

## Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022 – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 ‘Love as lifestyle’

In my study at home I have a small poster which always brings a smile to my lips. The poster has a simple inscription: ‘Floggings will continue until morale improves.’ It used to be displayed more prominently, until Alise pointed out that not all the wedding couples or baptism families that used to come and see me – and sit in my study – would appreciate the joke, and that it might be sending the wrong signals. So it sits on a high shelf now, where I can see it but they can’t!

Today we address the thorny subject of discipline. It’s a word that is now deeply unfashionable, and usually makes people shudder. It’s a stern word, isn’t it – and yet it is also much misunderstood, and its root meaning has a value which I would argue is fundamental to a flourishing Christian life.

We use the word disciple all the time to describe a follower or friend of Jesus, and the word ‘disciple’ and discipline’ are derived from the same root word, which means to learn or master. A disciple is basically an apprentice, and, to quote the Holman bible dictionary, the word discipline ‘refers to the process by which one learns a way of life.’ **In other words, you can’t be a disciple without discipline.**

All this leads usefully into our passage for today. As you heard it read, you may have found yourself thinking: ‘this all sounds a bit old-school!’ A life of quiet hard work and avoidance of licentious behaviour – it’s very Protestant, isn’t it? But before we dismiss it too quickly, let’s pause for thought. The very fact that it all sounds a bit stern, po-faced even, *might* say more about us and our culture than it does about the text.

I’ve deliberately – you could say provocatively – called today ‘love as lifestyle’, because I want to rehabilitate the idea of a disciplined life as the practical outworking of three dimensional love – towards God, towards others and towards ourselves. Discipline is not all canes in the headmaster’s office and joyless routines: practised positively, **it’s the path to freedom, happiness, health and wellbeing.** It’s also vital if we want to live to please God, as Paul begins by saying. And his advice is: keep doing it – indeed keep doing it ‘more and more’ (v1)!

So what are the key elements of this disciplined (disciple) life? What does love look like in practice? **First, Paul says, it is about purity of lifestyle,** which is all about how we demonstrate our love for God in practice. We are to be able to ‘control our own bodies in a way that is holy and honourable’ (v4). Paul particularly refers to sexual purity, but the application is broader; and he is very clear that this lies at the heart of what it means to follow God in a meaningful sense: ‘Anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.’ (v8)

This last sentence is important, for two reasons: it reminds us that if we choose to live a life which is incompatible with God’s ways then we block the flow of God’s presence in our lives. Our lives as Christians reflect a struggle between our natural selfishness and the loving and purifying Spirit of God. We need to keep feeding one of those and not the other – you can guess which!

Positively, it also reminds us that God does not leave us on our own, to try and make ourselves good. We certainly do need to co-operate with God, but we have extra help in this journey towards purity and holiness – God himself comes to dwell in us, transforming us from the inside out. As we direct our love towards God through the way we live our lives, making good choices about how we use our bodies, God's grace is sufficient to enable us to do that as best we can.

**Second, we direct love towards others.** We thought about this in much more detail last week, but it's worth noting that Paul actually uses two different words for love here – the one which means affection and the other which means selfless service. I think that's significant, because it reminds us that the one needs the other. It's much easier to love people if we like them – and in turn, as we serve each other, so we actually grow to love them more.

Where does discipline come in, you might be asking? Well, any healthy community needs to sustain these loving relationships over time. It's easy to offer a burst of enthusiasm for a few weeks or months which then peters out. We all know people like that! But the kind of committed service and affection over years – that is like gold. And it is one of the most important elements of discipline: to develop that capacity to keep loving and serving over a long period of time.

It's also why I think Paul comes to that after talking about purity and learning to control our own bodies. As we develop that capacity to make good choices and regulate our own behaviour as a direct and personal expression of our love for God, we gain the 'stickability' to keep loving others through humble service and mutual support. It's no accident that people who are known for leading a dissolute lifestyle rarely ever offer much of themselves to other people.

Finally, we show practical love to ourselves and our families by **ordering our own ambitions**: 'make it your ambition to lead a quiet life... and to work with your hands.' (v11) A bit of background helps here: since most of the early church expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, some new Christians decided that, if that was the case, there was no point working anymore: they should just wait for Jesus to come back. And Paul says a firm 'no' to that: actually, we honour Jesus by getting on with our lives: working hard and making sure as far as we can that we can support ourselves.

But it's worth saying that, in commending 'work with our hands', Paul is not saying that *only* manual labour is valuable: what he means is earning a living for yourself and your family. In teaching that, though, he's *not* assuming that everyone is in a position to do that: there are lots of passages elsewhere commending generosity towards those who find themselves in unfortunate circumstances. So, as always with scripture, alongside the deep teaching in this passage, we recognise that this one text is not the whole picture.

As we draw these reflections together, what we see here is that, if discipline is the art of learning a way of life, and if that way of life is fundamentally about love in practice, then what we have here are **three very practical bits of teaching which show how we put love for God, love for others, and care for ourselves into practice.** In this context, it's no surprise that Paul refers elsewhere to 'self-control' as one of the nine key fruit of the Spirit. Self-control with our own bodies, in showing committed love in a community, and in ordering our own ambitions leads to healthier, happier, more whole lives. Ultimately it glorifies God, who gladly gives us his Spirit to enable us to live this way. Today, let the Lord warm your heart with these words: and let us all pray for grace to grow in this kind of life – for God's glory, others' good and our growth. Amen.