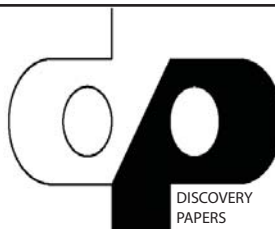


QUIET AMBITION

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
6th Message
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1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

A little less than a year ago, Admiral William McRaven gave the commencement speech to 8000 graduating students at the University of Texas. He gave them ten tips for how to change the world that he learned from his years of serving as a Navy SEAL. The admiral started with, “If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.”¹ He included, “If you want to change the world, don’t back down from the sharks.”² and “If you want to change the world, you must be your very best in the darkest moment.”³

At the end, Admiral McRaven described a brass bell that hangs in the middle of the SEAL training compound. All you have to do to quit the program is to ring the bell. All the training and hard work will stop. His final piece of advice was, “If you want to change the world, don’t ever, ever ring the bell.”⁴

Around three hundred years earlier, Alexander Pope translated Homer and wrote poetry in England. One of his poems is called *The Quiet Life*. It begins with Pope describing the tranquility of owning and working your own land:

*Happy the man whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.*⁵

The poem concludes by describing a peaceful but happy life lived in obscurity:

*Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.*⁶

Which appeals to you more: the world-changing life of Admiral McRaven or the quiet life of Alexander Pope?

What’s closer to the way that you live your life? Around here, a lot of people are infatuated with changing the world.

Finally, which life would God have us live? Does following Jesus mean changing the world? Or, does it mean a quiet life of contemplation and simplicity?

Today we are resuming our series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians called *Between the Times*. We took the last two weeks to celebrate Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Last week we heard about the defining moment of history: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the event that anchors the lives of the Thessalonians. But they are also instructed to look forward to the return of Jesus. These letters help them to live in between those two major events; to figure out what it looks like to remember and hope at the same time.

This morning we are looking at 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. Before we start, let’s do a bit of a review to remind us of what we’ve read in this book so far.

We started our series by looking at the planting of the church of Thessalonica from Acts 17. The apostle Paul had to leave town quickly because of persecution and he didn’t know how his new church would fare. In the opening of the letter in 1 Thessalonians 1, he is thrilled to hear that these new believers have lived true to the power of the gospel which had changed their lives and reverberated throughout the area. The simple proclamation that “Jesus Christ is Lord” transformed the community.

Then we learned that the gospel wasn’t just given to the Thessalonians. It was entrusted to them so they could give it away to others. We were encouraged to give away our lives in ministry to the people around us. When you do this, relationships go deep, and the next passage explored the depth of spiritual friendship that Paul felt with these Thessalonians. Friendship often turns into romance, so in the next section Paul gave them some broad guidance for living out their sexuality. We read a great instruction to embrace our sexuality throughout our lives with a kind of steady faithfulness that looks different in different seasons of our life.

That brings us to our passage for today. Much of the early part of the book of 1 Thessalonians has

focused on relationships within the church. Now, Paul starts to bridge into the church's relationship with the outside world. Again, he starts with love within the community, but ends by talking about its impact on the world.

Paul's encouragement will sound a bit odd in our context. It's different from the message that we hear at the schools and companies and organizations of Silicon Valley. He gives a unique picture for how Christians are supposed to engage with the public sphere. He encourages what I call a *quiet ambition*.

We'll have to unpack these ideas carefully. We need to understand what messages the Thessalonians heard about how to live their lives and how they relate to the pressures in our world. We'll learn how they were living and why Paul gave these instructions. Then we'll try to apply that to our own lives. What messages do we believe about the way we're supposed to live our lives? How should we follow Jesus?

I hope that these words will be very significant for us. We live in the midst of a culture that tells us nothing we do is important unless it changes the world. At the same time, we value worship, relationship, rest, and trusting in God. How do we bring together these two ideas of quiet ambition and changing the world? What pace of life should we pursue in these in between times?

Love Each Other

The apostle Paul has been very positive toward the Thessalonians throughout this letter. Most of what he says has been applauding them and urging them to keep going. This passage begins the same way.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10a:

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.

Paul begins by commending them for loving each other so well. In the next phrase he encourages them to do it more and more. But the way that he tells them to do this is really significant. Paul says that they are "taught by God" (1 Thessalonians 4:9) that they ought to love one another. This phrase is like a flashing light signaling something very important about what God is doing in the world.

In Isaiah 54, the prophet described life in the new kingdom that God will establish. In verse 13, he said that "all your children shall be taught by the LORD."

Jesus quotes this passage in John 6:45, when he says "It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." Jesus is claiming that he is bringing in the kingdom age that Isaiah was talking about. He is saying that it starts now.

So, when Paul tells the Thessalonians that they have been taught by God to love another, he is making a reference to this age of the kingdom that we live in. He is saying that we are living in the kingdom age. Everything that God's people in the Old Testament waited for anxiously has been started. The kingdom of God is here. This kingdom is a community centered around Jesus.

Jesus said that people would recognize his kingdom by how its members treated each other. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The starting place for living out your relationship with God is how you treat the other members of God's family. This is where everything starts.

We start by loving each other. Before we even get to whether we should change the world or live quietly, we have to start with this community of faith. *Love each other.*

This has immediate application for how we live in the 21st century. Even though we frequently talk about this, it is one of the hardest things for contemporary American Christians to do. So much of the way we live works against brotherly love.

We move around, we change churches, we don't live near each other, our relationships are splintered and short-term and easily replaced by other people. Fostering real, long-term, sacrificial brotherly love is incredibly challenging.

Maybe we need to stick around a bit longer. Maybe we need to invest in a small group of people for longer than a few months. Maybe we need to commit to a church community to get plugged in and to develop relationships that are deeper than saying "Hi" on a Sunday morning. Maybe we need to live like a family.

If you've seen the movie *Tommy Boy*, there's a great scene where Tommy, played by Chris Farley, meets a brother that he didn't know he had for the

first time. As his brother, reaches out his hand for a nice greeting, Tommy looks at his hand and frowns. He says, “Brothers don’t shake hands, brothers gotta hug.”⁷ and gives him a huge bear hug. This is what the kingdom of Jesus is like.

But this new kingdom isn’t just us. It’s not just Peninsula Bible Church. Paul points out that the Thessalonians didn’t just love the believers in their city. He says that they loved “all the brothers throughout Macedonia” (1Thessalonians 4:10). We know from 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 that there was “extreme poverty” in the other churches of Macedonia. In comparison, Thessalonica was a wealthy city in the region. The Thessalonians were probably sending money to the poorer churches in their immediate area.

Does this practice of loving all brothers have application for us? Over the past several months, there has been a lot of attention focused on the economic and social factors at work in Silicon Valley. Here in the Bay Area, there is an inner circle of ambition and achievement and opportunity. Many of you are part of that. Good stable jobs. Excellent schools. The best context for success. The good life.

But, there is a growing fringe in our community—a margin of poverty and despair. Parents working multiple jobs and still unable to pay for housing. Students trapped in despair and hopelessness. A racial divide with roots reaching into housing policies of a generation ago. The invisible people who make life work in Silicon Valley but whose own lives don’t really work at all.

What does brotherly love look like in this context?

Some of you know that there have been church, business, and nonprofit leaders meeting to think about ways to collaborate for the kingdom of God in our area. There’s a larger group called Transforming the Bay with Christ that’s been assembled by Pat Gelsinger, the CEO of VMWare. We’ve invited him to preach here in June, so we’ll hear more about him and what God has done in his life.

But there’s also a smaller group of churches forming on the Peninsula—roughly from Sunnyvale to Redwood City. We’re forming a loose network organization in order to collaborate on addressing some of the needs of our community, including promoting fatherhood for families without dads and encouraging and empowering working single moms. We’re developing strategies to help us serve together in long term relationships.

These two aspects of brotherly love are connected. If we aren’t committed to one local community, it’s much harder to reach out to others. Over and over again, we are instructed in the New Testament that we are to live out our faith by loving each other—not just by holding hands, but by opening wallets and schedules. Following Jesus begins with brotherly love.

Live Quietly

Right about now it would feel natural for me to start talking about the kind of impact that we could have if we all worked together. To show how as we unite, we can change the world. As long as we started our day by making our bed. But that isn’t where Paul goes.

1 Thessalonians 4:10b-11:

But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,

These words would be out of place at Stanford University, especially at a commencement address. They don’t seem to fit at all around here. Aspire to live quietly? That’s just not the way Silicon Valley works.

The first phrase is a bit contradictory. It’s literally “have ambition to lead a quiet life.” Those two ideas don’t seem to go together. Ambition is about upgrading, advancing, and achieving. That is the exact opposite of a quiet life. But this is what Paul says. Have ambition ... to live quietly.

What does he mean by this?

Again, the phrase that Paul uses gives us a clue. In other Greek literature, the phrases “live quietly” and “mind your own affairs” were used in reference to public life. Plato used these phrases to refer to a philosopher. Living quietly seems to refer to withdrawing from political or social or civic affairs. Somehow staying out of the public arena. Not causing a fuss.

We already know that the church in Thessalonica had experienced persecution from the city leaders. It’s likely that the members of this church were engaging in activities that continued to draw unnecessary attention to the church. Their behavior was probably causing increased persecution. This is the connection with brotherly love. They were acting in public in a way that made life harder for their brothers and sisters.

We're not sure exactly what they were doing. It could have had something to do with the system of benefactors and patrons that was in place in Roman culture. It's possible that the Thessalonians were giving up their jobs in order to evangelize aggressively in the city. It could be that they were lobbying for political change in an offensive way.

Whatever the Thessalonians were doing, we can probably say that they were being noisy in some way. They were doing something in public that made people hate Christians; acting out in culture in a way that gave Christians a bad reputation.

This is why Paul told them to live quietly. Don't create unnecessary turmoil. Be careful of what you do. Loving each other is a higher priority than creating uproar. Don't live out your faith in public in such a noisy way that turns the world against the gospel.

Paul is not telling the Thessalonians to withdraw entirely from public life. The next phrase makes that clear. But he's directing them toward a certain kind of lifestyle. First, he tells them that everything is grounded in brotherly love. Then he warns them against trying to accomplish too much too fast in a way that might do more harm than good. He tells them to *live quietly*.

What would it look like for us to live this way? How can we live quietly in the Silicon Valley?

There's a phrase that I hear a lot from people around here. It doesn't matter who I'm talking to. I've heard it from parents who work and parents who stay at home. I've heard it from students, professionals, and people in ministry. It's a deadly phrase. It breeds guilt and destroys real motivation. Many of you have probably said it. I'm sure I have.

"I feel like I should be doing more."

Have you ever said that? Why do we feel this way? Where does this come from? Does it come from our culture? Christian pressure? Do we think God wants to squeeze more out of us? Are we trying to satisfy our families? Do we compare ourselves to others?

Wherever it comes from, it isn't helpful. It doesn't actually motivate any kind of intentional and purposeful action. It's just a vague sense that I ought to be doing something I'm not. It makes me want to sign up for something—anything—to make that feeling go away.

Is that living quietly?

No. Living quietly is being faithful to the things that God has put before you. Do what God has asked you to do. If you're doing that, you're doing enough. This is what is meant by calling or vocation. God has given each of us something to do. He has asked you to play a role. But he doesn't usually give a detailed roadmap. Usually, there are little steps that you follow one day at a time.

If God wants you to do more, he'll open a door. He'll give you some kind of direction or an invitation or some thought that keeps coming up. If you're listening to God—if you're open to how he's leading you—then he'll let you know what you should do. And you should do just that—no more and no less.

You shouldn't be doing more. You should be doing what God has asked you to do. That's living quietly and minding your own affairs and working with your hands.

You might say that the apostle Paul is a curious person to give this message. After all, few people had as great an impact as he did. But his life did follow this pattern. When he arrived in a new city, he sewed tents. He took his time, preaching when opportunity presented itself. And he trusted God for the results of his actions.

Living quietly doesn't mean we don't have an impact. It just means that *we aren't aiming* for an impact. Our goal is to follow the leading of Jesus step by step and trust him to accomplish whatever he will through us.

What makes living quietly hard is that we are addicted to impact. People come to schools and work for companies in the Silicon Valley to change the world. We want to see ourselves as key players in the history of the world. We want to be at the center of things. We are taught to want to change the world.

Maybe part of the problem is that we want to be God. Do we care about the world being changed? Or do we care about being the ones that do it? When I ask myself that question, all too often I conclude that what's important to me is being at the center of the action. I want to impact the world.

Paul's instruction for a quiet life is an invitation to let God be God. It's his kingdom. It's his world. He is changing it. Things are happening. We'll have a part: the role that he asks us to do. It's not up to us to change the world. *It's up to us to love people and be faithful to our calling.*

Don't aim for impact. Aim for love.

So what is it, then, that God has asked you to do? It's probably a lot of what you're already doing—parenting those kids; studying for those classes; loving your friends; serving your church and your community; giving new opportunities a chance; exploring to find the place where your gifts fit best.

For the last year or so, I've been helped by Psalm 1. I've committed it to memory and it has been my go-to place for re-orienting myself toward God. It begins, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord." The psalm goes on to describe a tree, planted near abundant water, giving fruit in season.

I think that's a picture of the quiet life. A tree. Not trying to change the world. Just being. Rooted. Watered. Giving fruit. Living life. Bringing life to others.

What would it look like for you to live quietly? How can you break your addiction to impact? Be content with the work that God has set before you.

Protect Outsiders

Paul's simple instructions to the Thessalonians are moving outward in concentric circles. First, he started by emphasizing brotherly love. Then he encouraged a lifestyle of living out God's calling on their lives instead of maximizing impact. But now he moves outward. At the end of these instructions the apostle grounds all of this in a concern for those outside the community. "So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thessalonians 4:12).

This is the reason for all of this. Here is why we focus on brotherly love and aspire to live quietly. Our consideration is for those outside the church. We aren't supposed to be dependent on the world around us. We need to consider how we are perceived by outsiders. The purpose is that Christians "walk properly" (1 Thessalonians 4:12) before those who don't know Christ. The concern of the apostle Paul is the reputation of the church among unbelievers.

This is a common concern throughout the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 10:32, Paul says to "give no offense to Jews or Greeks." In Colossians 4:5, he urges people to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders." Peter has a similar concern in 1 Peter 2:12 where he writes, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable."

Nowhere are believers encouraged to water down the gospel or back down on the truth of who God is. But we are encouraged to pay attention to our

reputation in the world. How Christians are perceived by the world around us is important. We should pay attention to it. The gospel can be offensive, but we are not called to create unnecessary offense.

Let the gospel be offensive, not the Christians who preach it.

I had a classmate in college who was bold and direct about the gospel. He knew that the gospel would offend people if he was clear about it. But he thought that if people were being offended, that meant he was preaching the gospel. He thought he was "standing up for God," but in reality, he was just being an offensive person.

It wasn't the gospel that was offensive. It was he. He was disrespectful, arrogant, belligerent, belittling, unsympathetic to others needs, provocative, and deaf to anything anyone else said. This is not what we are called to. Let the gospel be offensive, not the ones who preach it.

We are called to walk properly before outsiders. The way in which Paul phrases this implies a concern for those outside of the family of God. An awareness of them and their needs. Walking properly before outsiders means protecting them. We love each other and live faithfully to God's calling and protect those who are outside. Protect outsiders.

The early Christian church was born out of Jewish background in a Greco-Roman culture. The early Christians were nobodies. They didn't fit anywhere. It took a while for culture to even have a category for them. They could easily have considered themselves as outsiders. They were outsiders to Jews, Greeks, Romans, and everyone else.

But Paul encourages them to think about their place in the world differently. They were not the outsiders; it was those who didn't know Christ. Even though everyone had a place in the world except them, it was the people separated from God who were the outsiders.

There is a common trend that concerns me in the way that Christians discuss issues in our culture. You hear it when Christians talk about the religious freedom laws in Indiana and Michigan and Georgia. You hear it when Christians talk about same-sex marriage. You hear it when Christians talk about prayer in school or evolution or almost anything about our culture.

It's the sense that Christians are the outsiders. That we are under attack. That our culture is closing

in around us and we can't do anything to stop it. Attitudes about religion and sexuality and family are changing. Christians need to defend ourselves from the attacks of a hostile culture. Christians are the victims of the culture war. Christians are outsiders.

But that's not true. Christians are *not* the outsiders. We are not the outsiders. We are not the victims of a world rising up against us. We are citizens of a new kingdom of grace and peace. We are part of the family of God. If you believe in Jesus, you know God. We don't have to protect ourselves. We are safe. Nothing the world does can hurt us.

Too often the efforts of Christians in the public square have been focused on protecting ourselves from persecution at the hands of a hostile state. We want to make sure that our rights and privileges and status aren't diminished. We are defensive. We are worried about ourselves. We think that as culture changes, our lives are going to be more difficult.

Where is the concern for the real outsiders? Where is the compassion for those in poverty? Where is understanding and grace and generosity and sacrifice that we are willing to make for the sake of those who really are outside? Where is paying attention to outsiders?

You might know that because I work for a church, I receive certain tax benefits. It's a great help and I'm very thankful for it. Lately, some people have been worried that the IRS will remove those tax benefits. Sometimes they go so far as to call that religious persecution.

Am I entitled to tax benefits? Are they granted by God? Where is my real citizenship? If the IRS tries to take them away, should I stand up and defend myself? Is that how I want to be known to the world around me? My biggest concern is for some tax benefits that make my life easier? Would that be "walking properly towards outsiders?" (Thessalonians 4:12).

When we enter the public square, we don't need to protect ourselves. God is our protector. We don't need to be defensive. God defends us. We don't need to feel vulnerable because we are safe. God protects us.

This is the example that Jesus set for us. A few verses after Peter's encouragement to keep our conduct honorable in the world, he cites Jesus as an example.

1 Peter 2:12:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus entrusted himself to his father, who judges rightly. We can do the same thing. God is our protector. As we interact in the public square, our concern is not for ourselves. Our concern is for the outsiders.

So what does that look like? I think it looks like Christians advocating for the rights and dignities of others. Believers noticing those in our culture who are really outsiders, not just of the family of God, but of the cultural system: widows, orphans, minorities, the working poor, veterans, those struggling with mental health, victims of abuse, the homeless, and the unemployed or underemployed.

We need to listen to the needs of the people in our world. It's not about our needs. It's not about our religious freedom. It's about loving our brothers and sisters in need and caring for the outsiders who don't know Jesus. We need to be willing to sacrifice our comfort, our money, our rights and our status for the sake of the outsiders.

This is what lies at the heart of our Beautiful Day efforts in two weeks—laying down our rights and privileges to take into account the outsider and changing the reputation of how Christians are perceived. No one complains about fixing up schools. There is no political controversy around giving away our time and money for our community. This is what it looks like to walk properly toward outsiders.

The gospel is Jesus Christ is not advanced through political power or legal amendments or government agencies. The gospel works through the love of one person for another. When God's people are faithful to the simple calling he has given us and when we pay attention to the needs of outsiders.

Conclusion

We started off by thinking about two different visions for life. One from a Navy SEAL Admiral; one from a British poet. Changing the world through 10 commitments or living the quiet life, unseen, unknown, and unlamented. One is a picture of intentional, focused, engagement. The other is a retreat, pastoral and serene.

How are we to live?

The instructions in this passage have given us a third option. Paul has given us a picture that weaves together three different aspects of following Jesus into one unified lifestyle. It's a remarkably comprehensive picture of life in the kingdom age of Jesus.

We love each other, sacrificing time and money for our brothers and sisters. We avoid being noisy in the world, damaging the reputation of Christ and his church. Instead, we pay attention to the responsibilities that God has put before us. Finally, we thoughtfully engage with our culture as an advocate for outsiders.

We live out a quiet ambition. Quiet because God is the one at work, changing the world and changing lives. Ambitious because God is the one at work. His kingdom will prevail. We are part of something sure and eternal.

The way we treat each other and the way we live our personal lives all speaks volumes to the culture around us. When we are confident in God, when we love our brothers and sisters, when we are faithful to what God has asked us to do, *then* his kingdom is advanced.

So the world does change, just not because we make it happen. We follow Jesus. We ask what God has given for us to do. We stay faithful to the tasks put before us. We engage in the public square on behalf of the vulnerable. And above all things, we love each other.

Love each other. Live quietly. Protect outsiders. Let God be God. And follow Him where he leads.

(Endnotes)

¹ McRaven, (Admiral) William. "10 Life Lessons." University of Texas. Austin, TX. 16 May 2014. Commencement Address.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Pope, Alexander. "The Quiet Life." *Bartleby.com*. Web 11 April 2015

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Tommy Boy. Dir. Peter Segal. Perf. Chris Farley, David Spade, Brian Dennehy. Paramount, 1995. Film..