

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Excel Still More

by Dan Trygg

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us how it is necessary to walk and to please God (just as you actually *do* walk), in order that you may excel still more.” 1 Thessalonians 4:1

“Now as to the love-of-the-brethren (*philadelphia*), you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love (*agapaō*) one another; <sup>10</sup> for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more...” 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

The Thessalonian church was like a number of other churches that Paul founded on his first and second missionary journeys. He was only there for a brief time, before opposition arose, and he had to leave. He came there after his imprisonment at Philippi, where he had been unjustly beaten with rods and imprisoned, for casting a demon out of a slave girl. Without the demon, she could no longer tell fortunes, so her masters rallied a mob to bring Paul to the city courts. There, the prejudices against the Jews, and the patriotic pride of the Roman colonial status of their city, conspired to cause an irrational lashing-out against Paul and his friend, Silas (Act.16). Even though they were released, and a public apology was made, they still were asked to leave, and they travelled to Thessalonica. After three weeks of preaching in the synagogue, a number of the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, and some of the leading women of the city joined Paul. **We don't know for sure how long he was able to stay among them, but long enough to establish a solid example of personal responsibility, gentle and nurturing character and sacrificial love** (1 Thess. 2:7-10). After a short time, some of the Jews became jealous of the response to Paul's preaching, and they also formed a mob to attempt to bring Paul to court. They could not find Paul, but seized Jason, their host, and some others, and brought them before the city officials, claiming sedition and rebellion against Rome. After obtaining a security bond from Jason and the other believers, they let them return to their homes. As a result, they sent Paul and his group away that night to the next major town to the south and west, on the seacoast, Berea (Act 17:1-10).

Thus **the church in Thessalonica was a recently-formed fellowship of people. Yet, the impact they were making was quite extensive.** People throughout northern *and* southern Greece were hearing that they were spreading the gospel. **They had become an example to other churches** for their eager willingness to share the message of Christ, and their work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope, as they received the word of God under much affliction and religious opposition (1 Thess. 1:2-8). **Paul had been forced to leave, and wanted to return to check on them on several occasions but was prevented by Satanic opposition** (2:18). Eventually, Jews from Thessalonica even followed Paul to Berea, and he had to flee from there as well, and travel south to Athens (Acts 17:13-15). From Athens, **he commissioned Timothy to check up on the Thessalonians to strengthen and encourage them, and to do some follow-up discipleship work among them** (1 Thess. 3:1-3). He was worried that they may have caved in to the persecution. **This letter of 1 Thessalonians is Paul's response to the report Timothy gave him upon his return.**

**Paul went briefly through their history together, reminding them of his example, and the kind of man he proved to be among them. He acknowledged their accomplishments, ...the strength of character and perseverance they had demonstrated under such pressure. They had done well.** He himself had modeled similar victory over trials, having come to them from his recent experience of persecution at Philippi. **He had effectively prepared them, telling them that they could expect opposition and afflictions.** When these came against them, and Paul himself was whisked away, *they had not flinched.* **They had not only remained steadfast in faith and loyalty, they had pressed in to God and deepened their close relationships with one another.** Paul was *delighted* at the news (3:7-9). He continued to pray for them, and for an opportunity to visit again. He prayed that God would cause their *agapē*-love to increase abundantly (to *multiply*) and to overflow (to *abound, be-more-than-sufficient-with-much-left-over*) toward one another and toward all people. This **agapē-love is to strengthen and establish their hearts unblameable before God** (3:12,13).

Like virtually all of Paul's letters, this one has a “practical section”, which begins in 4:1. He begins by saying, “Finally, then, brothers-and-sisters, we ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...” **Note that he does not approach them with a command, or with a demand. He does not need to do that, because he has a relationship with them.** He does not need to approach them as their superior, their boss, ...because he is their *friend*, like a *tender father* (2:11) or a *nursing mother* (2:6). They have already shown they were on the same page, and they loved him and were dedicated to God. He did not *need* to use a harsh tone with them. He simply “asked” and “encouraged” them. **What did he ask them?** “in order that according-as they received from him and his co-workers ‘the-how’ or ‘in-what-way’ it-is-necessary for you to walk-about and to please God”. Note: **There is a “how” or, a “way” that is necessary to live your life and to be pleasing to God.** This is a very important concept for us to grasp, in our culture today. *God*

*expects certain things*. He expects *us to act* in certain ways, and He expects *to be treated* in certain ways. **Our attitudes, behaviors and methods are either acceptable or unacceptable to Him.** They are pleasing or offensive. In our “anything goes” society, this is *not* politically-correct. It is not up to *us*, however. *God* decides. He is telling us what *He* expects and demands. Actually, **this is only the “lead-up” to what he is going to “ask” or “request”.** **Paul says they already have been doing those things that are lifestyle choices and relationship interactions that are pleasing to God. What Paul is asking them is to excel at this more!** The word for “excel” is the same as the word translated as “overflow” or “abound”. **In other words, they are to go deeper, ...invest more, ...obey more completely!**

**What kind of things is Paul talking about? He begins by reminding them of the things he had charged them with before.** “For you know what instructions we gave to you through the Lord Jesus” (4:2). Some versions use the word “commands” here, but the word is literally to “message-alongside”. It may seem like a small difference, but I think it is more about *who you now are* in relationship to Jesus, than about *the behaviors* themselves. **If we are Christ-followers, then He has “charged us” or “instructed us” to live up to His standards.**

**“For this is the will of God, your sanctification”... Sanctification can be a misunderstood concept. Its basic meaning is to “dedicate yourself”, to “set yourself apart completely for God”.** It is the opposite of something that is unclean or impure, so it means to “be clean” or “be pure”. The other antonym is “common, profane”, so to sanctify means to “set apart as special for God”, to “reserve yourself *for* Him, or in ways that *honor* Him”. It is like the difference between everyday dishes, that anyone can use at any time, versus special dishes that are reserved for special people or special occasions. **God desires that we consecrate ourselves to Him.**

**“...to abstain from sexual-immorality...”** Paul makes a specific application here. Evidently, this was a problem at Thessalonica. *This word for sexual immorality is the broadest word for sexual behavior*, and would include incest, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, fornication, adultery, or same-sex sexual encounters. The pagan world of the first century was extremely lewd and sexually immoral. Sexual behaviors of all varieties were common. Judaism and Christianity stood out as highly unusual for their standards of sexual purity. *Sexual behavior is only to be between husband and wife within the covenant of marriage.* Paul clearly tells these new Christians to stop indulging in any sexual behavior outside of marriage. **“...each of you to know how to possess his own vessel in holiness (dedicated to God) and honor (high value).”** We are to keep our bodies as dedicated to God, and treat them as valuable, and not lower those standards to engage in illicit sex. This is dishonoring to *ourselves*, and to *God*. **“...not in passion of lust, just as the ones not knowing God”** Paul seems to be really drawing out the lesson. He doesn’t leave us room to miss the point. Sensuality is one of the first places we go, when we are not receiving our fullness from God. Instead of being filled with the Spirit, we often try to “get life” from sensual pleasures (Rom. 1:18-27; Eph. 4:17-19). **“and that no one go beyond and defraud (‘over-reach’; ‘take more than is yours’) his brother in the matter, because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.”** Two things here: (1.) **to get involved in an illicit sexual relationship is like stealing.** It is *taking what does not belong to you*. Not only do you dishonor the other person, but you take something that should be reserved for a future spouse, or was to be reserved for a proper marriage before God; (2.) **God will judge and take vengeance upon those who do these things.** Hebrews 13:4 says, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers *God* will judge.” Our culture may have a very casual view of sex, but *God doesn’t*. He will enforce some kind of repercussions or consequences on those who disregard His boundaries for sexual relations. Then, if you still haven’t got the message *yet*, Paul writes, **“For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. <sup>8</sup> Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you”** (4:7-8). Paul has come full circle on his thought on sanctification from verse 3.

**“Now as to the love-of-the-brethren (*philadelphia*), you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love (*agapaō*) one another; <sup>10</sup> for indeed you do practice it... But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more...”** (4:9,10). This is an interesting verse. Note that it is about the practice of brotherly-love, love toward other people, especially other Christians. Paul says **they were already doing a good job with this. Why? Because they were “God-taught to *agapē*-love one another”.** ***Agapē*-love is the love that can only be produced by the Holy Spirit within us.** “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). The word for love throughout this verse is *agapē*. It is *produced* by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22). According to Paul, God is the One who *teaches us how to love* this way. However, Peter tells us that *it is also a by-product of our investments in our spiritual walk* (II Pet. 1:2-7), ...our choices and our self-control. Interestingly, there brotherly-love seems easier to develop than the *agapē*-love. It seems that you can have the brotherly-love naturally, and not necessarily have the love from God; ...but if you have the self-giving *agapē*-love, the brotherly-love is a by-product of that higher-type of love. In any case, **Paul commends them for the love they are expressing, and encourages them to excel even more, ...to overflow and abound even more in *agapē*-love.**