

About twelve years ago when Aundrea and I were planning to leave our home so I could attend seminary, I drew up a list of criteria, some primary, some secondary. Secondary criteria were things like proximity to our parents (since we had 2 kids at the time) and cost. Some of our primary criteria were the school's theology (orthodox, evangelical), its reputation (most rigorous, most respected), and its faculty. Ultimately, it was that last criterion—the faculty—that drew me to Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. As I scanned through the list of professors, my decision virtually made itself as I became more and more excited about studying under these scholars, and one in particular with a reputation as a world-class scholar on Paul and his writings. I took every class I could from this one professor and even became a member of his church so I could hear him preach on Sundays. I wanted to learn everything I could from him, and I still consider it one of the great privileges of my life to have been taught by this professor. To this day, it surprises me, humbles me, and motivates me to use my training well.

What kind of privilege would it be to be taught, not by one of the best, but by the very best? How would it feel to receive personal instruction from the teacher of teachers? What would that do for your confidence and motivation?

That is precisely the situation in our text for today's sermon. Paul says he has no need to write to these people on a certain topic because they have already received all the instruction they need on this from someone else, a teacher far superior to himself:

**4:9** *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God...*

Isn't that a thought-provoking statement? "You yourselves have been taught by God." It's a one-word description in Greek—"God-taught"—and this is the only place it appears in the Bible. In fact, this appears to be the first place it appears in all Greek literature, meaning it's a word Paul probably made up just for this situation. I LOVE this word! Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be taught by one of the apostles? Taught by John or taught by Peter or taught by Paul. But if you

think that would be amazing, how much more amazing to be taught by God Himself!

And what a topic! The verse goes on to say: "you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another." It's interesting to me that, in its single appearance in the Bible, this term "God-taught" is used in connection with love. Think about that for a moment. I mean, if you could ask God for one personal tutorial session, one subject for one-on-one coaching, even just one more chapter added to the Bible, what topic would you ask Him to teach?

Love is the cardinal virtue, greater even than faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13). It's the leading quality within the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). All the Law and Prophets are summed up in this one duty: to love God and neighbor (Mt 22:36-40). Jesus said outsiders would know we are His followers by our love (Jn 13:35). According to John, God Himself "is love" (1 Jn 4:8). So what does it look like when God Himself teaches you to love? Natural, Visible, and Liberal.

Context: The gospel Paul brought to Thessalonica "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). How? Four areas: sex, love, work, death.

## NATURAL

**v9** *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you...*

Some read this as a rhetorical device Paul is using for emphasis, like if we were to say: "I'm not even going to tell you how much fun we had on fall break." But I'm more inclined to take him literally, because his next two statements would seem to make more sense as proof that he really doesn't need to write to them about brotherly love. They've proven that this is an area of strength for this church.

...as it ought to be for all Christian churches, right? We are the ones who know Jesus would rather die than live without us. We are the dearly loved children of the Heavenly Father. We have been adopted into the family of the God who Himself is love and who is remaking us in His own

image. Love for us ought to be entirely natural, spontaneous, and instinctive.

Yes, there's a place for working on our love, deliberately pursuing loving thoughts and loving deeds. Even to these God-taught, loving Thessalonians, Paul says:

**v10b** *But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more...*

So there is a place for working at it. But love should be the natural posture of our hearts, if we truly know God:

**1 John 4:7-8** *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

Notice how emphatic Paul is when he mentions that God taught them to love (v 9): "you yourselves have been taught by God," he says. He's doubly emphatic here. In Greek, the subject is often embedded in the form of the verb, so there's no need for the writer to supply it. When he does, it reads the same way in English, but there's a nuance of emphasis that goes unnoticed—an accent being placed on the subject. That's what Paul does here: supplies the subject as if to say "YOU have been taught by God." But then he goes a step further and adds another intensive pronoun: "yourselves." The net effect is "You yourselves—yes, you Thessalonians!" Why? It's as though they aren't even aware they are excelling in love. If Paul were to say simply, "God taught you to love," they might reply, "Who? Us?!" It's so natural for them, they haven't even noticed they are doing it. Paul has to draw their attention to the fact that this virtue is so strong, it must have been instilled by God.

So how about your Christianity? What stands out in your life so strongly, so naturally that it's clear God taught you to be this way? Your politics? Your no-fun-allowed attitude? Your theological precision?

ILLUS: Whitefield (Calvinist) and Wesley (Arminian), good relationship between them but their followers weren't always so gracious. A partisan asked Whitefield: "Do you think that we, when we get to heaven, shall see John Wesley there?" "No, I do not think we shall. I believe that Mr. John Wesley will have a place so near the throne of God, and that such poor creatures as you and I will be so far off, we will be hardly able to see him." Spurgeon told the story

150 years later and added: "By this I know that he must be a Christian, for I saw that he loved his brother Wesley even while he so earnestly differed from him on certain points of doctrine."

## VISIBLE

**v10a** *for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.*

How did Paul know these people had been taught by God to love? He could see it. Their actions showed it. They were living love, not just feeling it. Real love is visible.

Let us put to rest once and for all the insipid cultural notion that romantic feelings equal love. Love is an action before it is ever a feeling. In 1 Corinthians 13, the great "love chapter," all 16 of those qualities are actually verbs—"Love is patient, love is kind" is literally "Love patients," love "kinds," etc. Love is active; unlove is inactive. A loving person will behave in a certain way: she will do (or not do). This does not mean that if you are active in the church, you are loving (this is the notion Paul corrects in vv. 1-3). It does mean, however, that if you are not active, you are not loving.

This should be obvious to us from the most well-known text in the Bible, John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave..." The Thessalonians showed their love the same way:

**2 Corinthians 8:1-4** *We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.*

You can tell from the language here that Paul has been taking up a collection: "a wealth of generosity" (v 2), "they gave" (v 3), "the relief of the saints" (v 4). We know from elsewhere (Rom 15:25ff, 1 Cor 16:1-4) that the collection is for the deeply impoverished saints in Jerusalem, and "the churches of Macedonia" includes Thessalonica (along with Berea and Philippi). This is what proved to Paul that these people were so loving—because they were giving. Their love was visible. Is yours?

## LIBERAL

Stay here in 2 Corinthians 8 for a moment and notice the liberality of their giving:

**v2** *a wealth of generosity on their part*

**v3** *they gave according to their means*

**v4** *they begged us for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints*

God-taught love isn't stingy or reluctant. It's lavish! When Paul asked for a donation, these folks didn't reach for their checkbook; they signed over their whole paycheck!

And it didn't matter who was in need:

**v9** *taught by God to love one another,*

**v10** *that is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.*

**3:12** *May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.*

They gave liberally in depth and in scope. Generous amounts to whomever needed it.

So how are we doing? Americans pride themselves on their generosity and care for the poor. The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University estimated that American individuals gave over \$227 billion to charitable organizations in 2011. On the one hand, that's an incredible amount. On the other, it's about what we spent on fast food (\$117B), beer (\$96B), and chocolate (\$16B) (stats from Mental Floss "How Americans Spend Their Money").

But consider this: studies repeatedly show that Americans who earn in the top 20% of income levels on average contribute between 1.5% and 3% of their earnings to charity. Americans who earn in the bottom 20% give between 3%-5%. Those with less money give more of it away. Why? Follow-up research shows that it's a matter of empathy. Wealth tends to buffer people from noticing and concerning themselves with the needs of others. Compassion and empathy diminish as we move up the income scale; but they increase again when we see ourselves as needy, just like these other people. (cf. *NYTimes* "The Charitable-Giving Divide" 8/20/10 and *FoxBusiness.com* "Poor, Middle Class and Rich: Who Gives and Who Doesn't?" 4/24/13)

What about these generous Thessalonians? Where did they get so liberal in love? They knew what it was like to be poor, too:

**v2** *their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity*

**v3** *they gave according to their means and beyond their means*

**v4** *begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part*

"Extreme poverty" didn't prohibit them from giving. In fact, they still gave "beyond their means." The beggars begged for a chance to give. The liberality of empathy.

How can we cultivate this kind of liberal, generous love? Notice vv 8-9:

**2 Corinthians 8:8-9** *I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

The gospel tells us that, when we see the poor, broken, and needy, we are looking in the mirror. THAT was ME!

The Bible never guilts us into behaving the right way. A biblical appeal for love and liberality never says, "How selfish are you, to have 2 cars and a big house and eat out twice a week when the rest of the world is starving. Don't you feel terrible? Now go and be more loving." That kind of appeal ultimately builds resistance.

So how does the Bible appeal for generosity? As a response, not to the disparity of income between us and the poor, but to the disparity between what we deserve and what we receive from God through Jesus Christ. Biblically motivated giving is a spontaneous response to experiencing the grace of God.

CONCL:

"Taught by God to love." What a great description. Wouldn't you want that to be said of you—that you learned the cardinal virtue from the master teacher? The OT foretold a time when God Himself would teach His people personally, directly, actively:

**Isaiah 54:13** *All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children.*

Jesus picked up that promise and said it was fulfilled in Him:

**John 6:45** *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.*

In other words, the first and greatest sign that you are God-taught is that you come to Jesus, you see Jesus, you eat and drink the life that is yours in Jesus. Have you come to Him? If you have, do you still remember what you received from Him—His riches for your poverty. His death for your life. His family love for your rebellion. For God's glory and your joy! Amen?

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