

Love Minus Zero

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Preacher: Nigel Anderson

[0 : 0 0] to 1 Thessalonians as we continue through this first letter of Paul to the church there in Thessalonica. We're going to read again the first 16 verses of chapter 2 and then particularly focus on verses 7 to 12. So 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 reading from the beginning.

For you yourselves know brothers that are coming to you was not in vain, it wasn't empty. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive. But just as we've been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

For we never came with words of flattery as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our very own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

[1 : 3 8] You remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We work night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you, for we proclaim to you the gospel of God.

You are witnesses in God also. How holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct towards you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you have promised, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. You suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

So as always, to fill up the measure of their sins. Let me pray God's blessing on that reading from his holy word.

[3 : 0 6] As we turn again to verses 7 to 12, as we see in the title there, some of you might recognize it from, so we see a song from the past. Love minus zero.

In other words, love minus nothing. Utter love, absolute love, full love, particularly in the context of believers loving one another, even in the work of the church.

And as Paul delves into that particular theme, he gives two analogies, if you like, two ways to express that love minus zero.

On the one hand, as we read there in verse 7, The Gentleness of Motherly Self-Denial. Maybe a rather long subtitle, subheading.

But we'll see what Paul's saying when he speaks of himself, or himself and the other messengers of the word, how they were like mothers, gentle mothers, to the children, the spiritual children in Thessalonica.

[4 : 09] And then he uses the same parental analogy when he later speaks about encouragement that he gave them, the believers, in fatherly affection.

Love minus zero. Because in the work of the gospel, well, in any bonding of relationships within the community of God's people, that's that principle that really has to hold.

Love minus zero. In other words, love minus nothing. Unconditional love. Active love. Self-giving love. Love that springs from the God of love.

And it's that love that's demanded within the church of God, even whether it be from leaders to others or others to others within the congregation. That love that reaches out to others in affection and encouragement, in self-denial, thinking of others better than yourself.

Love that's exercised, love that's practiced in response to the love of the Lord Jesus. That extravagant love that Jesus showed, you who are his, even in his extravagant self-denial in giving of himself for you.

[5 : 32] And of course, that love, the love of the Savior, that's a love that none of us deserve. But that love of the Lord Jesus, it's that love that you receive.

And we might say, that love that you return with thanksgiving as you seek to build up the church on earth, as you seek to build the church and fellowship one with another and witness one to another and from a church to others.

It's the love that you exercise even in the service that you give to the Lord in serving his name. It's that love that gives all of self.

It's that love, love minus zero, love holding nothing back. Just as we see here in the case of Paul, the Apostle Paul and his companions, as we see, how they express that love in their fellowship with other believers as they showed that love minus zero in their witness to the truth and in their service for the Lord.

Now, if you remember, those of you who were here last, Lord's Day evening, we saw last week how Paul had defended himself against those who actually had questioned his motives, had questioned, you know, even the very basis of his service there in Thessalonica.

[6 : 55] But as we know, as we read, as Paul testifies, Paul's motives were pure. He was there, he was in Thessalonica to preach the gospel, to preach the good news of the Lord Jesus.

And he was there to deny himself in that work. And his motives, his motives in that work that God had given him to do, his motives were pure for the good of the hearers, for the glory of God, of course, first and foremost.

But it was for the Thessalonians, for their good, their eternal good. And Paul wasn't thinking of himself when he was preaching.

He wasn't out to win praise from men. He was there to share the gospel, share the good news with these people there in Thessalonica. Because God entrusted him to give the good news, to proclaim the good news, to preach Christ crucified to these people there in that Greek town or city.

And so Paul, as we saw, he goes on to defend his motives. And as he proceeds in his defense of his motives, he turns to speak of his conduct, his behavior, when he was with the Thessalonians.

[8 : 13] Because his conduct, as we read there, his conduct was carried out first and foremost out of love for the Lord, out of love, his love for the Savior.

And then his love for those to whom he'd been sent to preach. And as we move on to see what Paul's saying about, well, about his own ministry, we do have to backtrack a little and maybe see again some of what we were looking at last Lord's Day evening because we had a little look last Lord's Day evening at verse 7.

But we need to, of course, bring that into what Paul writes about his, well, about not just, as it were, a motherly self-denial, but also a fatherly affection, fatherly encouragement.

So we do need to look at what Paul's saying about himself in relation to a mother and a father. These two metaphors, of course, that Paul's using to emphasize care, compassion, love, love for others.

And when you bring these two metaphors together, well, they really sum up what Paul's ministry was about. Giving. The giving of himself.

[9 : 23] Giving for the sake of the gospel. And of course, there can be no greater testimony. No greater testimony for anyone. Whether you're a church member, whether you're a pastor, no greater testimony that in the work of service that you give for the Lord, you give.

You're somebody who gives. Somebody who gives and gives and gives again. You give the gospel. You give Christ to others.

You give yourself for the sake of the gospel. So we're going to look at what Paul's saying about his own testimony, his own defense of his work. And really, of course, to apply what Paul's saying to our own context, to our own situation.

Well, we mentioned the gentleness of motherly self-denial. Well, it's reading actually from verse 6 into verse 7. Though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ, but we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

We could have made. So, remember, Paul is writing not just in his own name, but you go back to the very start of the letter. He speaks about himself and Silvanus or Silas and Timothy.

[10 : 41] So, he's speaking of himself there as apostles of Christ. We need to look at that first of all. Why is he referring to themselves as apostles of Christ?

Well, in the New Testament, there are actually two ways that the word apostle is used. There's the first way of referring to those who are witnesses of Christ's resurrection, those who saw the risen Lord Jesus and having seen the risen Lord Jesus being sent out.

The word apostle means. Messenger. Being sent out to witness to the remaining Savior. And the eleven remaining disciples, of course, Judas Iscariot, not an apostle, who betrayed Jesus, who was replaced by Matthias.

So, these eleven plus Matthias, they were apostles. They'd seen the risen Savior and they went out to proclaim the risen Lord Jesus to others. They were apostles in that sense.

And Paul himself is the apostle Paul. He wasn't one of the disciples, but of course, on the Damascus Road, he met with the risen Lord Jesus. So, he could be counted as an apostle who met with the risen Lord Jesus.

[12 : 01] But, there's a more general sense when you take the literal meaning of apostle. You know, the messenger, the saint one. And, in fact, you look at other parts of Scripture and you see other people called apostles.

In that sense, Barnabas is called an apostle in Acts 14. There are others as well in Romans 16, Adronicus, Junius. But, when Paul speaks here of himself and these others, Silas and Timothy, being apostles, it's this general sense.

they were together, it seems, when the gospel was first preached in Thessalonica. And, Timothy had gone to Thessalonica after Paul and Silas had left for another place called Berea.

And so, Paul's referring to himself, Silas, yes, I suppose Timothy as well, when they were with the Thessalonian believers. He's referring to their conduct, their behavior, as apostles, as messengers, messengers of the gospel to the people in Thessalonica.

And Paul tells us, he tells them, that when they were with the believers, when Paul, Silas, Timothy were with the believers, their conduct was honorable.

[13 : 18] He says, we could have been a burden to you as apostles. We could have insisted on our rights as apostles, but we chose not to. We could have insisted on payment for their work, but they chose not to.

Paul, of course, would later write to the Corinthians regarding all who proclaim the gospel that, well, they're entitled to make a living even in preaching the gospel. But here, Paul expressly says, no, in this case, no.

They could have been a burden to the Thessalonians, but they weren't. Why? Well, let's look at this more closely. Paul's not saying, he's not saying that those who work in church contents should receive absolutely nothing for that work.

You read elsewhere, of course, in Scripture, 1 Timothy 5, for example, the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

Or you know what Timothy added from the Old Testament, don't muzzle the ox while it's treading out the grain. What Jesus said himself, the worker deserves his wages.

[14 : 32] That's, of course, the principle, the basic principle. But you've got to think of context. You've got to think what's expedient. You've got to think what's appropriate in giving context.

Because really, what Paul's saying here, he's saying there are limits to your liberty, limits to what's appropriate in certain circumstances.

He'd write later on in 1 Corinthians 10, all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but all things don't build up.

You see, it was perfectly lawful for Paul to insist him and being paid for his preaching, but it wasn't helpful in the context of the prevailing situation at that time.

Because there were false teachers who were going around and they were certainly insisting on being paid and paid well because in their case they preached out of greed. Greed was the dominant factor.

[15 : 34] And because of that principle in their lives, the message was being discredited. But Paul, first and foremost, was in Thessalonica to preach the gospel. He wasn't there to make money.

So he couldn't risk the credibility of the gospel. And he couldn't risk his own credibility by appearing exactly as those who were peddling the gospel. Peddling, you might say, even what they peddled in a false sense.

So Paul denied himself. He was aware of the bigger picture. And he denied even the right than his apostle. And this is something I think we can bring even in context of our current, even our current time.

Even our current church context. Watch how you insist on your own rights. You know, there are many rights I suppose we can claim. We can have particular rights that in fact that our church law allows.

Precious, precious rights we can exercise. But we've got to use them with discretion and wisdom. Exercise for grace of care.

[16 : 47] Especially when even exercising these rights can even damage somebody, even damage the unity of the church. And so rights have got to be exercised in good conscience.

But wisdom prevail when Christ's cause is involved. And it's so often necessary to forgo these rights if rights are only for selfish gain and do nothing for the greater cause of the Lord Jesus.

Paul, you see, Paul and these other apostles, they showed so much wisdom in not insisting on their rights. But what did they show? They showed self-giving love to these people in Thessalonica.

And the way that Paul describes that self-giving love, well, it's really quite remarkable. As we read there in verse 7, we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

This is quite remarkable. You know, Paul's comparing himself and these other apostles as a nursing mother. You know, and I suppose in many ways, even the imagery is more more of a sort of a mother bird caring for her chicks.

[18 : 01] And there's a reason for saying that because if you go to the Old Testament, when Paul speaks of a mother in the Old Testament, well, yes, it's from a female perspective, of course, but often the Old Testament, when the emphasis on this motherly care was given, it's the context of a mother bird.

Think of what Jesus said when he cried out against Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen, a mother bird, a hen, gathers her brood under her wings and you would not. And Paul here is referring to, you know, to Christ's care for his church.

For example, you go to Ephesians 5, 29, and he speaks exactly there in the Philonians. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but none is it, just as does the church.

So what Paul's saying here for himself and these other apostles, they cared so much for these believers. They were like mothers to their children, like mothers in cherishing, in comforting, giving spiritual food to these little ones, these people who were young in their faith.

[19 : 28] He was showing that self-giving love and showing it in abundance to every single person in that church. And not one person in that church loved any the less than any others.

And you see how Paul speaks of that outworking of that love, that love and sharing. Verse 8, being affectionately, listen to the words of love, affectionately desirous of you.

We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you'd become very dear to us. Paul showed his care for these Thessalonians, sharing in love, sharing the gospel, sharing even their very selves.

This is the language of love. This is the language of affection. And the language of affection, together with the necessity of preaching the gospel, preaching the gospel in love, but love the Lord Jesus.

Giving the good news of salvation through Christ alone. And giving of self in the proclaiming of that word. Yes, Paul did so out of love for these Thessalonian believers.

[20 : 44] believers. Now let's bring all this to application. Because certainly all who have a pastoral care over the flock of the Lord Jesus, I have, we have that duty to give of our whole self in serving, serving you, serving the flock.

So the word's going to be preached fully. The message of salvation is going to be proclaimed absolutely. But there's got to still be that giving of self, giving of self in love.

Because as Paul would say also to the Corinthians, I'm nothing. I mean, there's no point in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. There's no point in preaching Christ crucified unless the one who preaches, the one who proclaims, lives out the gospel of Jesus and lives out that gospel in love for others and in love, living it out sacrificially.

Because notice what Paul's saying about his own response to the Thessalonians. They were the objects of his affections. He tells them they'd become so very dear to them.

The word actually is the love word, so beloved to them. They were beloved by God and so beloved by the apostles. And so it follows then that Paul and these other apostles, they regarded the Thessalonians with that love minus zero.

[22 : 15] Not because they were forced to, not because of anything that Paul was going to gain from it. It was because God's love conquers all. And all who've been entrusted with, well, with the care of the flock of the Lord Jesus.

So important to reflect on that utter necessity of care, that loving care, the care to be shown, particularly those in positions of leadership, the care over the flock.

And that's why Paul compares that care, his care to a mother. Might well sound a surprising comparison, but, well, there's nothing to be cautious about using this particular language.

There's every place in ministry for care and compassion and tenderness and gentleness, whether you're dealing from the pulpit such as this, or even the home, even in home visits particularly.

And all who are blessed with pastoral care in a congregation, there's that responsibility to show undivided Christian love, love to those who need that love, love and tender, compassion at the love of the Lord Jesus.

[23 : 35] Somebody's written this, we all need to cultivate more in our pastoral ministry, gentleness, the gentleness, love and self-sacrifice of a mother.

You know, Paul comparing himself to a mother, it might sound a little unusual. In fact, it may well be that sometimes we do a bulk from thinking of that.

It's been told that somehow men can shy away from church because the language that's used in church might seem feminine, even using the word love itself.

That shouldn't be the case. I mean, Paul himself, Paul was a tough masculine individual. Paul was no weakling. Paul had suffered, he'd endured so much physical suffering, mental suffering, and did so for the sake of his Lord and Savior.

you. But he wasn't afraid to use the language of love, especially in reference to love for God and love for his fellow believers. I think of Jesus.

[24 : 40] I mean, Jesus, we have to say the most masculine of all men. He used the language of love continually, love for God and love for others. And so must you, so must I, if you're going to reflect the love of God for sinners.

sinner. But of course, as we see here in this letter, it's not just the mother metaphor that Paul uses. Paul uses the father metaphor. We read that in verses 10 to 12, where we read there of the encouragement of fatherly affection.

Because Paul wants these believers there in Thessalonica to see that, well, that there was fatherly affection being shown to them. The way that Paul, Silas, and Timothy conducted themselves was like a father in affection to his chosen.

And there's this sense of example, a fatherly example that Paul's giving here. You were witnesses, verse 10, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct towards you believers.

In other words, the example, a fatherly example. Because we read that in chapter 1, verse 6, when Paul speaks of the Thessalonians have been imitators of us and the Lord.

[26 : 01] They were imitators of these apostles because the apostles lived lives that were worthy of imitation. You see, the apostles showed themselves to be set apart, to be holy, to be converted.

They'd been transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ. And so they showed themselves, as Paul says, blameless, blameless, through their upright living. Yes, they were still sinners, but as far as their conduct was concerned towards the Thessalonians, they were, you might say, above the truth, above any kind of blame.

That's what the word blameless is saying, above any kind of blame. Their motives were pure, their practice was pure. It was founded, grounded in love. And so the apostle, Paul, he can speak of himself and these others as fathers to the Thessalonians.

Father in the sense of an example. How these believers in Thessalonians should live looking to Paul as that example. Now, of course, we might see even in a human sense, you know, true fatherly love.

Fatherly care. Well, that's done as examples to the children, because the father shows he has an authority.

[27 : 27] The children will want to emulate, imitate the father and his conduct. Of course, we know that it can be the opposite case. Fathers can neglect their children, neglect their responsibilities, but no, Paul, see, that's not what we were with you.

We were with you. We set you an example as fathers set examples to their children. And so, there in Thessalonica, Paul is saying, you didn't need any other influences other than ourselves.

You didn't need anyone to show you spiritual guidance other than ourselves. Paul, Silas, Timothy, showed that fatherly commitment. They showed God in their holiness and their righteousness and their blameless living.

And he did so to inspire these Thessalonians, that these Thessalonians would live their lives to the glory of God. But it wasn't some kind of, you know, domineering, autocratic, fatherly authority that Paul and these others were exercising.

It was the authority of fatherly love, fatherly affection. For you know, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you, we encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

[28 : 50] Paul treated these Thessalonians in that fatherly love, not in any kind of domineering sense. And he did it, as Paul tells us, by encouraging and urging the believers to live lives worthy of God.

Paul had such a fatherly concern for these people there in Thessalonica. Their spiritual welfare was uppermost in Paul's heart.

And so, you know, Paul wanted to disciple these people so that they lived lives worthy of the name of the Lord Jesus, because God had called them into his kingdom.

And so, Paul was showing his fatherly concern, his fatherly purpose, so that these young believers in Thessalonica would grow, that they'd grow and become strong Christian believers, that they'd become true followers of the one Lord and Savior.

And so, Paul's explaining to them, he's reminding them of his own conduct, the conduct of the other apostles, conduct, as we said, that was utterly above reproach, selfless conduct, because he wanted the best for these Thessalonians, he wanted to see them grow spiritually.

[30 : 09] And Paul, when he's speaking of encouragement, he's urging these believers, live your life worthy of God. He's encouraging them, encouraging them to be strong in the Lord and to remain steadfast in the face of the suffering that they're enduring for the gospel sake.

See, these three men had come alongside these people in Thessalonica. They'd supported them, they'd given them hope, they were enabling these people to live lives to the glory of God, to live lives of faith, and to live with that steadfast endurance, even in the face of suffering.

And falling on from encouragement, Paul offered comfort, comfort in their suffering. You know what it's like when a father puts his arm around his child to give comfort, when the child's upset and the little one's comforted.

Well, isn't that what Paul's declaring here? He's speaking, as it were, of his arms being around these people in that church there in Thessalonica, saying, you know, our arms are continually around you, we're on your shoulders, around you, we've given you that comfort, even in these difficult times you're living in, these times of persecution, these times when the Thessalonica church, a young church, that church needed the comfort of these older mature believers, because Paul, Silas, and Timothy wanted the best for these young believers, these believers who are beloved, who are dear, dear to Paul, dear to Silas, dear to Timothy, these young believers face so much opposition, so much hardship, and so the apostles in their encouragement and their comfort, it was so vital to these people there in that Greek city.

They were spiritual parents, parents to these believers, showing how much they cared for them, how much their motive was pure, full of absolute integrity, how much, yes, their love for them was love minus zero.

[32 : 28] I pray then that in your own relationships, one with another, whether as I said it's from leadership to congregation or within the congregation, across the congregation, that your love one for another, that it would be just that, love minus zero, love, yes, in response to the one who showed you his love minus zero and who continues to show you love minus zero.

So love one another, love one another with that gentle self-denial encouragement and comfort one to another, show it in words of affection, acts of affection, as you seek to honour your Lord and Saviour because he shows you, he shows you unconditional love, he shows you that unsurpassing love, that true affection, that he gives and gives and gives again to build you up, to encourage you, to show his love, that love that's eternal.

Amen. And let us pray. Lord our God, we truly do give thanks to you. You are the God of love. You have showered your love upon your people, even here this evening.

Lord, we confess that so often the love that we show is weak love, diminished love, but we pray, Lord, that you'll increase our faith, increase our faith and increase our love, that we will truly be those who reflect the Lord Jesus, who imitate him in his love for others.

Help us then in our weakness. Strengthen us, we pray that you might have the glory. We pray, Lord, these things in and through the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

[34 : 21] Amen.