

1THESSALONIANS 4:1-3a "Strive To Be A Theologian"

The apostle Paul ends chapter three with an exhortation for our love to grow more and more toward the brethren and all men as we saw in verse 12 of that chapter. The implied means of this growth in love comes from the one true God whom, John says, is love. Our love must be in conformity to God's agape love which is selfless.

Paul gives us a glimpse of what Godly love is and what it is not in 1CO 13:4-8 "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails."

Donald Grey Barnhouse says, "love within the brotherhood must precede love in general. This is in line with the principle Paul set forth in GAL 6:10 "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." Indeed, it was this mutually exhibited love in the church that drew forth the remark, 'Behold, how these Christians love one another."

You and I can be very religious and yet not love as Christ loved and desires for us to love. Instead of love, the world will often see Christians who know a great deal of what the bible says, but aren't really exhibiting in their lives what the bible says.

Barnhouse goes on to say, "Don't forget, doctrine never impresses the unregenerate world. Those who don't know Christ couldn't care less if you and I cross our theological t's and existential i's properly. This is important within the church to be sure. But if we want to let the world outside know what Christianity is all about, we need to show them the love of Christ among us as brothers and sisters in the Lord. When the world sees that Christians can get along with each other, then they'll believe what we say---not until then."

But what about doctrine? I've heard Christians say that theology and doctrine aren't important at all. And yet it isn't until we Christians get a handle on doctrine that we will be able to love others as God wants us to love.

Now, what is doctrine and theology? One definition of doctrine is a set of collective teachings. And so from a biblical standpoint what doctrine amounts to is those teachings which God has given us in His word. To learn the things of God and to know His will we must know His teachings or doctrine.

The word Theology comes from the Greek word *theologia* which is made up of two Greek words: *Theo*, which means God, and *logia*, which means the study of things.

And so Theology is the study of God and all of those things which pertain to God. Why should that be offensive for Christians? When we come to God's word for direction or for wanting to know more of who God is and what He desires for our lives we are, in a loose sense, Theologians and seekers of doctrine.

What many people in the church have done is to relegate theology and doctrine to a cold, sterile, academic and ineffectual approach to the things of God. And in the process they've relegated the word to a collection of beliefs with no practical value for real life, or they have substituted the living word with man-made rules and regulations, which go beyond the word of God, which is what legalism is.

Paul actually addresses this ungodly approach to life when writing the Colossians.

COL 2:20-23 "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? 22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

COL 3:1-3 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

What Paul is saying is the same thing Jesus said to the Pharisees. They were continually coming to our Lord and confronting Him about the law. They would say, "You can't heal on the Sabbath because you can't do any work on that day, "Thus saith the Lord".

MAR 3:2-6 "Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. 3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." 4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. 5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

You see they had twisted the law in such a way as to make it destructive. Jesus showed them that it was their misunderstanding of the law that put unbiblical mandates on the people which were harmful and without hope.

No wonder the people flocked to Jesus. He had words of life and hope. He didn't speak like the Pharisees whose words were cold and lifeless and burdensome.

And unfortunately, in some quarters of the church at large, there is a similar approach like that of the Pharisees. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" It's not as though God's word doesn't address ungodly behavior, but to add to God's word is very dangerous as the apostle John says in the book of Revelation, primarily because worldly wisdom and worldly solutions are not God's ways. He says, 'MY ways are not your ways.'

There are denominations that actually have lists of what they refer to as inappropriate behavior. And to become a member you must submit to that list. Their intentions may be good but their theology and doctrine is bad when it exceeds the word of God.

One of the physical therapists at my Chiropractor in Ft. Myers came from such a denomination and she is a Christian, but she remembers growing up in an environment which was unbiblically oppressive.

Her former church's list included: No make-up for women, no slacks for the women, no dancing, no parties, no going to the movies, no drinking and the list went on and on as she relayed it to me.

Now, in all fairness I'm sure those church leaders were concerned with the holiness of their members, as they should be. But, if God's word gives liberty in these areas, who in the world do we

think we are to add our pet lists to bind peoples' consciences where God doesn't?

Now, I would say this. Where we have liberty in Christ, we should not abuse it. But, to try and play the Holy Spirit by making people conform to a man-made set of rules is nothing short of Pharisaic, which is legalism.

Our holiness as believers is based upon what God says in His word and our conforming to the life of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our holiness must be prompted by our love for Christ, not a fear of man and his standards.

We need to understand this because as we pursue doctrine and theology we must pursue it in the Spirit, who is our Teacher, and with the same intent as James speaks of in his epistle.

When James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (JAM 1:22), he's not asking us to be Pharisees, obeying a set of man made rules. He's simply saying your doctrine and theology should effect every area of your life to the point where it becomes a natural part, (or if you will, a supernatural) part of you and your behavior which is prompted by your love for Christ.

When it comes to this area of Christian liberty Paul tells us in ROM 14:3-6 "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5 One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God."

I know Christians, for example, who don't celebrate Christmas because they feel it's a day that dishonors Christ because of its Pagan origins, and so they look down on other Christians.

Vice versa, those who do celebrate it will often times look down on those who don't celebrate. If all that you do is unto the Lord to worship and honor Him then don't sweat it and don't judge in areas where God says it's okay.

The problem arises when we try and force others to adhere to our convictions in these kinds of areas. And that is where legalism rears its ugly head and it leads to divisions in the body and keeps us from getting on with the work of furthering the Kingdom of God with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, the reason I am trying to give you a perspective on how doctrine and theology are to be handled is because a proper understanding of this is essential to our spiritual growth and this is what Paul now addresses in fourth chapter of Thessalonians.

1TH 4:1 "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more."

The NAS puts it this way: "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more."

Paul is actually talking about doctrine and theology here. He felt it was very important for these new believers to have a proper handle on what God says about Himself and His will for their lives and how they needed to excel in knowing more about their God which would help them in their walk with Him, and encourage their love for one another, as well as all men.

It's all connected. Truth and love grow side by side in conjunction with one another. To neglect God's truth will adversely affect how you will be able to love God and men, and it will also adversely affect your ability to be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ, which is what Paul speaks of in verse 3 when he mentions sanctification.

In this first verse Paul alludes to the teachings or instruction he had given them. I say allude because the word instruction or teaching doesn't actually appear in the original text in verse one.

The literal translation from the Greek as taken from the Interlinear bible is: "For the rest then, brothers, we beseech you and we exhort you in the Lord Jesus, even as you received from us HOW IT BEHOOVES YOU TO WALK, and to please God, that you abound..."

"How to", necessarily means instruction. The kind of "how to" you receive is vital. You can go into any Christian bookstore and find rows and rows of "how to" books: How to love your mate,

How to lose weight, How to keep your hair from falling out, I mean the "how to's" are endless.

But, unless the "how to's" are directly based on biblical teaching they are nothing more than worldly wisdom, which may give short term solutions, but in the long run are worthless for any real spiritual growth.

You cannot combine the world's way's and God's ways and try to come up with a hybrid approach to godliness or instruction. That's why, for example, Christian psychology is a contradiction in terms and is actually harmful.

The word Psychology, like Theology, is made up of two Greek words: *Psyche* which means mind as it relates to behavior, and *logia* which we already saw, means the study of.

Psychology then, is the study of the mind and how to alter behavior of human beings. That's what counseling is all about, altering behavior. Modern Psychology was created by men in the 19th Century, who, for the most part, actually denied the existence of God and opted to understand and alter men's behavior in a naturalistic way apart from anything which has to do with God.

God say's, if your behavior is to be altered it must be in conformity to My word and My Spirit alone. To bring the naturalistic approach into a spiritual realm is not only unwise, it's doomed from the git-go. And so Christian Psychology is an attempt to combine the worldly or natural with the spiritual, and the two are not compatible, nor should they be forced to be compatible.

Does that mean all Christian Psychologists are purposely trying to undermine God's work? I think not. But once you've been enlightened to the truth a decision must be made. Will I continue to compromise God's truth by mixing the two world views or will God's word be the exclusive approach to my counseling as it relates to the body of Christ?

And that's really the bottom line. Compromise. Is God's word sufficient or not? If it is then let's not play games defending any system which is diametrically opposed to it. Now, I'm not just trying to pick on Psychology. Anything or any teaching which does not conform to God's word must not take its place or be forced to live along side it.

If I taught God's word together with humanistic philosophy which opposed His word, I dare say that some of you would be upset, for good reason.

Paul say's, 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, because that pleases God.' If we know how to please Him why would we attempt to do anything which would displease Him by adding worldly wisdom for spiritual growth?

And that's why Paul instructed the Colossians in COL 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

Paul fully understood how the Thessalonians came out of pagan teaching which depended on worldly wisdom, and he was trying to protect them and encourage them to growth in Christ by seeking the things above, those things he had received that he was giving to them by the authority of Christ.

1TH 4:2 "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."

This instruction wasn't a good idea Paul made up or learned from the philosophers of his day. This came directly from Christ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There is no greater authority.

Over the years Cheryle and I have counseled people in the church. And it's interesting to see what different Christians have received in the way of wisdom to the solutions to their problems. Some have tried the worlds' wisdom; many have tried to combine the worlds' wisdom with God's word. But, it never ceases to amaze me when a Christian is given the full counsel of God's word, without compromise, and how they often react when they've tried everything else.

And often the response to our counsel is, 'that's too simplistic.' Or, 'I've tried it God's way and it doesn't work.' What they really mean to say is that I wasn't willing to trust and persevere with God and do it His way no matter what.

People get the impression that counseling is some secret formula which only a select few can implement to affect the lives of people.

Allow me to let you in on a little known fact. Counseling, and by that I mean biblical counseling, is essentially directing people to

God's truth, and encouraging them in love to obey Him day by day as they submit and trust Him with their lives. It's called living by faith.

Someone might say, 'Well, that sounds like the formula for sanctification; growing in Christ and being more and more like Him. If that's what you think, you're 100% right. In fact, Paul goes so far as to say in the next verse. 1TH 4:3 "It is God's will that you should be sanctified:"

There is no way you will be sanctified apart from knowing and walking in the truth of God's word in the power of the Spirit. People try to complicate the world. And often people try to complicate the Christian walk by deviating from the simple truth that God alone is sufficient for all of our needs, and His grace is sufficient to walk through any trial or problem in this world in His strength.

Peter wasn't joking when he said, "[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2PE 1:3-4)

Is there anything in this life that God can't deal with for the believer? Is there anything in God's word that will not enable us to receive His counsel as to how we can proceed? **God has given us everything we need for life and godliness**, which is to say that He gives us everything to conform us into the image of His Son, which is sanctification.

Jesus prayed to the Father in JOH 17:17 "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." He doesn't say, 'sanctify them by the truth, together with the latest teachings from the psychological world.'

The way in which we live in this world as Christians is directly related to the Word of God affecting us through the power of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't make any difference what new "disease" the world has created, it all comes down to the same old problem which affects us all. It's called sin, and praise God there's a solution to that. It is Jesus Christ.

We're not recovering addicts, or recovering alcoholics, or recovering anything, especially recovering sinners. We have been justified by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are new creations in Christ. We no longer belong to the evil one, nor are we bound to the power of the evil one.

Yes, we still sin and yes we battle the flesh and the world and the devil, but if we have placed our faith in Christ, we belong to the living God who is our strength and our life. Let's not relegate our Almighty God to just one more solution to the problems we face in life as though they all have some merit. Let us grow in our sanctification as we not only seek the truth of God's word, but also are "doers" of the word in God's strength.

Next week we'll pick up here and discuss some of the Theological differences between justification and sanctification and how the two are intertwined and dependent upon each other.

But, let me just encourage you to seek whole-heartedly the God who gave us His Son Jesus Christ and the God who gave us His word which is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.
(2Tim.3:16-17)

God is sufficient and so is His word for every area of our lives and as Peter says in 2Pet.2:2-3, "like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord."

Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and instruct you in the way you should go as you go to His word, and trust and obey and walk by the faith He's given you, and give glory to His name.