

The Problem of Love in an Age of Hostility

In 1949, shortly after the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Second World War, George Orwell published his increasingly classic novel *1984*. The book is a dystopian novel, which imagines Orwell's native Britain as the fictional Oceania that has been taken over by a tyrannical political regime, which governs through emotional manipulation. Individual thinking is a crime against the state, citizens are under constant surveillance and through propaganda, misinformation, and state-sponsored hate against a mysterious "other," Oceania is stabilized.

Every day the citizens of Oceania are required to participate in a ritual called the "Two Minutes Hate." The "Two Minutes Hate" is a dramatically produced film, which depicts and demeans Oceania's enemies. It is dramatically produced with what the narrator of the book describes as "hideous, grinding speech, as of some monstrous machine running without oil..." Its singular purpose is the proliferation of hate and collective rage as a ritual event, which unifies the citizens of Oceania and distracts them from other political and cultural issues.

Orwell's description of the influence of State Sponsored group hate is haunting. He wrote,

"Before the Hate had proceeded for thirty seconds, uncontrollable exclamations of rage were breaking out from half the people in the room...A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledgehammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blow-lamp." (Orwell, p. 14–15)

Orwell's description is exactly what the tyrannical party would hope for, uncontrollable, frenetic, and formative hate. Maybe the most haunting line comes from the main character's reflection on this ritual. He says, "The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid jumping in." Hate has a way of sweeping everything in its vitriolic path away. It swells and consumes. It causes the rationalization of irrational behavior. Hate is a powerful force.

"The Opposite of Hate"

My assumption is most of us would agree in the past five years, we have seen an increase in polarization and hate in our national dialogue, particularly since the 2016 election cycle, and this is true regardless of which side of the aisle you find yourself. Earlier this year, Sally Kohn, a liberal political commentator who formerly worked for Fox News, published a book entitled, *The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide for Repairing our Humanity*. In the book, she explores the roots of this movement toward

a more vitriolic culture. She seeks to understand why we all, collectively, have found ourselves further polarized than we have in years past.

Upon reflecting on some of her initial findings she writes, "We've gotten to the point where hate is such an acceptable norm that we not only believe it's inevitable but we try overtly to market its benefit—and exploit hate for profit." Hate is economy. It receives headlines. It gets clicks on social media. It receives the most airtime on the news. And quite frankly, as Kohn notes, in as polarized an age as ours, hate is profitable. When Hate becomes economy, we begin to experience the same formative power of Orwell's Two Minutes Hate.

The 24-hour news cycle functions as the highly produced videos, we listen to headlines, neighbors, friends, politicians, spew hate condemning "the other" and slowly the powerful forces of rage shape us. All of us have witnessed outrage sweep through our national dialogue; we have all witnessed the atrocities of Hate. Consider the following recent cultural discussions that have dominated our country:

- Immigration debates and families being separated at the border
- Gun violence and the ensuing 2nd Amendment and gun-control debates
- Racial tensions from Black Lives Matter, to Ferguson, and Charleston
- And even this week, the tragedy at the Capital Gazette shooting.

The very air we breath is thick with hate, and I imagine as I mention some of these topics and names you had a visceral response. Hate shapes us individually, and hate shapes us culturally, breeding more brokenness and violence.

How do we reverse this?

The way of Jesus stands in stark contrast to this cultural moment. I can't help but think the church can and must offer an alternate narrative. This brings us to our text in 1 Thessalonians 3. Let me give you a little context into what is happening in the church in Thessalonica at the time of Paul's writing of this letter to this church.

Acts 17 offers some insight for us. As was Paul's custom, he went into the synagogue and began to argue with the Jews that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, and the Messiah had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. The response was mixed. Some Jews were persuaded by Paul's arguments, as well as some Gentiles, but other Jews were not persuaded. They grew in animosity toward this new movement and in response created a mob, which launched an all-out riot in the city

Fueled by hate and ideological differences, the mob began frantically searching out Paul and Silas (the leaders of this new movement). Having not found them, they dragged some of the believers in front of city officials and began declaring,

“These men have caused trouble all over the world have not come here...They are defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” Acts 17:6

So it is in the midst of this hostile situation Paul literally flees the city for his life and leaves this young church abruptly. Now imagine for a moment you are one of these believers. You are continuing to live in this hostile moment with oppression from both non-believing Jews and the Roman Empire at its height. Your natural disposition is to hate those who are oppressing you and then you receive this letter from Paul who has been run out of town. And right in the middle of the letter, you read this benediction.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.
(1 Thessalonians 3:11–13)

Paul’s First Prayer—I Thessalonians 3:11

So the first part of the prayer, Paul is seeking to be back with the church. Remember, Paul was abruptly separated from this young church plant, which he deeply loves. Paul desperately wants to return to this church to encourage and further their ministry.

And so he prays,

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

Now bear with me, because I have to get a little Bible nerdy on you, but the payoff, I think, is worth it. Paul does something unique here, which would certainly have stood out to the original audience. He starts this prayer with a plural subject, *“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus...”* But he goes on to use a singular verb. In Greek, the subject and verb always match in number, meaning a plural subject demands a plural verb, and a singular subject demands a singular verb. But Paul didn’t do this here, and this makes for a very clunky sentence in the Greek. So the question is, why? Why does Paul intentionally write in this discrepancy?

Now, Paul was a monotheistic Jew, which would stand in contrast to the pluralist pagan culture and he was speaking to an audience who held deeply to the concept of the existence of one God. And so what Paul was doing here, by using a plural subject with a singular verb, was make the case God and Jesus are different but unified, two distinct entities, but one God. He possibly was even hinting at the fact they’re unified in love, just like God wants us to be unified in love.

Remember Jesus words in the Gospel of John, *“I and the Father are One,”* and *“I love the father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”*

So as we enter into the prayer, it’s a good thing to ask the Father and the Son to help us embody the same kind of love for one another, which exists between God the Father and our Lord Jesus. This sort of unity is symptomatic of one of the most mysterious doctrines in the Christian faith, the Trinity. To be clear, Paul isn’t making a case for the Trinity here,

but the unity described is between God and Jesus. This sort of unity is instructive for us in how we understand love.

By no means do we have the time to fully unpack one of the most mysterious aspects of the Christian faith. I want to spend just a few minutes here because it will open up our understanding of the type of love Paul declares unites God and Jesus and is calling the Thessalonians and ourselves to embody.

At its most fundamental, the doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that God is one, but at the very same moment manifests in three distinct persons: God the Father, God the son, God the Holy Spirit.

Rublev’s Trinity Icon

While this concept is certainly as difficult to understand as it is to explain, I often think it is best understood through visual imagery. Maybe one of the most famous depictions of the Trinity is by the 15th Century Russian artist, Andrei Rublev. The painting depicts three figures, each representative of the three distinct Characters of the God-head (Father-Son-Holy Spirit)

As you meditate on the icon, a few things become obvious. Each of the three individuals is nearly identical, specifically in their faces, but their attire distinguishes them each individually. Each of the individuals is slightly leaning into the center of the table with a sort of affectionate reverence for the other. Your eyes bounce around in a cyclical manner, with no one character standing out above the other. There is no sense of hierarchy but a mutual standing and love for all at the table. This is the picture of love we are given, the very essence of the Triune God is that of mutual self-giving love. Each person in the Trinity is different, but their differences don’t swell up hate, but rather unite them in love. The very essence of that Triune God is love, self-giving love in community. With this sort of love in our minds, let’s look at verse 12, the second of Paul’s prayers

The What and Who of Love—I Thessalonians 3:12

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Now, this is interesting language. Most of us don’t speak of love in the manner Paul does here, *“make your love increase.”*

Love as a Source of Action, not Action itself

We tend to speak of love as an action; but Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers speak of love more as a disposition and less of an action. Consider the following statements:

And over all these virtues, put on love... (Colossians 3:14)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud... (1 Corinthians 13:4)

These are all traits, which are the natural by-product of love. Pursue love and patience, kindness, etc. will follow. Paul is not saying, do these things to love, but rather, when you are filled with love these ooze out of you.

Love itself is not an action, but rather it is a source of action.

So let’s define love this way, Love is an overall condition of the individual who is poised to promote the good of another. Love is a disposition, a character, a readiness to act in a certain way. It is not, therefore, an

action, feeling, or emotion, nor is it an intention. This understanding of love is holistic. It is not something that can be turned off or on for this or that person or thing. It is a general orientation toward life as a whole.

When Paul is praying for our love to “increase and overflow,” he is not praying for you to increase in loving actions, but rather we would be filled with love, so it spills out of us onto those around us. Now, be careful not to romanticize my words here, because it is easy to do so. I am not simply speaking of a flowery, beautiful language about love being the essence of who we are. But instead, I am speaking of the only way in which true genuine love can manifest itself.

Consider again the image of Rublev's Trinity and the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. As Love comes out of the very essence of the Triune God, so love is not something in which we act out in the moment of need, but rather, it is to flow from the essence of our being.

Think of John's words in 1 John 4:7–8

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

The Trinity is not loving, but rather its very essence, its very existence as a 3-in-1 community is love. This is true genuine love, which is the overflow of our overall disposition toward the world.

Love is not something you choose to do. It is something you choose to be. Now, let's layer this with the context of Thessalonians. It is to an oppressed people who are living in a toxic environment in which the Gospel is taking root; Paul prays for their love to increase to two particular peoples, each other and everyone else.

“For each other...” Paul is showing their first responsibility is to allow their love to grow within the church community. In an age of hostility, where differences are made ultimate, and hate is normalized, the church stands as a stark contrast community, offering an environment of love amongst difference. Church is one of the few social institutions remaining, which intentionally welcomes those from different generations, social classes, economic classes, racial distinctions, etc. The church is a community of “differents,” which embody an alternate ethic to the cultural normalization of hate.

“For everyone else...” Remember the context in which Paul is writing this letter. “Everyone else” is hostile to the way of Jesus and is committed to Rome and Caesar, and not Jesus. The shift of Paul's focus broadens outward beyond the walls of the church. Here is the reality. Love for those in the “in-group” isn't profound; there is nothing world-changing about loving those who love you. A dispositional understanding of love is the Christian call and requires love to extend to everyone else, regardless of differences. Biblical Commentator, Marianne Thompson, summarizes this tension between loving the church community and “everyone else” well, she wrote,

“...the Christian community is the school in which we learn to love. Like great musicians who practice tedious drills for long hours, Christians practice their scales at home in order to sing in public. In the community, love is commanded and modeled, and here is where it must be lived out and practiced. This does not mean that love is limited to the boundaries of the

community. But if the community does not live by the model and teaching of its founder, Jesus, how can it expect others to do so or to hear its call to join with them?”

Without question, this is a difficult task to embark on. And ultimately it is a lifelong call of learning to increase and overflow in love in every area of our lives. But consider the high point of Jesus' call to love from Matthew 5. Jesus' litmus test for love will demonstrate the necessity of love as a disposition.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (Matthew 5:43–44)

The only true way to “*love your enemies*,” or those with whom we disagree, or our culture says we should hate, is if you are the kind of person for whom loving your enemies is easier than hating your enemies. And this can only take place through the inward transformation of our entire being toward love. We do not come to our enemies and then try to love them, but rather, we come to them as a loving person.

Holiness and the Trajectory of Love—I Thessalonians 3:13

We now arrive at Paul's final prayer for us, and the Thessalonians.

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

The prayer begins for our hearts to be strengthened. Paul understands the complexity and difficulty to become consumed with love. But Paul also gives further meaning and purpose as to why we must “*increase and overflow in love*.” And it comes in a subtle transitional phrase, “*...so that you will be blameless and holy*.” The small phrase “so that” links Paul's thinking back to the previous prayer about love. The reason that we must increase and overflow with love is for the sake of holiness, and so we will be made holy in the presence of our God when Jesus comes back.

The way in which we love, fosters in us holiness, in God's economy, love and holiness are linked. What does holiness mean? The Hebrew word for holy is *godesh* and means “apartness, set-apartness, sacredness.” In the New Testament, the word for holy is *hagios*, meaning set apart, sacred, and worthy of veneration. God is holy because he's totally separate and above us in his perfection. He also calls us to be holy, he calls us to be set apart for him, and this is both a process of growth as well as a state of being we'll possess when we see Jesus face to face.

One day we'll stand before him holy and blameless, and that hope we have of seeing Jesus fuels our pursuit of holiness today. Love is a morally centric disposition toward others with a readiness to seek their good. Which leads us to the final phrase in this section, “*...when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones*.” There is a day, which is out on the horizon when Jesus will return as “Lord.” Jesus will return, and the Kingdom of God will be made fully manifest. This is our hope. The hope that one day God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The reason we are able to endure in love today, the reason we pursue love is the kingdom of God is out on the horizon, and it is coming to crash into earth, and the world will function differently. Love will ultimately be the way of all things on earth. Therefore, in order for us to be found Holy on that day, to be able to live into the reality of God's presence and reign on earth on this coming day, we must have the same

central organizing principle in our lives, which governs the Kingdom of God, love.

Love is the means through which the kingdom of God proliferates throughout the created order. Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica and ourselves this day is coming, and we can live in light of its reality here-and-now.

Rublev's Trinity—The Open Space

So what does all of this mean for us today? What do we do with this call to allow our love to increase and overflow? How do we make love the central disposition of our lives and the source of all our actions? To answer this, I want to look one more time at Rublev's depiction of the Trinity and note a few things we may have missed and are instructive for us.

Presence—Love is Presence

In the same way, Paul's first prayer in verse 11 is a prayer for him to be present with the Thessalonians, so too we see this presence playing out within the Triune God. Each of the three is utterly present with the other. They are distinct and different but present with each other. For some of us today this is the first step in learning to love well, we simply need to be more present with our family, spouse, co-worker, person you are told to hate, the marginalized and oppressed. Whoever it is, the first step is presence.

The Open Space—Love as Invitation to Each other and Everyone Else

Notice that your eyes bounce around the three identical figures, representing the loving triune community of God and lands at the open space. The open space is at the forefront of the table and the icon because it is the invitation for the observer to see their place at the table. We are invited into this type of love; we are invited into this community, to be transformed by the love of God so we can embrace love and give love. You are invited to sit at the divine table, to be consumed by the infinite loving union of the God Head—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Elements of Communion

At the heart of the painting and the heart of the divine unity is the elements of communion. The very reason they are sitting at the table is to partake in the Communion meal, which is set for all of us. And this meal is both the means through which we find ourselves at the table and the means through which we are to embody love for the world. It is initially the gift of Jesus' death, the working of his life poured out for the sake of the world that we enter into the love of God for us. And it is also the primary way in which we shift our disposition toward love for "each other and everyone else." Jesus' example on the cross (symbolic in the sacrament of communion) and the essence of the Triune God-Head is a love that places the needs of others ahead of their own, so to we are called to embody the story by giving our very lives for the sake of

love, placing the needs of others above our own. In the same way, Jesus sets the example; we embody the way of Jesus for the world around us. To escape a life that is naturally oriented toward hate, we have to surrender our self-will as the governing principle; we have to surrender our resolve to have our own way above all else.

Instead, we yield our will to good and to God, and we learn to seek what is good for others. We seek first to embody this story of communion. We counter the narrative of hate with a narrative of selfless love by pouring our lives out for the sake of the world, because this is how the kingdom of God is made manifest.

So for many of us, the first step is to view our daily interactions with friends, co-workers, family, strangers, and whoever through the lens of laying down our desires as the primary lens. When you are talking with that co-worker, interacting on social media, speaking with your children, engaging with someone who doesn't think the same way that you do, are you genuinely seeking and praying for their good? Even at the expense of your rights or freedoms?

For the follower of Jesus, love is to be our disposition toward the world. So that politician you can't tolerate, that co-worker who gets on your every nerve, that "enemy" you experience, are you praying and hoping for their flourishing? Are you blessing and not cursing them? For many of us, this is our first step toward a dispositional love. It is engaging in the practice of blessing those we disagree with.

It reminds me of Jesus' teachings about dying to ourselves.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23–24)

For some of us, we live in the light of the simple but profound reality God is inviting us into this kind of love. He is inviting us to experience his love and be embraced by that reality. And for others of us, we live in the light of the reality that we need to embody this love. We need to take more seriously our call to lay our life down for each other and everyone else. We need to lay down our rights, freedoms, desires, etc. for our enemies. Because this initial act of self-denial is a step toward a dispositional love toward the world and the Bay Area, which we are called to embody. So may you find yourself wrapped up in this story of divine love. May you be embraced and embody this love. And may today be a step toward a new vision for each other and everyone else.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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