

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Ambition

Key Idea:

Holy ambition is not the pursuit of fame, platform, or recognition — it is the God-given aspiration to live quietly, work hard, and love others through faithful service in the callings God has given us.

Key Text:

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 ESV)

Key Points:

- **Love, holiness, and the return of Christ are the three interwoven threads that run through this entire section of 1 Thessalonians.** Paul's prayer in 3:12–13 — that they would abound in love so that they would be established in holiness at the coming of Christ — sets the agenda for chapters 4–5. Each theme appears in each section: the call to holy sexuality (4:1–8) is grounded in God's call to holiness and motivated by His judgment; the call to brotherly love (4:9–12) flows from God-taught love and shapes how we live before others; and the hope of the return (4:13–5:11) frames everything. This passage is the second movement of that three-part symphony, bringing love to bear on the concrete and ordinary matters of daily life.
- **Brotherly love is not merely a feeling — it is a God-taught disposition that expresses itself in concrete acts of care for fellow believers.** The Greek word *philadelphias* originally referred to love between biological siblings and was then adopted by the early church to describe love for brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul says the Thessalonians are already doing this — across the whole of Macedonia — but urges them to abound “more and more.” The Christian life is not about fame and flash but about practical, ordinary deeds of love: a meal brought to a neighbor, a hand extended in difficulty, a word spoken with grace. Such love, unlike internet fame, accumulates into something real and lasting.

- **In a culture obsessed with being known, God gives His people a radically different and counterintuitive ambition: to live quietly and mind their own affairs.** The Greek word Paul uses — *philotimeomai* — means to be ambitious, to aspire, to make it one's aim. He uses the same word of his own burning ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ has not yet been named (Rom. 15:20) and to please God in all things (2 Cor. 5:9). The oxymoron “aspire to live quietly” is intentional: it arrests our attention. In a world rewarding outrageous behavior and engineering endless self-promotion, God calls His people to aspire to something quieter, more obscure, and infinitely more significant — a life of faithful love expressed in ordinary faithfulness.
- **Working hard with your hands in the callings God has given you is a form of love for your neighbors and a means of blessing to the world.** While Greek philosophers despised manual labor as beneath a free person, Scripture consistently honors it. Work is not a consequence of the fall but a gift given before it — God Himself worked to create and then called His image-bearers to do the same. Every Christian has received multiple callings: roles and responsibilities through which God works to serve neighbors and promote the common good in every realm of life. A calling is not merely a job title but the specific place God has put you to serve others — as parent, neighbor, employee, citizen, friend. Faithful, hard work in those callings is not a distraction from holy waiting; it is an essential expression of it.
- **The holy ambition to live quietly and work faithfully serves two vital purposes: it commends the Gospel to unbelievers and frees us from dependence on others.** The “so that” of v. 12 gives the double motive for vv. 9–11. First, the church's witness to outsiders: especially after the countercultural sexual ethics of 4:1–8, believers needed to adorn the Gospel with lives of visible integrity, honest work, and genuine love. Second, the avoidance of dependence: some in Thessalonica had stopped working — whether from eschatological excitement or simple laziness — and were exploiting others' generosity. True love does not take advantage of a community's care. The same concern surfaces in 2 Thessalonians 3:10–13, showing this was not a passing rebuke but a consistent apostolic expectation.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened with images of Paris Hilton, Kato Kaelin, and our culture's fascination with people who are famous for being famous — noting that middle school girls would rather be Britney Spears' assistant than a US Senator, and that algorithms now reward outrage over genuine contribution. Where do you see this dynamic most clearly in your own life or in the lives of people around you? How does it shape what we aspire to?
- Paul says the Thessalonians have been “taught by God” to love one another — not by human instruction alone (v. 9). What does it mean to be taught by God to love? How does that differ from merely being told to love? What role do Scripture and the Holy Spirit each play in that God-given teaching?

- The phrase “ambition to live quietly” is an oxymoron — deliberately arresting. In what ways does quiet, faithful, ordinary living require ambition and intentionality in our cultural moment? What forces make it hard to simply live quietly and mind your own affairs?
- Paul warns against being a “busybody” — someone who meddles in others’ affairs (cf. 2 Thess. 3:11). The outline connects this directly to true love and holiness: genuine love does not desire to control or gossip. Where do you see the busybody temptation most clearly — in social media, at work, in church? What does it look like to resist it?
- The outline notes that Greek philosophers and aristocrats despised manual labor, while Scripture consistently honors it. How has your own background shaped your view of work — especially work done with your hands? Do you find it easy or difficult to see ordinary, unglamorous work as service to God and neighbor?
- The teaching introduced the concept of calling — not just a vocation or career, but the specific roles and responsibilities God has given each of us through which He works to serve our neighbors and bless the world. What are the callings you currently carry? Which ones feel most meaningful? Which feel most overlooked or undervalued?
- The outline points out that some Thessalonians had stopped working — apparently thinking that since Jesus was coming soon, ordinary labor no longer mattered. That is the opposite of holy waiting. How does genuine expectation of Christ’s return actually motivate faithful work rather than idle disengagement? What does it mean that working hard at your callings is “an essential part of holy waiting”?
- Paul says the goal of this holy ambition is to “walk properly before outsiders” (v. 12). How does a life of quiet faithfulness, hard work, and genuine love commend the Gospel to people who do not yet believe? Can you think of examples — from your own experience or from history — where a believer’s ordinary life opened a door for the Gospel?
- Bret posed several diagnostic questions from the outline: Do I find my significance in public recognition or in quietly fulfilling my callings? Do I find my significance in success or faithfulness? Am I content in my callings or always restless, yearning for something more? Take a moment to sit honestly with those questions. Which one is hardest to answer? What would a faithful response look like?

For Further Study:

- For Paul’s parallel passages on the holy ambition to work quietly and not be a burden, read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13 and 1 Timothy 2:1–2 alongside this week’s text. Note how consistently these concerns appear across Paul’s letters and across years of ministry.
- For a deeper study of calling and work, explore BRCC’s [Called](#) series at brcc.church, where Bret unpacks the biblical theology of vocation at greater length.
- Watch this week’s episode of [After Hours](#) (available on Tuesday) for a more detailed discussion of the theology of calling, vocation, and the dignity of work.
- Listen to the song “[I Did Not Change the World Today](#)” that Bret quoted on Sunday. Here are the lyrics:

I did not save the world today,
Or change the course of history,
I walked the small and quiet way,
The life that God has given me.

I woke up with the morning sun,
I sat awhile to think and pray,
I did my work till the day was done,
But I did not save the world today.

I tried to live with gratitude,
To do the good that I could do,
To love the people close to me,
My neighbors and my family,
To share the kindness I've been shown,
To trust the Love that is my home,
To celebrate the tiny part I play,
But I did not save the world today.

I hear the politicians speak,
Such big ideas and lofty claims,
My life, to theirs, seems small and weak,
But in God's big hand we weigh the same.

The saints and poets seem to know,
The law behind the ocean tide,
The world gets changed and moved along,
By little gestures multiplied.

So I try to live with gratitude,
To do the good that I can do,
To love the people close to me,
My neighbors and my family,
To share the kindness I've been shown,
To trust the Love that is my home,
To celebrate the tiny part I play,
But I did not save the world today."

— **Allen Levi, "I Did Not Save the World Today"**

- For a meditation on the dignity and blessing of work, read Genesis 1:26–2:15 (God works and commissions humanity to work) alongside Psalm 90:16–17, the benediction that closed this teaching: "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us."
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [calling and work](#); [love](#); [holiness](#).