

Love, and especially love among believers, is an important topic in the New Testament. It deserves careful attention, which it often does not get. Instead of reading foreign concepts into the command to love, it is better to allow the Bible to define genuine brotherly love for us. This text in 1 Thessalonians indicates that those who wish to practice genuine brotherly love will also need to be discerning.

Timothy had brought back to Paul a good report about the faith and love of the Thessalonian believers. They excelled, but they still needed to grow. Both their example and their need reveal aspects of the discernment that is part of genuine brotherly love and establish reasons why it must be discerning to be genuine brotherly love.

1. ***Genuine brotherly love is discerning because it is taught by God (4:9).***

“God-taught” brotherly love is implied in the Old Testament promises concerning the new covenant (cf. Isaiah 54:13; Jeremiah 31:33–34).

“God-taught” brotherly love is explicit in the New Testament as a result of the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer (Galatians 5:22) and the experience of the new birth (1 John 4:7, 8, 12, etc.).

“God-taught” brotherly love will have the characteristics of the Teacher, just as a disciple becomes like a teacher (Matthew 10:25). Hence, it will be discerning.

2. ***Genuine brotherly love is discerning because it extends to all God's family (4:10a).***

The Thessalonian’s love extended to all believers in Macedonia beyond Thessalonica. It was a family love which recognized the importance of their new spiritual family.

Genuine brotherly love discerns the object of love. As a “brotherly” love it puts a priority on the family of believers (Galatians 6:10). As a “genuine” love it does not limit itself to favorites within the family.

3. ***Genuine brotherly love is discerning because it recognizes room for growth (4:10b).***

The Thessalonian’s love was exemplary but could still grow, as was Paul’s prayer for them (3:12).

Abounding love could mean doing more of what they were doing or recognizing new areas in which to demonstrate love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4–7). Paul appears to particularly have in mind the need for some to change their lifestyle (vv 11–12).

The ultimate standard for brotherly love is the love of God in Christ for us (1 John 4:9–10). Measured against God’s love, our love for the family of God will always have room for growth. Therefore, we are to encourage each other toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

4. ***Genuine brotherly love is discerning because it accepts personal responsibility (4:11, 12b).***

As verse 11 continues the sentence begun in verse 10, the topic most probably continues to relate to brotherly love. The three infinitive phrases (v 11) correct a lifestyle which did not represent or enhance genuine brotherly love.

Some among the Thessalonian believers were not working, but were busybodies and stirred up trouble. (It appears similar to the problem of idleness concerning which Paul counseled Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:13.) Apparently these Thessalonians expected to be supported materially by others.

A voluntary lifestyle which imposes upon other believers is a failure to accept personal responsibility. Genuine brotherly love accepts personal responsibility and recognizes it as an act of love to others. Those in true need should be helped and should be free to receive help. Resources are freed to help others, when each acts responsibly.

5. ***Genuine brotherly love is discerning because it considers its testimony to the world (4:12).***

Believers are to demonstrate proper, godly living to the world. Paul is not concerned about what is respectable to the world, but what is right and good by God’s standards. (He just commended manual labor which was not respected by the Greeks.) Instead, like Peter, he calls believers to live good lives that will force even malicious pagans to glorify God on the judgment day (1 Peter 2:12).

Genuine brotherly love discerns the testimony it has to the world who is watching. It may draw or repel them. But how you live within the family of God will make a statement. Does your lifestyle communicate to the world that you genuinely love your brothers and sisters in Christ?

We sing that the world will know we are Christians by our love. But for that love to truly represent God’s love, it must be discerning. A true child of God will want to love as God loves. Pray for the Spirit-led, Word-based discernment that shapes and grows love as genuine brotherly love.