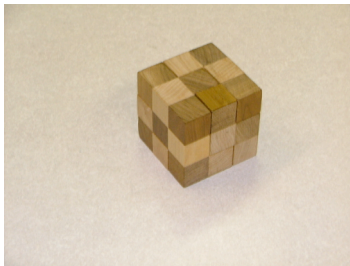


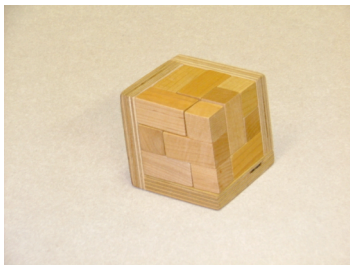
## Simple and Difficult

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, 4:9-10

I really enjoy wooden puzzles. A good puzzle is both simple and difficult. Anybody can make a puzzle that's so complicated that it's difficult; but it takes real skill to make a puzzle that is both simple and difficult. Today I'd like to tell you about two puzzles. First, this is a classic puzzle called the "Soma". How this puzzle came into being is interesting. In 1936 a Danish designer (Piet Hein) was sitting in a physics lecture (by Heisenberg, no less) and his mind began to wander. He started thinking about all the possible shapes – except a straight line – you can make out of 3 or 4 cubes. It turns out that you can make exactly seven distinct shapes and that they can be put together to form a larger 3x3 cube. Thus he created the Soma.



The Soma is not a particularly difficult puzzle. As a matter of fact, it has been proven that there are 240 solutions to the Soma (that figure doesn't include flipping or rotating the cube). Sometime later (in 1969), however, someone modified the Soma to make a very difficult puzzle. If you take the Soma and lean it back diagonally you have *this* puzzle; it's called Rhoma. It has the same seven shapes – only slanted. The object is still to put together the seven pieces to make a 3x3 slanted cube (a.k.a. rhombic hexahedron). Guess what? It only has one solution. Simple yet difficult.



I tell you about these puzzles to make analogy with the ethical commands of Scripture. When you read the Bible, you find many different commands. They can be organized and systematized in many different ways [like the Soma]. For example, you could take the Ten Commandments and explain how all of the commands of Scripture are expressions of these ten. Or you could organize them in terms of how you should behave at home, in the workplace, in the church, and in the world in general. Or you could talk about what you're supposed to do with your mind, your body, your possessions, your time, etc. Like the Soma, there are many good ways of thinking about the commands of Scripture.

In a sense, Jesus has done us a huge favor by "leaning the cube back diagonally" [like the Rhoma]; He has told us that there is really *one organizing principle* for all of the commands of Scripture. When Jesus was asked "What is the great commandment in the Law," Jesus replied

with the word “love.” Love God and love your neighbor (Matthew 22). He said that loving God and loving your neighbor encapsulates the entire Law and the Prophets. Paul spoke of the primacy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 when he said that you can have all sorts of wisdom and knowledge and make all sorts of heroic sacrifices, but if you don’t have love “it profits you nothing.” John wrote in 1 John 4:20 that if a person says he loves God but doesn’t love his brother, he’s a big liar. Love is the organizing principle for all of the commands of Scripture. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:5 that “the goal of our instruction is love . . .” (See also Gal. 5:6) Every command of Scripture is an expression of love. It’s that simple. Yet as we’ll see, it’s also incredibly difficult.

We’ve come to the end of chapter 3 in our study of 1 Thessalonians. So far Paul hasn’t given a single command; so far it’s been all thanksgiving and praise. When Paul finally gets around to challenging the Thessalonians, it’s no coincidence that he addresses this primary issue of love. Since the entire Christian life is an expression of love, Paul’s aspiration for the Thessalonians was that their love would “increase and abound.”

***A Prayer for Increasing, Abounding Love (3:11-13)*** In verses 11 through 13 Paul records a prayer he prayed on behalf of the Thessalonians. Instead of addressing God directly, he expresses his aspirations for them in terms of what he longs for God to do (see this form of prayer in Psalm 68:1). He first prays that God might allow them to visit the Thessalonians once again.

11 Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

You may remember from verse 10 that Paul wanted to see them again so that they might renew their fellowship and so that he might address any deficiencies that they had in their faith. In verse 12 Paul prays for their capacity to love:

12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

John Chrysostom’s comment on this prayer is, “Do you see the unrestrained madness of love which is indicated by the words? He says ‘increase’ and ‘abound’ instead of grow” (cited in Holmes, p. 115, note 4). If the Thessalonians were jars, the idea here is that the love inside them would increase to the point of overflowing. You couldn’t get close to them without love splashing over onto you.

And this love wasn’t supposed to be restricted to other believers. Paul first prays that they would “increase and abound in love for one another.” In chapter 4, as we’ll see, Paul uses the term *philadelphia* (lit. brotherly love) to denote this love among believers. Paul also prays that they would “increase and abound in love . . . for all people.” Paul is describing a consistency of love both inside and outside the church. The love we show for one another is the same love we should show to people outside the church. This is instructive because we sometimes feel like we need to act differently around our “Christian friends” and everybody else.

But if love is the organizing principle behind everything we do in this world, there shouldn’t be a dichotomy between how we treat people in the church and how we treat others. Certainly we can talk about Jesus more freely in the church than outside the church. But we should show the same

love in both places. We should express the same compassion and genuine concern. I really think it's a mark of freedom when you can be yourself around **everybody** in your life: Christian friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, the cashier at the grocery store, even people you don't much like. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would consistently overflow with love toward "all people." The capacity to love everybody in your life is freedom.

Paul very consistently attributes the believer's capacity to love to the Lord, to God Himself. He prays, ". . . may **the Lord cause you** to increase and abound in love. . . ." In chapter 4 Paul will write that they were "taught by God" to love each other. Clearly Paul is talking about a distinctively Christian, God-taught type of love; it's not your garden-variety concern for other people.

Paul mentions at the end of verse 12, "just as we also do for you." Paul, Silas, and Timothy had loved the Thessalonians the way they were supposed to love each other and everybody else. Again, the Thessalonians had the advantage of being able to imitate Paul in this.

In verse 13 Paul links their increasing capacity to love with their blamelessness before God at the return of Christ.

13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

Of course in one sense our standing before God is based solely upon the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We are declared righteous (i.e., justified) by faith alone. When you accept that sacrifice and trust in Jesus alone, you are holy and blameless before God. But Paul also spoke about living lives that are blameless (above reproach) and about behavior that conforms to our right standing before God. This is what Paul has in mind when he says that as we increase and abound in love, God will "establish our hearts without blame in holiness before God" at the return of Christ. We'll talk more about the return of Christ in a couple of weeks. For now, let's simply notice that practically speaking love is **a distinguishing characteristic** that confirms and shows that a person is without blame in holiness before God.

***A Challenge to "excel still more" in Love. (4:9-10)*** When it comes to the will of God, Scripture teaches that we are supposed to know the will of God (Romans 12:2, 1 Peter 2:15, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, etc.), pray according to the will of God (1 John 5:14), and do the will of God (John 7:17, 1 John 2:17). Paul has already *prayed* according to the will of God in relation to the Thessalonians' capacity to love. Here in these verses he challenges them to *do* the will of God to the fullest extent. It's interesting how Paul expresses himself in verse 9:

9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,

This is incredibly high praise for the Thessalonians. He writes that when it comes to loving each other, they really didn't need anybody to write and instruct them. Why? Because they were "**taught by God** to love one another." They were taught by God to love each other first and foremost because love is something that God is always teaching His people. School is always in

session for God when it comes to loving each other. And He is a VERY skillful, engaging teacher – never boring and never irrelevant.

They were taught by God to love each other, secondarily, because they were teachable. They paid attention to what God was impressing upon them. They weren't like the kids that goof off in the back of the class and don't learn a thing. They were good students, paying close attention to what God was teaching them.

In verse 10 Paul mentions that they not only love one another; they practice love toward “all the brethren who are in Macedonia.”

After all that praise for the Thessalonians, you might expect that Paul would be satisfied. Not so. Paul had a “holy discontentment” that prompted him to write, “But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.” They were already excelling when it came to love, but he challenged them to excel still more.” Love is not the type of thing you “master”; it's much more

Like a good puzzle, what God demands of us is both *simple and difficult*. God simply wants us to be full to overflowing with love for everybody in our lives, to excel still more in our love. And yet “loving everybody” is the most difficult thing God could require of us. It's not the type of thing you can fake; it's not the type of thing you can pull off by willpower or human effort; there aren't “ten steps to excelling in love.” If you want to fulfill this simple demand of loving everybody, learning to love has to be your fervent, all-out pursuit.

In his book *Sacred Companions* David Benner argues that one of the primary ways that God wants to transform us is by making us into “great lovers.” God is love; God is therefore a great lover; God wants us to be like Him in the sense that He wants us to also be great lovers. Benner is very insightful when he writes this:

How I wish God had set something – anything – other than love as the supreme measure of spiritual progress. Recognizing the impoverishment of my love of both God and others is so discouraging. It's the most depressing thing I have encountered in my Christ following.

My first response to the limitations of my love is always the same – to try harder. I pray for love with more fervor. And I try to love with more diligence. But nothing seems to change. Then I recall that once again I have got it all backwards. God doesn't want me to try to become more loving. He wants me to absorb his love so that it flows out from me. (p. 34)

Can you relate to what Benner is saying? I think he is exactly right: God “causes us to increase and abound in love” by overwhelming us and filling us up with His love. John wrote that “we love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). It turns out that unless you experience the love of God, you can't really love others. Love has to be experienced before it can be practiced. I've heard people say over and over that when they began to experience the love of God, their lives were never the same. That has certainly been my experience. As I've experienced the love of God, I've grown in my capacity to love others.

Experiencing the love of God is a huge topic; a lot could be said about it. I'll just make a couple comments for now. The main thing I would say is that ***God wants us to know and experience His love***. The basic plot of the Bible involves God pursuing a love relationship with His people. The problem – beginning with Adam and Eve – is that His people keep wandering off into spiritual adultery, like a wife that won't quit cheating on her husband (the imagery of the book of Hosea). Even though He had been scorned, God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes would have life. God describes those who believe in the shockingly amorous imagery: we are now “the bride of Christ.” The plot of the Bible is unashamedly about how much God loves us. To know God is to know how deeply He loves us.

The best, first thing you can do to become a great lover is to experience the love of God. You can experience this love in a myriad of ways: through the Scripture, in worship, through another person who loves you like God does, through creation, etc. If you open yourself up to the love of God, He will absolutely ravish you. It can be so intense that you can hardly stand it sometimes. Sometimes God's love will bring tears to your eyes. Please seek to experience the love of God every way you can. Know that this is not a selfish pursuit that makes a person self-centered; this is a God-centered pursuit that leaves a person humble.

***God wants to teach us to be great lovers.*** As you experience the love of God, identify a relationship or a situation and pray: “God, in this situation/relationship, teach me to be a great lover. It's not enough to be a mediocre lover; God, teach me to be a ***great*** lover.” Choose a situation or a relationship in your life and allow God to teach you how to love. Start somewhere.

For example, you may have an especially difficult relationship in the workplace, in your living situation, or in the church. Chances are that there is somebody in your life that you find difficult to love (that person may find you to be difficult to love also). Instead of merely tolerating that person, what about learning how your love might increase and abound toward that person? In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote that “love is patient.” What would your influence be if you were taught by God to be patient with disagreeable people? 1 Peter 3:9 talks about “not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead. . .” What would your life be like if you had the capacity to bless people who insult you? You'd have a powerful life.

As another example, perhaps there's an area of obedience that you find especially difficult right now; perhaps you have very little resolve to be obedient. It may be that you're only focused on not sinning; but “not sinning” never captures a person's heart and enflames them to do great thing. Instead, consider how your disobedience is keeping you from loving other people; consider how obedience in that area could be a significant milestone in becoming a great lover. For example, maybe you are struggling with sins of the tongue; you find yourself saying unkind things about others and to others. On the one hand, it seems like saying these things is not a big deal; maybe lots of people around you say lots of worse things. On the other hand, it is a big deal because “love is kind”; you can't say unkind things and be a great lover. What would your life and influence be like if your words were life-giving and grace-giving (Ephesians 4:29)?

I'd encourage you to start somewhere. God is always teaching; we have to be teachable.

I read this week that college students change majors on average three times (I guess I was above average in college). Students change majors for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they start

taking courses in a certain subject and find that it's too difficult or too boring. Sometimes they discover that there is something else that they were born to do. And so they change majors.

If you enroll in the school of Christ and begin to learn from Him how to love, you will find the coursework to be incredibly difficult. You may be tempted to change your major. "Learning how to love my wife/coworkers/church people is too hard. I think I'll try something else." Well, it turns out that in the school of Christ there is only one major: love. Every area of obedience is an expression of love. You can't change majors.

But the great thing about this major is that the job market is outstanding. As a matter of fact, you will never lack for work(s) – either in this life or in eternity. If you learn from God how to love, you will look back and realize that as a new creature in Christ, this is what you were born to be. You were born to be a great lover.