Paul described how to live a life that is pleasing to God, reminding the Thessalonians that “you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia” (4:9-10). Love for one another and cooperation in the community clearly played an important role in the Thessalonian church. Such love, Paul wrote, would strengthen their hearts in “holiness” so that they would be “blameless” before God, and make them ready to meet “Jesus with all his saints” (3:13).

Paul spoke about a circle of love, cooperation, and holiness. They enjoyed a deep sense of the “we,” the idea that they shared in Christian mission and ministry together. They lived by the Cooperation Imperative.

Paul and his colleagues, Silvanus and Timothy, set a good example for them. “We might have made demands as apostles of Christ,” wrote Paul. “But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (2:7). Paul elevated the “we” over the “me,” not expecting an extra portion of praise or support, but to strengthen their ministry and to underscore the holiness of the work.

“You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters,” Paul reminded them; “we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (2:9-12). Paul deserves his status as a saint of the church, working to proclaim the gospel and behaving in a pure, upright, and blameless way. We should all be trying to provide this kind of service to the Christian community.

But here is the surprise: This kind of cooperation may be part of the way God made us. More than 10 years ago, Michael Tomasello ran experiments with infants just beginning to walk and talk. “He had those infants engage with an adult stranger they had met moments before,” reports Duke Magazine. “They were put in situations where they could help the adult solve some simple problem, from fetching out-of-reach objects to opening cabinet doors when the adult’s hands are full. They were…eager to help.” From a very early age, concludes Tomasello, children understand the goals of others and cooperate with them in a self-giving way. The Cooperation Imperative.

Paul is eager to help the Thessalonians, which is commendable. Perhaps God instilled within Paul the Cooperation Imperative. If we are going to “lead a life worthy of God,” we are challenged to follow the path of Jesus and become the people that God made us to be. This means receiving the word of God, as the Thessalonians did, but also recognizing that God’s word is already at work within us. God designed us to cooperate with one another, as God shares the Gospel message through Scripture and through our bodies, hearts, and minds.

Not surprisingly, our model for this is Jesus, the One who was both fully human and fully God. He lived a life of cooperation, always elevating the “we” over the “me.” In an article on Jesus and cooperation, Clive and Cara Beed argue that a major theme of Jesus’ ministry was the “collaboration between people who assist each other to achieve common goals.”

Jesus cooperated with God. Even before his ministry began, he made clear that he was obedient to God. “One does not live by bread alone,” he said during his temptation by the devil in the wilderness, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then he said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” and “worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Matthew 4:1-10).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus made clear that he served God and not himself. Instead of satisfying himself physically, spiritually, or politically, Jesus always put God first. Jesus lived out the Lord’s Prayer every step of the way, “*Your* kingdom come, *your* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, italics added). Collaboration with God was Jesus’ priority.

Jesus also cooperated with people around him. He built a team of disciples at the very start of his ministry, men would follow him and share his mission. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called for cooperation in a teaching we call the golden rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

On the topic of forgiveness, Jesus challenged his followers to collaborate with God and with each other in this important work. “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,” he predicted; “but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15). Nothing, it seems, is done in isolation.

Such collaboration continued when Jesus encountered 5,000 hungry people, and said to his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37). Then he multiplied five loaves and two fish, filling the stomachs of everyone in the crowd.

When it came time for Jesus to send out 70 followers to do his work, he commissioned them to “cure the sick” and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near” (Luke 10:9). For Jesus, ministry and mission was not about him. It was all about collaboration, elevating the “we” over the “me.” The Cooperation Imperative.

The challenge for churches today is to be solid at the center and soft at the edges. We must be solidly devoted to the worship of the One Triune God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. At the same time, we must be soft at the edges, willing to collaborate with all people to serve a world in need. When we are solid at the center and soft at the edges, we are in a good position to cooperate with God and the people around us, living “a life worthy of God” (v. 12). Cooperation with God. Cooperation with each other. Both are imperative.

**Sources:**

* Beed, Clive and Cara. “Jesus on Cooperation.” Transformation, April 2015, 97.
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**The Cooperation Imperative**

All Saints’ Sunday, November 1, 2020 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Picture an experiment in which a couple of 3-year-olds face a challenge. They pull together on ropes and the result is a flood of gummy bears raining down. They are delighted by the candy treats. But what happens if one gets more than the other? A meltdown, a tantrum, or a fight? Surprisingly no! Kids tend to adjust things to arrive at an equitable distribution. If one points out that she has fewer gummies, the other quickly corrects the imbalance. They share.

Human beings have an inborn desire to cooperate. Despite what you see in halls of power, people have an inherent desire to work jointly toward the same end. Duke professor Michael Tomasello, an expert in this field, says that his research is revealing that “we want to cooperate because it’s mutually beneficial to do so. But we also want to cooperate because we want to distribute the spoils of our joint effort fairly, because we *ought* to.” (italics added)

You might say that cooperation deepens the sense of “we,” the notion that we are all in this together, that we all deserve a share. Cooperation is a quality worth celebrating on All Saints’ Day, when we remember the men and women who worked together to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul prayed that God would “so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (3:13).

Paul’s first and second letters to the Thessalonians are possibly the earliest writings in the New Testament, so they give us a good idea of what was important to the first Christians. Written to Greek followers of Jesus in the port city of Thessalonica, Paul spoke of the second “coming of the Lord” (4:15), which most members of the community assumed would happen in their lifetimes.