The Cooperation Imperative

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

9 Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that we would not be a burden to any of you as we preached God's Good News to you. 10 You yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers. 11 And you know that we treated each of you as a father treats his own children. 12 We pleaded with you, encouraged you, and urged you to live your lives in a way that God would consider worthy. For He called you to share in His Kingdom and glory.

13 Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received His message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.

Paul helps us understand how following the example of Jesus means cooperation and collaboration.

Picture with me if you will, an experiment in which a couple of 3-year-olds face a challenge. They pull together on some ropes, and the result is a flood of gummy bears raining down. They are delighted by the candy treats. But what happens, do you suppose, when one discerns that they don't have as much as the other one? A meltdown, a tantrum or a fight? No. Surprisingly, and consistently, they tend to make adjustments to arrive at an equitable distribution. If one points out that she is deprived of gummies, the other quickly corrects the imbalance. Interesting huh?

A number of studies are pointing to the same conclusion: Human beings have a desire to cooperate. Despite what you see in halls of power around the world, people have an inborn desire to work jointly toward the same end. Cooperation is not counterintuitive. Cooperation leads to mutual benefit. It's even logical.

Imagine a children's sermon where the Pastor gets four cardboard mailing tubes and then asks two children to place their arms through them so they can't bend their elbows. Then, he offered the children some cookies. They quickly realize that eating them is impossible if they can't bend their arms. He just watched them struggle and gave them a little time. It took a minute. But eventually they realize they can enjoy the goodies if each one feeds the other. There is an old African proverb that says, If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go together.

Duke professor Michael Tomasello is an expert in this field, and he 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." You might say that cooperation deepens the sense of "we" — the notion that we're all in this together, that we all deserve a share.

Cooperation is a quality worth celebrating. 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" (1 Thessalonians 3:13). **[NOTE 1]**

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 Christ 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.

He also described how they should live a life that is pleasing to God, reminding them 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 were clearly a part of life in the Thessalonian church. He wanted them to have their hearts strengthened in "holiness" so that they would be "blameless" before God, and he desired that they be ready to meet "Jesus with all of his saints" (3:13). Now remember that holiness refers to being set apart for God and blameless means accepting the justification that Jesus offers.

Paul was talking about a circle of love, cooperation and holiness. Not a circular firing squad. Do you see that at Doster Community Church? A circle of love, cooperation and holiness? If not, how can you be part of the solution?

Such an approach made the Thessalonians ready to meet Jesus and his saints. They had a deep sense of the "we," the idea that they were all 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. **[NOTE 2]** If gummy bears had been available, he would have wanted to share them fairly.

"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 a surprise: This kind of cooperation may actually be part of the way God has made us. More than 10 years ago, Michael Tomasello was running experiments with infants who were 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, as it turned out, eager to help." From a very early age, says Tomasello, they could understand the goals of another person and cooperate with them in a self-giving way.

The apostle Paul was eager to help the Thessalonians, which is certainly commendable. But maybe God had already instilled within him 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 seeing that God's word is already at work in us. God wants us to cooperate with one another, and he sends this message through both Holy Scripture and through our bodies, hearts and minds. **[NOTE 3]**

Not surprisingly, our model for this is Jesus Christ, the One who was both fully human and fully God. He lived a life of cooperation, always elevating the "we" over the "me." Read the gospels and you will see it over and over. In an article on Jesus and cooperation, Clive and Cara Beed argue that one of the major themes of Jesus was "collaboration between people who assist each other to achieve common goals." **[NOTE 4]** First, Jesus cooperated with God. Even before his ministry began, he made clear that he was obedient to God and not to the devil. "One does not live by bread alone," he said during his temptation 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 was serving God and not himself. Instead of satisfying himself physically, spiritually or politically, he 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). Collaboration with God was always his top priority. **[NOTE 5]**

Second, Jesus cooperated with people around him. He built a team at the very start of his ministry, calling 12 disciples to follow him and share in mission. In the Sermon on the Mount, he called for cooperation in the teaching we call the golden rule, saying: "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 to be done in isolation. The Cooperation Imperative.

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 to you" (Luke 10:9). For Jesus, ministry and mission was not about him. It was all about collaboration, elevating the "we" over the "me." Jesus followed the square or four step process of teaching. Teacher does it while disciples watch, Teacher does it with assistance from disciples, Disciples do it with assistance from the teacher and finally the disciples do it on their own and come back and debrief with the teacher.

Our challenge is to cooperate with God and with each other, following the example of Jesus. This is what Paul, Silvanus and Timothy did among the Thessalonians, dealing with each of them "like a father with his children, urging and encouraging" them to lead a life worthy of God (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). And when the Thessalonians accepted the message that was brought to them, they accepted it "not as a human word but what it really is, God's word" (v. 13). Cooperation with each other. Cooperation with God. Both are imperative. **[NOTE 6]**

The challenge for churches today is to be solid at the center and soft at the edges. This means that they are devoted to the worship of the one Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — solid at the center of their preaching and teaching. We stand on the Word, walk in love, and rest in the arms of Jesus.

But at the same time, they should be soft at the edges, willing to collaborate with people of different faiths or no faith to serve a world in need. This could mean partnering with non-Christians to feed the hungry or starting a tutoring program with local university students to help at-risk neighborhood children.

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). How do we make Doster Community solid at the center and a little soft on the edges? Let me ask you a couple questions for thought. What would it look like for you to cooperate more with your church family? What would it look like for you to cooperate with God? Please write something down that you are going to apply. Let's pray … AMEN *—Henry Brinton and Carl Wilton contributed to this material.*

Sermon Notes on "The Cooperation Imperative"

based on 1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13 given at Doster Community Church August 30, 2026

1. Cooperation deepens the sense of "We". We ...are all in this together. We want to cooperate because it is mutually beneficial. We are called to love one another. The Thessalonians lived by the Cooperation Imperative. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy set a good example and they were gentle among them.
2. "We worked night and day so that we might not be a burden while we proclaimed you the gospel of God. You are witnesses." They behaved in a pure, upright and blameless way. We should all be trying to proved this kind of service.
3. To live a "life worthy of God" we are challenged to follow the path of Jesus and become the people that God made us to be. Jesus lived a life of cooperation. Jesus modeled collaboration between people.
4. Jesus cooperated with God! Jesus made it clear that He put God first and only did what God showed Him. "Your will be done."
5. Jesus Cooperated with people around Him. Nothing done in isolation. Even forgiveness is collaborative.
6. What does it look like for you to cooperate with your church family? What does it look like for you to Cooperate with God? What are you going to do about it? Please write something down ...!