

[1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

The other year on Advent Sunday I railed against the rise of luxury Advent calendars. Well,, no need for me to be original this year, because this week the Irish journalist Melanie McDonagh did exactly that in [The Spectator magazine](#). This year, she writes,

There are tea or coffee Advent calendars with a different flavour for each day – see Whittard’s Tea or Pact Coffee or Fortnum’s – there are beauty advent calendars like the Space NK one for £199 with a different skincare product for each day or the one from Dior for £400; a gin advent calendar from the Craft Gin Club; there are cheese versions, pork scratching versions and there are, of course chocolate advent calendars, which are everywhere: Charbonnel et Walker does one for £75; Cadbury’s Dairy Milk for £2.19 ('make every day in the run-up to Christmas magical').

And in fairness, Ms McDonagh also rages against ordinary chocolate Advent calendars. Why?

Advent generally is about expectation (actually it’s partly about preparing for the Day of Judgment); it’s the reverse of a binge.

That’s right: Advent isn’t a time of preparation in the sense that we prepare by buying presents, getting the decorations out of the garage, and putting up the tree. It’s a time when we prepare not only for the humble coming of Christ in the manger, but also for his future coming in glory, when he will judge the living and the dead, as the Creed says.

No, this is not ‘The most wonderful time of the year’. If anything, it’s ‘The most miserable time of the year,’ and I don’t mean that purely for those who find this season hard due to the anniversaries of bereavements and other tragedies.

So let me be the first person this year to wish you a thoroughly dismal Advent.

Er, no, not really. In our reading from 1 Thessalonians Paul is anxious not only to visit his beloved friends in Thessalonica, but also to help them prepare for Christ’s coming as judge. And while he wants them to be serious about that preparation, we can hardly call his desires for them miserable.

There are two ways Paul urges the Thessalonians to prepare for Christ's coming. As we explore them, I hope you'll agree with me that they require seriousness but they don't necessitate being miserable.

Firstly, says Paul, *love one another*.

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Love each other (presumably those are the church members) and love everyone else (all those Jesus would have called our neighbour).

Love. Easy to state, hard to do. But that's the calling.

Love one another in the church, because when Jesus comes again the new creation is going to be a place of love. Nobody will be having a little dig at someone else in the kingdom of God. Nobody will be stabbing someone else in the back when Jesus comes again. Nobody will disregard or ignore their brother or sister when Jesus returns. The actions of the community will entirely be driven by love.

Love your neighbour. Because the world needs a witness to the redeeming and unconditional love of God in Christ. If someone is hurt, we do not look for an excuse by pondering whether they deserve help before deciding whether or not to do something. If their need is an interruption to our routine, then rather than worrying about our routine we consider their need as putting our routine into perspective. How can we expect the world to believe in a God who loves them if the community that professes to believe in that love doesn't show it to them?

But as I said, all that is easy to state but hard to do. We may struggle to love some people in the church. Just as it is said that we can choose our friends but not our family members, so the same is true about the church family. There are some people here whom we honestly would not pick as fellow church members if we had the choice.

And we just don't seem to fit together naturally all the time, do we? Many years ago a couple of writers described building the church as like 'building with bananas.' Imagine trying to build an edifice out of bananas. Their shape would make it very tricky! Growing the church feels like that at times!

And as for that 'love your neighbour' stuff – well, what if we don't approve of their lifestyle and we don't think God does, either? What if they hold political

views we don't like? If people inside the church can be hard to love, it can be doubly difficult to love some people who don't share our faith.

So maybe this is miserable after all?

Let's re-read verse 12:

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow. That's the key. It's not that we can do this on our own. That would be drudgery and failure. Our challenge to love as a sign of the coming kingdom is one that the Lord enables us to do, and he does not expect us to achieve without him.

So here's a prayer thought for those times when we struggle to love someone, either in the church or the community, and yet we know Jesus wants us to show them his love. I once heard a preacher tell a story where he said that God challenged him to do something difficult, and he said, 'No, Lord, I'm not willing.'

But then he heard the Lord's reply to him. 'Are you willing to be made willing?'

Are we willing to be made willing to love? Let us say 'yes' to Christ increasing our love.

Secondly, says Paul, *be holy*.

¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Oh dear, holiness. Well, that must be dour and it must be hard work. Doesn't it make you think of those Christians who think the closer you get to God, the more sour-faced you will be?

If that's your image, then let me speak to you about the famous preacher and devotional writer of a hundred or so years ago, Oswald Chambers. Famed for his preaching that led people to repentance and new life, he was also known for his joy and laughter. Many of his converts may have wept for his sins, but they laughed for joy at their realisation of how great God's love for them was.

D W Lambert, who as a child knew Chambers as a friend of his parents, wrote a book about him. Here is one story he recounts of him:

On one occasion when my mother was preparing the tea, to which a number of local ministers had been invited to meet Chambers, there came gales of laughter from the study. I, with the priggishness of a small boy, looked shocked, thinking that such holy men should not indulge in laughter. My mother, with quiet insight, remarked, "When God makes you holy He gives you a sense of humour."¹

Indeed, Chambers was often asked to babysit for some couples – something remarkable, given that he and his wife Biddy lost their only child Kathleen when she was just four years old. The children would tell their parents that Chambers didn't preach to them, he was a playmate, and he taught them funny rhymes. I don't have time for more stories today about him, but if you go on the Internet and search for 'Oswald Chambers laughter children' you will find several anecdotes that support this.

Sure, holiness can be tough, challenging and painful. But at its heart it is about becoming more like Jesus. And we remember that Jesus loved weddings and banquets, and he promised abundant life to his followers. If you come across one of those Christians who gives you the impression that the most devout Christians are the most miserable ones, it's usually because they are miserable people and they don't realise just how good Jesus is.

But I can't deny the difficulties in being blameless and holy. Which one of us hasn't had that sense of failure that we are so very far from being like Jesus? Isn't the call to be holy a counsel of despair? We may understand that it makes sense, because surely when Jesus comes again all will be good, true, pure, and right, and we need to be in harmony with that, but many of us are so conscious of our shortcomings and our besetting sins.

So note that there is good news in this verse. Let's read it again:

¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

May he strengthen your hearts. Just as we found the command to love to be challenging but we discovered that God enables us, so the same is true of the call to holiness. May he strengthen our hearts.

So our prayer for holiness is similar to our prayer for greater love. Lord, I'm not always willing, but you can make me willing. I take responsibility for my own actions, but you can give me the strength I need in order to be holy, to be more like Jesus.

Yes, **love and holiness** are both marks of what life will be like when Christ returns. As Christians, we hear the call to conform to the life of the age to come while we live in the midst of this age which will pass away. This is all very demanding.

But in both cases, God is on hand and he waits for us to pray and ask him to give us the increase and the strength to fulfil his commands.

If we truly want to use Advent as a season of preparation, then let us prepare for Christ's coming again by praying that God will give us more of himself so that we can be more truly loving and more deeply holy.

¹ D W Lambert, *Oswald Chambers: An Unbridled Soul*, p7f.