

1 Thessalonians 4:1-7

Holiness: God's and Ours

Introduction

The opening verses of 1 Thessalonians 4 are about how to live and please God –living in purity, showing brotherly love, and working for a living. But right in the heart of the passage is a fundamental principle. **It is God's will that you should be sanctified** (1 Thessalonians 4:3). All that is before and after (to be dealt with later) is just illustration of this basic principle. Going to start today with looking at God's holiness and ours. Another week we will look at the same verse again under the heading of how to live a godly life. Also need to give time to consider the subject of sin in the believer, since the Bible says far more about sin in God's people than in unbelievers.

Neglect of the subject of holiness

Holiness is a very important but much neglected theme in Christian and evangelical world at present. An article in "The Ulster Christian", titled "Holiness – a forgotten theme", suggested ten of the most important subjects discussed by the average Christian. The list included gifts, Bible versions, women's ministry, eschatology, marriage, divorce and church government. But holiness was not among them. The article posed the questions "When did you last hear a sermon on holiness? When did you last hear of a conference called to discuss holiness?" It is not exciting enough. Alright for the Puritans and early Methodists, but not for modern twentieth century Christian. Years ago there were fierce debates about holiness and about the different schools of thought on the subject (Reformed, Keswick, Wesleyan). But the subject is never mentioned now. When the subject of walking with God is preached on, the response is often that people are not interested in that subject nowadays, its not exciting enough, they are looking for excitement and emotional thrills.

The obsession of the church has become better methods. But God is concerned with better men. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not anoint plans, but men. One of reasons for failure of Christians to make an impact is that their lives are so little different from the rest of the world's.

Men not excited about holiness but God is very excited about it. It is God's will that we should be holy. It is possible to get into heaven with the wrong views on spiritual gifts, second coming, divorce, church government, but not without holiness. **Without holiness no one will see the Lord** (Hebrews 12:14). Salvation is by grace through faith. But grace and faith which do not lead to holiness are not New Testament grace and faith. Holiness follows true grace, as night follows day. It is the only real evidence of new birth.

Definition of holiness

"Hallow", "sanctify", "holiness", "saint" – all from same family of Greek words -  $\alpha\gamma\iota\alpha\zeta\omega$   $\alpha\gamma\iota\alpha\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$   $\alpha\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma$ . Here is one of the most misunderstood terms in Christian

vocabulary. “Holy” people are portrayed in stained glass windows, with pale and unhealthy faces, and halos over the heads of feeble and emaciated bodies. People speak of them in hushed tones. “Holy” people sought to be “holy” by wearing hair shirts and other devices to ensure they do not find life too enjoyable. They were regarded as holy because of their impractical ways of life, they never smiled, and they knew nothing of the real world.

Yet Bible saints were not weak and anaemic, but tough. They had sunburnt faces and were full of joy. They were very human beings, mixing with all sorts of men and fully aware of all that was going on in the world. Think of Elijah, John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul. To them, holiness was attractive and not forbidding and inhumane. The greatest saints down through church history were characterised, not by haloes and inapproachability, but by their humanity. They were intensely human, with a twinkle in their eye, a sense of humour.

The adjective, noun and verb in Hebrew and in Greek are from the same root, meaning “set apart”, “separated unto God”. When we are separated unto God, it leads to a life in which we grow in grace, have victory over sin, a transformed nature, and renewal of the image of God. His is the characteristic mark of every Christian, not just the spiritual elite. We are all saints. There are no two standards in the Christian church – it’s not a case of ministers and missionaries in one category, with ordinary Christians in another – and deacons somewhere in between. We are all saints, separated unto the Lord.

**Be holy, because I am holy** (1 Peter 1:15). **It is God’s will that you should be sanctified** (1 Thessalonians 4:3). **For He chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight** (Ephesians 1:4). **Predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son** (Romans 8:29). Here is our supreme concern as Christians. Not happiness, but holiness. Happiness will come as a by-product. God has married holiness and happiness. The holiest is always the happiest.

#### God’s holiness

We are to be holy because God is holy, and because we are saved and in His family. He has chosen us to be His, He wants us to be like Him. **Through them you may participate in the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4). **Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator** (Colossians 3:10). God’s supreme aim is to make us men and women like Himself, He wants to make us godly.

God’s holiness is referred to more often than all of His other attributes put together. He is the “Holy One of Israel”. God was separate from His creation, exalted above it, different from us. No one can be compared with Him. Separate from sin is the main way He is unlike us. **My God, my Holy One... your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong** (Habakkuk 1:12,13). God’s holiness was His moral perfection.

So God cannot compromise with sin in any form. He requires conformity with His moral laws, i.e. ten commandments. He requires purity in thought, word and deed. Men’s failure in this leads to His wrath and judgment.

How do we react? First recognise that God is supremely the Holy One. This is forgotten, in our haste to portray Him as the God of love. But what of His holiness and other attributes? Exclusive emphasis on love leads people to believe they can live as they like, speak as they like, do as they like. They think they can still ask for His help and blessing, and get very peeved with Him when He does not dance to their tune. They convince themselves that at the end, we are all going to heaven, for there is no hell - God is a god of love, after all.

The way Christians speak of God, live their lives, act in public worship, so often gives away how little they understand His holiness. **Worship God acceptably with reverence and awe** (Hebrews 12:28). **Hallowed (sanctified) be your name** (Matthew 6:9). This does not mean a slavish and cowering emotion, but a healthy attitude of awe and reverence. **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge** (Proverbs 1:7), and so influences the way we live. **To fear the Lord is to hate evil** (Proverbs 8:13). **He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress.... turning a man from the snares of death** (Proverbs 14:26,27). **Through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil** (Proverbs 16:6). To fear the Lord means to acknowledge His holiness, see the importance of His will, realization of our accountability to Him. When we are filled with confidence in our own ability, it is the complete antithesis of holiness. One of the marks of spiritual decline is when there is no fear of God before men's eyes (Psalm 36:1).

### Holiness in men

From the moment we receive new life from God in new birth, we are responsible to see that that new life grows. We are set apart for God for His use, His glory and doing His will. Regeneration leads to sanctification. Going to say more about this next time, but briefly, this means we are committed to humbling ourselves before Lord, aware of our own unworthiness. So we separate ourselves from all that is unworthy and sinful, concerned to be like Him in thought, word and deed. Our lives will inevitably be very and increasingly different from the people around us, who are under the influence of the world, flesh and devil. **We are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory** (2 Corinthians 3:18). As our faith in and love to Christ increases, we see more and more in Him every day, and it is our concern to please Him at home, at work and in His church.

Increased spirituality and spiritual taste result. We prize the things of God more and more. Spiritual conversation and companions. The ways of the world have less appeal to us. The more conscious we are of the evil and sin in ourselves, the greater our sense of humility and unworthiness. Old ways of behaviour and ways of looking at things are replaced by new ones. God's will, glory and purposes are the only things that matter in life.

It does not mean we shall be perfect. We will never be beyond the need to confess sin and be cleansed in Christ's blood. But there will be growth and development. And we will become increasingly useful to God, and pleasing to Him. These things are our responsibility. But how impossible! Sanctification drives us back on God's resources. **Abide in Christ** (John 15:5). **Christ lives in me** (Galatians 2:20). **I can do everything through Him who gives me strength** (Philippians 4:13). **Be filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18). Suddenly these verses take on reality, and cease to be

meaningless pious phrases. We are committed to one hundred per cent of me and one hundred per cent of God.