

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Moral Purity, Brotherly Love and Daily Work

Introduction

The key phrase in this section comes in verse 3, **It is God's will that you should be holy**. Now we come to the three examples given of this in practice. Note two preliminary points from the opening two verses. Firstly the authority with which Paul speaks. Earlier he stressed his message was the Word of God (2:13). The Greek word for instructions in 4:2, *παράγγελια* is the same word used of a military command, or a court order by magistrates. In other words, whether preaching the Gospel, or teaching Christian moral standards, Paul speaks with the same divine authority. These are God's words, and Christ's commandments.

Secondly, Christian living is to be pleasing to God. Jesus lived to please His Father (John 8:29). Paul's concern was to please God, not men (1 Thessalonians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 1:10). He was anxious never to displease God or grieve the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 2:15; Ephesians 4:30). The writer to the Hebrews also mentions the importance of pleasing God (Hebrews 11:6). John urges us to do the same (1 John 3:22). The Christian life is not just about keeping rules with a list of do's and don'ts. We are not to just obey laws, but please the law-giver. Christian morality is not primarily rules, but relationship.

As we study the Word and become aware of the Holy Spirit's leading, we become spiritually sensitive to God. Our Christian instinct is aware of the Shepherd's voice. Our goal is to be perfectly pleasing to God, although in fact we shall never arrive completely at this goal. Our justification was once and for all, but our sanctification is never complete.

Adoniram Judson, pioneer Baptist missionary to Burma, who endured untold suffering and sorrow at certain periods of his life, once told a missionary meeting, "If you enter Gospel ministry in this or other levels, let not your object be to 'do your duty' or 'save souls', though these have a place in your motives. But let your main object be to please the Lord Jesus. Let this be the ruling motive in all you do."

This was the ruling motive in Paul's life. How it would simplify life, sort out problems of guidance, keep us from many distractions, shut ears to many voices, if we simply lived to please Christ. So from this general exhortation to please God, remembering it is His will that we should be holy, we arrive at the specific detail.

Moral Purity

We are to avoid sexual immorality and live in purity, respect and honour. Very practical teaching in dealing with sex, the most imperious of all human urges, and of special relevance in Paul's time. The ancient world of Rome and Greece was utterly corrupt and licentious. In the 520 years of the Roman Republic, there was not one divorce. When it became an Empire, divorce was an everyday occurrence. It was said

that in Rome, the years were identified by the names of the ruling consuls, but fashionable ladies identified the years by the names of their husbands. It was not unknown for someone to have eight husbands in five years. In Greece, moral laxity was just as bad. A man would have a mistress to provide him with intellectual companionship. Then he would have concubines from his female slaves, and for occasional gratification, a harlot. Then of course he had a wife, who brought up his legitimate children and heirs, and presided over the household. Sexual sin was just part of normal life. So long as a man supported his wife and family, there was no shame in extra marital relationships.

Vice was universal and uncontrolled. It was from this background that these new Christians and church members were coming. They had a lot to unlearn, and were probably often tempted to go back to old way of life. Christian standards were very new and strange and difficult to observe, but they had to clean out the old life. Becoming a new convert brought many problems and caused many agonizing thoughts and decisions. **Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable** (1 Thessalonians 4:4). Commentators are divided about how this verse should be interpreted. Some translate it as, **Each of you should learn to acquire or take a wife for himself in holiness and honour.** The word in dispute is σκευος, which means vessel. Does that mean body or wife? (N.B. The Jews did speak of wives as vessels, and Peter spoke of honouring the wife as the weaker vessel in 1 Peter 3:7).

If the word is meant to be “wife”, as in A.V., then this passage is teaching sexual purity of life, that the only context for sexual activity is permanent heterosexual marriage, and there is no place for fornication, adultery or homosexuality. And that within marriage there has to be respect and honour. Marriage is not legalised lust. Neither partner must take advantage of the other. There is no place for selfish desire to use, but every place for true love and unselfish desire to cherish and respect. Even if the word is meant to be “body”, as in N.I.V., the same emphasis on purity is to be found. In our very pagan society, it needs to be said as firmly as Paul does, that “affairs” ought not to be the source of easy laughs for comedians, for it is about promiscuous fornication and therefore one of the seven deadly sins. To behave like this means rejection of God, who has given us the Holy Spirit. This rejection brings the punishment of God.

Paul summarizes, **God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life** (4:7). Here is the Christian standard. Sex is the good gift of the good creator, but it has been distorted by the sinfulness of mankind, leading to all perversion, unhappiness and moral chaos, with disastrous effects on family, relationships and society. Needs to be channelled in right direction and carefully controlled. So Christians, in a day when anything goes, are seen as narrow, puritanical, prudish, negative. But when we use God’s gifts aright, i.e. within context of life-long marriage bond, we are pleasing God, whose will it is that we should be holy. Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and not to be debased or misused, but used within divine parameters.

Life of brotherly love

Paul moves from chastity to charity. “Brotherly love”, φιλαδελφία, means love of Christians for one another, rather than all men at this point. **You have been taught by God** (4:9). They had learned from the Old Testament to love their neighbour (Leviticus 19:18), and from Jesus in His new commandment to love one another (John 13:34). But Paul’s reference is probably not to the Father in the Old Testament, or the Son in John’s gospel, but to the teaching of the Holy Spirit who dwells in hearts. The prophets said that God’s people would receive the Spirit and therefore be taught by God to know Him (Isaiah 54:13; Jeremiah 31:34). Love for the brothers is one of the signs that we have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14). Paul was delighted to know they did show this love throughout Macedonia. Yet still room for improvement – **We urge you, brothers, to do so more and more** (4:10).

Daily work

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we told you (4:11). Some Thessalonians were getting restless and not applying themselves to daily work. Not unable, but unwilling to work. The real problem was that they were concerned about Christ’s return. Some had given up work in order to be ready for that time (2 Thessalonians 3:11).

“To work with your hands” – the Jews always honoured hard work and manual labour. Every boy was taught a trade – even Jesus learnt to be a carpenter, and Paul a tent-maker. But the Greeks despised manual work because it was the occupation of slaves. But the Bible gives dignity to manual labour. One of the blessings of the Protestant Reformation was the new emphasis on daily work as honourable. Manual work was regarded as much a vocation as the task of a monk or a priest.

Quiet application to daily work will win respect of outsiders, and it means you will be dependent on no one, and therefore it gives self respect. Not to be slave to the world’s opinions. But need to be sensitive to effect of our actions on others. Important not to bring the Gospel into disrepute. To give up work and live as a parasite will give others a poor impression of the Gospel.

In the same verse in 2 Thessalonians, Paul denounces fanatics, busy bodies and loafers in the church. An American commentator has remarked that “Nearly every church has them. Often one and the same person is all three!” The Gospel is very practical. It dignifies labour, hard work and thrift. The best preparation for the Parousia is quietly, efficiently and diligently doing our daily work.

John Wesley was asked what he would do in the intervening time if he knew he would die at 12 o’clock tomorrow night. “Just as I intend to spend it. Preach tonight at Gloucester and again tomorrow morning. Then ride to Tewksbury. Preach in the afternoon. Meet society in the evening. Then go to friend Martin’s house because he expects me. Converse. Pray with the family. Retire to my room at 10pm. Commend myself to my heavenly Father. Go to sleep and wake up in glory.”

A tree is known by its fruits. Christian faith should be known by the men it produces. The only way to prove that Christianity is the best religion is to prove that it produces the best of men. Should make us better workmen, truer friends, and kinder men and women. Thus our lives will be sermons to win men for Christ.