

STUDY 4 – 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-12

After the very personal opening three chapters of this letter Paul moves on to give some practical teaching. In these 12 verses Paul addresses how to “live in order to please God”. In passing, it is important to notice what an encouragement that phrase is. Sometimes we can be so aware of our sinful nature that we can begin to believe that we can never please God. But we are told here that it is possible! The word for “live” is literally “walk” – a step by step, moment by moment, long obedience in the same direction.

The issues Paul singles out here are not issues he did not have time to cover when he was in Thessalonica. The two issues (of sexual purity and brotherly love) are not even issues this church seems to be particularly weak on. In verse 1 he specifically states that they are living well in these areas. We must assume that these are areas of life where they and we need continual reminders about, because they are areas where the lifestyle of the church will be markedly different to the lifestyle of the world around. The commands for these areas of life come straight from our Lord Jesus and with his authority (Paul did not make them up, they are not bound to a particular culture). We all need to fight sin and grow in godliness in these areas “more and more”. Most of our growth as Christians will be done by carrying on doing more of the same, not moving on to new things.

The beginning of verse 3 is the headline point of the whole section. We struggle sometimes because we want to find out what God’s will is for our lives, but here we are told. It is “that you should be sanctified”, a word which means set apart for God’s use (linked to the words used for “holy”). By God’s sovereign choice and through Jesus’ death and resurrection we are already sanctified, but we show that know by living as sanctified people, set apart for God from those around us. We are not set apart by leaving the world and only spending time with Christians, but by leaving the behaviour of the world – particularly in the area of sexual immorality. The word used for this in verse 3 refers to sexual sin in its broadest sense, basically anything other than sex between one man and one woman in marriage.

Positively the command is “learn to control his own body”. This is a hard verse to translate and literally reads “acquire his own vessel” which has lead some translators to believe it should read “learn to acquire a wife” (see footnote). In the final analysis the point made by either translation is similar – marriage is the only place for sexual intercourse so self control outside the marriage relationship is necessary. How we are to do this is the important thing – in a way that is “holy” (set apart for God and sharing his character), and honourable (with true love for others, showing them honour).

This is underlined by the negative statements in verse 5 and 6. We are not to act on our sexual impulses like the world around “not in passionate lust like the heathen”. We can and should be self controlled. This applies just as much to areas like the films we watch and the websites we visit as it does to actual relationships. We are honourable as we relate to one another in this as we do not wrong or take advantage of our brother (or sister). The true love we have for each other in Christ will be seen in how we behave towards each other as men and women in the church.

In verses 6 to 8 we are given some very serious reasons why we should act in this way. Our culture winks at sexual sin, but God will punish it. “Affairs” are adultery. We are called to be holy, different, not the same as our culture in this area. If we ignore this teaching we cannot justify it by saying it is the outdated teaching of a 1st century apostle, we are ignoring the words of God who has made his home in us by his Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Although we may think that the issue of sexual morality is the most pressing one in our culture, the second area of holiness Paul stresses is just as important. The way we love each other as the church family must continue to grow. Paul calls the Thessalonians to do this “more and more” (verse 9-10). We must grow in laying down our lives for one another in practical ways following the example Jesus gave us. This is a true mark of the church – that selfish, self centred people have been brought to God through Christ and are transformed to love God and each other.

This love is shown practically by hard work and “minding your own business”. Verses 11 and 12 are linked to verses 9 and 10. But why does Paul give this

example? It's probably because of the situation in the Thessalonian church. It is likely (reading on in the letter and in 2 Thessalonians) that confusion about Jesus' return has led some people to stop working and to wait excitedly for him, which gave them more time to meddle in other people's lives – which has put extra stress on the rest of the church. But we are to live lives which put others first no matter what situation we find ourselves in. This is particularly important as we are being watched by those outside the church. If we take advantage of each other that will be noticed, and we will lose their respect.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How does Paul say we can live (in verse 1). Is that an encouragement to you?

Many people worry about God's will for their lives. What is God's will for your life (verse 3)?

What area of sanctification does Paul focus on in verses 3-8? What must we not do? What must we do?

What reasons are we given for this? How does this help us live like this, considering the pressures of our culture on us?

"This is just outdated teaching of a 1st century man" How would you reply to a fellow Christian who was trying to justify sleeping with his/her girlfriend or boyfriend?

What other area of church life does Paul focus on from verse 9? Why is this so important?

What practical example does he give of brotherly love in verses 11 and 12?

What reason does he give for our love for each other?