

# Living a Holy Life

## A study of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

By Mike Morrison

**P**aul has reminded the believers in Thessalonica of their faithfulness in midst of some trials. Now he reminds them of what he taught them about Christian life. Although the Thessalonians had been idolaters (1:9), Paul does not say anything about the need to avoid idolatry. He focuses on sexual purity, love, and work.

He begins with a general principle: **Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (4:1).** Paul's message in Thessalonica was not just about how to get eternal life on the day of judgment—it included instruction about behavior, as well. Some ways of life are more pleasing to God than others—not because God has arbitrary pet peeves, but because our behavior can help or hurt the people he loves (including ourselves).



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Paul praises the Thessalonians for already doing what he had told them, and he encourages them to continue, because the instructions are not just Paul's personal preferences—he was acting as God's messenger: **For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.**

### Sex and sanctification (verses 3-8)

**It is God's will that you should be sanctified,** Paul begins. "Sanctified" means to be holy, or to be "set apart." In one sense, all Christians have already been set apart or sanctified or made holy by Jesus Christ. But Paul also encourages believers to set themselves apart for God's use.

We are already children of God, but Paul exhorts us to act like it, to make our behavior consistent with what God says that we are. God wants us to set our lives in a certain way.

What does sanctification include? The first thing Paul mentions, and the topic he gives the most space to, is sexual conduct: **that you should avoid sexual immorality.** Greco-Roman religions had few

restrictions on male sexuality, and as a result, sexual conduct was always high on the list of moral exhortations given to Gentiles. Paul does not specify here exactly what was included in "immorality" (he and Timothy may have already covered those details)—he just reminds them to avoid what they had already been taught is wrong.

Paul explains this instruction not on the basis of Old Testament laws, but on a more general principle: **that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.** Self-control was one of the primary virtues of Greco-Roman civilization, and Paul appeals to that cultural value to argue against a common cultural vice.

He contrasts self-restraint with people who are driven by carnal urges: **not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.** Paul uses the word *ethnē*, which means "nations" or "Gentiles." His readers were Gentiles, but they are not to live in the same way as everyone else around them. If they indulge in sexual immorality, they are acting as if they are ignorant of who God is and what he wants. They are letting themselves be controlled by the flesh, not the Spirit.

Paul further says **that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.** Sexual immorality hurts other people, and it should not be done to fellow believers—nor to anyone else, for that matter. People are not to be used for one's own self-gratification.

Paul adds yet another reason for sexual purity: **The Lord will punish...for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.** Part of Paul's message in Thessalonica was that God would eventually punish selfish behavior that hurts other people. (The NIV has the word "men," but in a passage about sexual sin, this could easily be read as referring only to males, when the Greek text is not gender specific. A more literal translation is "the Lord is an avenger concerning all these things.")

Paul brings the discussion back to God's will: **For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.** God wants sexual purity. Anything else is impure, unholy, unspiritual, and unchristian.

Most of Paul's exhortations are given without supporting argumentation, but when it comes to sex, it seems that Paul felt that more support was needed.

Perhaps the Thessalonians had asked for some reasons for what was, in their culture, an odd restriction. So Paul gives several reasons: 1) immorality comes from a lack of self-control, 2) it hurts other people, 3) God wants us to avoid it, and 4) he will punish it.

Paul concludes by reminding the readers that this is God's idea, not just his own: **Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.** Since God is sharing his life and nature with us, and this is the life we want for all eternity, then, as best as we can with his Spirit transforming us, our lives should be holy and conformed to the pattern that Jesus Christ gives us.

### Respectable behavior (verses 9-12)

Paul then moves to two other areas of life—love and work. He does not say much about either one, apparently because the Thessalonians are already doing well, and a brief reminder will be sufficient. **Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.** Paul is using two Greek words for love: He did not need to write to them about *philia* love (mutual love) because they already had *agapē* love (unilateral love) for one another.

**And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.** (Apparently they had some contact with the church in Philippi, and perhaps Berea.) **Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.** In other words, good job! Keep up the good work!

Paul turns from their behavior with other believers, to their role in the larger society around them: **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.** If you want to be ambitious, count yourself a success when you stay out of trouble—that's a pretty ambitious goal in itself. If you are going to be persecuted, make sure it is for the gospel and not for bad behavior. And don't be lazy (some Greeks thought that manual labor was beneath their dignity).

He gives two reasons for this: **so that your daily**

**life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.** Let your behavior make the gospel more attractive to unbelievers (similar to Titus 2:5, 8, 10), and don't become financially beholden to someone else. Mooching doesn't do the gospel any favors. Be an asset to society, and people might be a little more willing to listen to what you have to say.

### The coming of the Lord

Paul's next topic is the return of Christ—the only place in his letters where he gives details about what will happen. The Thessalonian believers wanted to know more about this topic. We'd like to know more, today, too, because some of the things Paul says are puzzling.

He begins by discussing the resurrection of believers who die before Jesus returns. It sounds like someone in the Thessalonian church had died—although it's possible that the people were asking a hypothetical question.

Paul assures them that people who die will not miss out on the great event. They will have places of honor as the saints rise to meet the returning King. Is Paul teaching a "rapture" of the saints before the Great Tribulation? We'll discuss the details in the next issue of *Christian Odyssey*. ☪

#### Taking it personally

- How would I respond if someone starting giving me commands I already knew about, and I was already doing a good job in that area? (vv. 1, 10)
- How "set apart" is my life for God's use? Are there areas of my life that are not given to him? (v. 3)
- Why does Paul specify that we should not harm a brother (or sister) in sexual immorality? (v. 5)
- Are all people taught by God to love each other? (v. 9)

## The Greeks Had a Word for It

### "Πορνεία"

Paul told the Thessalonians to avoid it. He told the Corinthians to flee from it. He told the Galatians it was a work of the flesh. "It" was sexual immorality—referred to by the Greek word *porneia*. This word comes from *pornē*, prostitute, which comes from the word *pernaō*, meaning "to sell." *Porneia* is what prostitutes sold. The English word pornography comes from this same root word.

Although *porneia* originally meant to consort with prostitutes, it was also used for a variety of other sexual practices outside of marriage, including incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), adultery (Matthew 5:32), the orgy at Sinai (1 Corinthians 10:8; Numbers 25:1), and the immorality in Sodom (Jude 7). "Among you," Paul writes in Ephesians 5:3, "there must not even be a hint of *porneia*."