

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – “Sanctified Steps for Saints”

In the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians, we’ve been seeing how Paul has been looking back to his time with those in Thessalonica. He’s been reflecting on how they had that work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope (1:3); those three great virtues: faith, hope and love.

Chapters 1-3 have been about remembering and rejoicing. But now in Chapters 4-5 it’s about reality and readiness. We shift from the past to look at the present. And our present living is going to be determined by our future outlook.

This is Paul’s focus in the remainder of the book, and it’s filled with great practical exhortation of how we should be living in the present and walking in purity because of our future hope.

Summary Statement:

In this passage, Paul exhorts the Thessalonian church to live in a way that distinguishes them from the surrounding culture, emphasizing the need for holy living and love as key indicators of their identity in Christ. This provides a great witness to the world around them.

Outline:

1. The Pleasing Walk – 4:1-3
2. The Pure Walk – 4:4-8
3. The Partnering Walk – 4:9-10
4. The Proper Walk – 4:11-12

1. The Pleasing Walk – 4:1-3

4:1-3 - *Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; ² for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;*

When Paul writes **finally** here, he’s not looking to draw the letter to its conclusion. You can read this and think, he’s still got a couple chapters to go. The idea here is that Paul is building off of what he said in Chapter 3. The KJV says *Furthermore*. That gives a better sense of what is intended.

- It's a good rule of thumb around here too. If you hear me say, *In conclusion*, it's probably not wise to think I'm actually wrapping up the sermon. It's more of a, *Let me add some more thoughts to what I've said*.

Now what is Paul looking to build on? At the end of Chapter 3 he prayed that God would make them increase in love to one another and establish their hearts blameless in holiness (3:12-13). So now Paul is going to continue to expand on what that looks like. It's his practical exhortation to this church.

- Paul would usually write his letters in a two-part division. First, he would share what God has done (doctrine), then second, he would share what we are to do (duty).
- This is how he's finishing this letter for us. It's filled with great practical truths to encourage us and show us how to live a life pleasing to God.

So Paul is urging and exhorting them to abound more and more. The word **urge** is to *ask*. And funny, the word **exhort** is more rightly defined as *urge*. But the word exhort is a great word because it's the Greek word *parakaleō*, which means to urge, implore, or call to one's side. Paul is calling these believers to come alongside him as he seeks to walk in the fullness of what God has for him. Paul wants this for these believers.

- He knows there can be a tendency to get tired or complacent. Especially if your facing affliction as they were. So he exhorts them to **abound more and more**. Abound in what? Abound in love and holiness – the themes we left off with in Chapter 3.
- He doesn't want them to take the foot off the pedal. He wants to see them continuing in these things and not just to continue in them but to excel in them. This love and holiness should just be overflowing in you and pouring out.
- He's taught them these things already. They're doing a lot of these things already (vs. 10), but he wants to see it increase. In other words, don't ever settle with where you're at. God is too big for us to feel like there's nothing more to learn, discover, or live out.
- The Word encourages us to continually move forward. This was Paul's confession and desire: **Philippians 3:12–14**, *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³ Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are*

ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

- Guess what happens when we stop moving forward? We become stagnant and complacent. God can't steer a parked car. Are you moving forward in the things of God?

Our desire should be to live in a manner that pleases God. We have a lot of people in the world who's aim it is to live to simply please themselves. *As long as I'm happy, that's what matters.* But for the Christian this should not be. We've died to self. Our life is now in Jesus. He's the One we are living for and the One we want to please.

So, how do we please the Lord?

Paul says, ***you know what commandments we gave you...*** Paul, Silas and Timothy laid it all out to them. There was no bait and switch here. They didn't say, believe in Jesus and you can just keep doing what you're doing. They shared what was commanded of them. And it wasn't commandments from Paul. It was ***through the Lord Jesus***. They shared these truths from the authority of Jesus because they were from Jesus. Following in obedience to what God commands is what pleases the Lord. And this is not an option for the believer. You don't just get to pick and choose what things you want to live out. These are clear moral instructions for the believer that are given to please and glorify God, but also to bring blessing to you.

- Sometimes people think that the commandments of God are just too burdensome. But they're not.
- **1 John 5:3**, *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."*
- What is a burden is when we're trying to squeeze pleasure out of life from places we were never meant to do so. But when we come and live out these lives to God and for God, we find there's real pleasure in that. We're doing what we were made to do. We find His way is really a good way, a light way, a non-burdensome way.

So, can you be a little more specific as to what His way really looks like? What is pleasing to Him? Well, glad you asked, I just so happen to have a verse for you: ***For this is the will of God, your sanctification...***

Have you ever asked that question, *what is the will of God for my life?* We can wrestle over this 'till we're blue in the face and still not be certain in some areas. You see, we often make finding His will about the *What, Where, and When*. Whereas God is more concerned with the *Who* and the *Why*. He's not fretting over making sure you take the right job or move to the right city. He wants you simply living for Him in whatever you're doing. His will is that you live set apart for Him. That's sanctification.

- This word is *hagiasmos* in the Greek. It's used 10 times in the N.T.

5 times it's translated as *holiness*, 5 times it's translated as *sanctification*. And when you're living a sanctified life, you're living a life that pleases God and is right in the center of His will. How cool is that!?

Living a sanctified life means you're walking in holiness. You're setting yourself apart from the things of the world and setting yourself apart to God. God is holy. He is so distinct and separate from this world, yet amazingly, He does not separate Himself from us. But He calls us to be holy so we can walk in fellowship with him and share in His holiness.

Now one way we're to be distinct and separate from this world is by our abstinence of **sexual immorality**.

The KJV translates this as fornication. It's the Greek word *porneia*. Of course we get our English word 'pornography' from this. Sexual immorality doesn't just encompass pornography, it encompasses any form of sexual practice that is outside of God's parameters and revealed will (ie. adultery, premarital and extramarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other perversions of this act that has been given to us as a gift from God to be shared between one man and one woman in the confines of marriage).

- There are some that will think this is just old fashioned Bible times norm that has no relevance or implication for today.
- Some will say, *We live in a sex obsessed culture that Paul couldn't have seen coming. There's no way these restrictions are meant for us. This is unrealistic!*
- But think about the times that Paul was living in. He's first of all writing this from Corinth. A completely debased society with the temple of Aphrodite on the acro-Corinth where temple prostitutes would come down from the hill and make themselves available to the people of the city as a way of worshipping their goddess. Thessalonica would have been familiar with conduct too. Anything went.

- We hear of people who are coming out of the closet today. Back then they had no closets! There were no boundaries, no shame.
- “The Athenian orator Demosthenes had written: ‘We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.’ As long as a man supported his wife and family, there was no shame whatsoever in extramarital relationships.”¹
- As you can see the Greco-Roman world was every bit as immoral as our day, actually more so! In fact, in the book, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire’, Givens writes how that Rome was not conquered from without, but was rather destroyed from within, as the morality of the nation became so rotten that it finally collapsed.

So, with all this in mind, Paul encourages these believers to abstain from sexual immorality. Not that they were blatantly messing up in this area, but because they knew no different. But now the gospel has so radically transformed them. This is what makes the gospel so exciting – nobody is out of reach of God’s amazing grace. It’s truly good news.

- Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- Notice God **had sanctified** them, but we’re also called to keep growing in sanctification. Keep setting your life apart to God. Keep walking closer with Him and further from the things of the world.

2. The Pure Walk – 4:4-8

4:4-8 - *that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵ not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. ⁷ For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.*

Paul has let these believers know what pleases God and what His will is for them, so now they need to know how to put this into practice. It starts with

¹ Barclay, W. (2003). *The Letters to Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, p. 230). Westminster John Knox Press.

learning how to control your own body and not following after the lusts of the flesh. This is what the Gentiles do, and they don't know God. But we who know God should have different pursuits, different convictions. Our aim is to please God not ourselves.

- “When we succumb to sexual strongholds, we are worshiping the wrong thing. In committing acts of sexual immorality, then, we are not just making a mistake. We are proving that we are **like the unsaved Gentiles, who do not know God**. Sexual immorality is a fruit of an idolatrous root—of the worship of pleasure over God, something that should not be true of believers who possess the Spirit. And if we worship our way into sin, the only solution is to worship our way out of it.” ²

Are you someone that knows God, that truly has a heart to worship God because of what He has done for you? Abstaining from sexual immorality is not some command where God is being a kill joy. He knows these things done outside of His way will kill the joy. His desire is to protect you from the consequences that come from engaging in these things that are not of Him. He wants this act to be a blessing, not a burden. And when it's done the wrong way there are consequences.

Notice, we read in vs. 6 that ***the Lord is the avenger of all such***... Nothing is hidden from Him, He sees all and it will all be brought to account.

- “Although in Christ we're protected from His eternal condemnation (Rom. 8:1), God may still allow the consequences of our sexual sin to discipline us. Immorality can lead to anxiety, conflict, guilt, broken marriages, broken homes, and even deadly diseases. This is the bitter harvest we reap from planting seeds of impurity in the soil of our lives.” ³

One of Britain's most gifted writers of the nineteenth century fell into sexual sin and ended in prison and disgrace. He wrote:

The gods have given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.... Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation.... *I grew careless of the lives of others*. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some

² Evans, T. (2019). *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (pp. 1264–1265). Holman Bible Publishers.

³ Swindoll, C. R. (2016). *Insights on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Vol. 10, p. 56). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

day to cry aloud from the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.¹¹⁴

So don't be led by your passions and lust, be led by the Word of God and by what pleases God. If the heathens do what they do because they don't know God, then we must behave in a very different way because we do know God. God has called us to live different. To be holy. You may not like this, you may reject this, but in doing so you're not rejecting a belief passed down by man, you're rejecting God. And He's given us His Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth and to convict us when we're not walking in that truth.

Side note: some believe that the word **vessel** is meant to speak of a wife. It's used that way in 1 Peter 3:7. Others say it speaks of the body, and it's used that way in 2 Corinthians 4:7. It's a debate that's gone on for centuries. Both can apply. We must carry out these acts of a sexual nature in a way that honours God and follows His way.

- As already mentioned, the immorality in this day was not looked down upon. Divorce was a common thing. Some husbands were divorcing their wives over burning their breakfast or talking bad about the in-laws. This idea of keeping yourself for one another was scoffed at. Paul reminds these believers that they are not to treat their spouse with hardness or harshness, but in holiness and honor.

Paul now moves on from talking about lust to talk about love. In this section it's not about abstaining but about abounding!

3. The Partnering Walk – 4:9-10

4:9-10 - *But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;¹⁰ and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more;*

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, who left his lovely wife to engage in homosexuality.

⁴ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 2035). Thomas Nelson.

Paul once again highlights their love. It's not something he needs to expand on because they've already seen this clearly from the Lord. Not only has it been a consistent teaching through the Word:

- **Leviticus 19:18**, *"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."*
- **John 13:34–35**, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

But this love is also planted into the heart of those born again:

- **Romans 5:5**, *"Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*

When these Thessalonians accepted Christ, they were made new. New focus, new desires, new mission. Part of that is having a love for people that wasn't self-serving, but sacrificial. When you're confronted with the love and grace of God, and that's poured into your hearts, it's hard not to live that out.

And Paul's exhortation is to let that increase more and more. Don't let it die out, keep fanning it so that love burns brighter and brighter.

4. The Proper Walk – 4:11-12

4:11-12 - *that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, ¹² that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.*

In this continued call for right conduct, Paul touches on three things:

- i. Lead a quiet life.
- ii. Mind your own business.
- iii. Work hard.

Leading a quiet life certainly doesn't mean you just stick to yourselves and never talk to anyone. You introverts are finally getting the courage to shout an amen to a verse here, but hold your horses. Leading a quiet life is more about not giving rise to fanatical or emotional living where you come across as some fruit cake. We want to stand out for our fervor for Christ, but be careful you're not standing

out unnecessarily as some restless, frantic soul. We should be at peace, living a quiet life.

Minding your own business is being careful to manage your own responsibilities and affairs. It doesn't mean we ignore other people and not help them in an encouraging way, but be careful you're not sticking your nose where it doesn't belong and then gossiping about what you see.

Working with your own hands wasn't so much a command to go and do manual labour as much as it was a reminder to stay active in the days you live. It would be easy to think the Lord is coming back any day, so I'm just going to quit my job and be ready for His return.

You see, when you're living a normal life, you're going to be a good witness to others. If you're calling your boss and saying you're not making it in to work because you just feel the Lord wants you to stay home and pray, that's not being a good witness. When you're asking to borrow money from people because you quit your job feeling the Lord is coming back, that's not a good witness. When you're going around talking about how you disagree with what others are doing, that's not being a good witness.

Walk properly toward those who are outside. Listen, you should stand out for being a follower of Christ, but don't stand out because you're being an idiot or not reflecting the things of Christ. Our desire should be to live exemplary lives.

Points to Ponder:

1. Am I still abounding, growing, more and more?
 - Where have I plateaued spiritually?
 - What's one step forward I can take this week in pleasing God?
2. Am I pursuing God's will or my own desires?
 - God's will is my sanctification. Am I cooperating with the Spirit?
 - Are there areas of impurity or compromise needing repentance?
3. Am I controlling my vessel or is my vessel controlling me?
 - What habits shape my heart?
 - Do I need accountability? Boundaries? A reset?
4. If an unbeliever watched my daily life, would they see Jesus?
 - How is the gospel on display in my home?