

How to Walk and Please God

A Sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. HOW YOU MUST WALK AND PLEASE GOD

A. In verse one Paul urges the Thessalonians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of their calling so that by doing so they may please God.

1. This is precisely the same thing that he has done elsewhere in other letters:

- a. Eph. 4:1-3
- b. Phil. 1:27
- c. Col. 1:9-10

2. What we are looking at then is simply another facet of God's will for your life, the difference inherently being that to the Thessalonians, Paul is speaking toward the sexual ethic.

3. As you are reading through this passage then, I want to draw particular attention to verse one and verse 8. Think of everything in between in light of what was just said. Verses 2-7 are verses that simply define his main point: that they conduct themselves in a way that is pleasing to God. Verse 8 then gives the warning.

4. Now we can move back to verse one to see this direct connection, because Paul highlights his apostolic authority in the person of Jesus Christ - not only once, but again in verse two.

B. The passage though is not straight fire and brimstone; Paul gives a measure of encouragement to the church at Thessalonica.

1. For one, they are already practicing these things.

2. What this shows us then is that this is not merely an event where Paul is rebuking the Thessalonians, but giving them some measure of praise.

3. Yet Paul does not stop here at offering this measure of praise; he calls them to abound all the more.

C. In verse 2, Paul gives the first reason for his exhortation: For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

1. What I want to highlight specifically is the theme of current knowledge that runs all throughout this passage.

2. These commandments are meant to be the outworking of the previous instruction mentioned in verse 1.

3. These commandments then are backwards looking - yet also forwards looking, as again, what Paul is about to say to them is by way of reminder.

D. In verse 3 then, Paul gives a second purpose to why he is urging and exhorting the Thessalonians:
For this is the will of God - your sanctification.

Paul reveals this in four points:

I. That you abstain from sexual immorality (v. 3)

- a. The verb "abstain" here carries the connotation of "fleeing from" that particular thing.
 - i. The very real fear I have for you all is that because this can be a private sin people will continue to hide it and make lighter of the issue than it really is.
 - ii. Obviously, if you are not found in sexual immorality, these things will not even remotely come into your lives, yet you will not be at odds with God, nor will you have to worry about suffering judgment.

- b. If then, we are to flee from sexual immorality with urgency, what is "sexual immorality"?
 - i. This is far more than adultery, sex outside of the confines of marriage, homosexuality, bestiality, rape, or being an effeminate male like we know it today in the Western world.
 - ii. We can also look to Roman culture to understand the audience Paul is speaking to; some of these practices are continued to our own day – yet others we are far too "prudish" to continue in.

- iii. Just in case one wants to narrow the implications of what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians - we see that Paul makes it painstakingly clear that we are to think in broad terms (Gal. 5:19).

II. That you control your own vessel in sanctification and honor (v. 4)

- a. Paul is using a euphemism to tell the Thessalonians to gain control over their sexual organs.
 - i. The reason being: in the very next verse Paul sets this idea at contrast with the Gentiles who live in lustful passion because they do not know God.
 - ii. The assumption in the text is that you will have sexual desires. Sexual desire itself is not the issue - it is a desire that is not only uncontrolled, but defined by the same standards as the Gentiles who do not know God.
 - iii. The mandate upon the Christian is to have complete mastery over the body rather than the lusts of the flesh.
- b. Paul is building toward this grand contrast we will see in verse 5 where he is drawing out the idea of two different spheres of operation that people live in.
 - i. These are two distinct realities going on at the same time: the realm of sanctification and honor, and the realm of lustful passion.
 - ii. They represent two different peoples: the saved, and the unsaved.

- c. This only further demonstrates what Paul is trying to get the Thessalonians to see: they must walk and please God in this manner simply because he is showing that by divine purpose, they operate in sanctification and honor.
 - i. The sexual ethic is not pulled from the culture or commonly accepted or normalized practice.
 - ii. It is counter-cultural and should be an open act of rebellion toward the beliefs this world holds dear.

- d. Yet beyond the fact that the sexual ethic is to be set-apart, Paul maintains that it is to operate in the realm of honor.
 - i. honor/shame society
 - ii. The interesting thing in this though is that through bringing honor to God, they also honor to the body of believers.
 - iii. Respectively, those that are dishonoring God and their bodies are bringing shame and dishonor upon the church.
 - iv. Our "private sins" are not all that private.

- e. This is, in part, why Paul sets up such a large contrast between the lustful Gentile who does not know God and the Christian.
 - i. One is controlled by their desires.
 - ii. The other, is controlled by the Spirit of God.
 - iii. In all of these things - our concern is to be found in having complete mastery over our body in sanctification and honor.
 - iv. These principles are upheld in the two present realities we find in opposition to one another.

III. Gentiles live in lustful passion because they don't know God (v. 5)

- a. What I want us to pay particular attention to here is that Paul highlights the reason that they live in lustful passion is because they don't know God.
 - i. This gives the idea then that those who do not know God are incapable of living in a manner consistent with those who do.
 - ii. Yet Paul goes further in saying that these Gentiles who do not know God are operating in the realm of lustful passion.

- b. That same contrast between the believer and the unbeliever that Paul highlighted in verse 4 is now coming to an apex.
 - i. Because of the way the text portrays an unbeliever here, we should not see their restraint in the sexual ethic as anything other than the hand of the Spirit.
 - ii. But if this is not a clear enough picture, let these quotes from the Roman politician Cicero, give an illustration of what I am speaking to.
 - iii. Paul understood that these ideas clashed heavily with those of his own day – and continues to combat this line of reasoning.

IV. That you do not sin or defraud your brother in this manner because the Lord is the avenger of all these things (v. 6)

- a. Paul stacks these points as a unit, showing that they are contingent and subordinate to his main point in order to draw out the call to walk in a worthy manner and please God.

- b. Paul clearly demonstrates the result of disobedience: the Lord is the avenger of all these things.

- c. The premise of this is built off of the former argument that these spheres of reality exist and the believer and unbeliever operate in two distinct categories.
 - i. By bringing another member of the body of Christ into the sin of sexual immorality, you are effectively taking two members of the body of Christ, which are to be set apart, and joining them together in the realm of lustful passion.
 - ii. Think of how easy this becomes when we watch a show with our spouse or friends that makes a mockery of a pure sexual ethic.

- d. Paul draws all this out is for the purpose of invoking a classic motif in the Old Testament of judgment against those who do not know God.
 - i. First, he has displayed their character and set this at odds with what the Christian character is to be - and then gives us the reason why this is so: they do not know God.
 - ii. Secondly, he gives a result of this: judgment upon the unbeliever.
 - iii. Jeremiah 5:9-16
 - iv. The promise of judgment from the Lord is meant to bolster the lazy toward repentance - but Paul does not want us to respond solely out of fear.

E. God has not called you for the purpose of uncleanness, or impurity, but in sanctification (v. 7)

- a. The word impurity, or some of you might see it, as "uncleanness" in your bibles, does not simply mean slightly dirty or tainted.
- b. This verse is not tied to verses 3-6, to that original exhortation in verses 1-2.
- c. The unique thing I want to draw out here though is that once again, Paul is setting up this stark contrast between the realm the believer operates in as opposed to the unbeliever, for he says, "you were called *not for* the purpose of vileness, *but in* sanctification."
 - i. Paul is making it painfully clear how different these two things really are.
 - ii. The natural result of this purpose is the outworking of obedience in the Christian's life.
- d. So we have to ask the question: if the Christian is called in the realm of sanctification, how do we view the sexual ethic in light of this?
 - i. The Christian's sexual ethic is to be set apart from the rest of this world.
 - ii. What this means is that we start thinking of the sexual ethic, not simply in terms of what we can or can't do - but in what is honorable, and lovely, wise, and of good repute.
 - iii. We ought to be guided by the principle that our lives, as ones that are operating in the realm of sanctification, are to be set apart as an act of worship to our Creator.
 - iv. This very plainly means that sex should be seen as an act of worship between a man and his wife.

F. Therefore, the one rejecting this is not rejecting man, but the God giving His Holy Spirit to you (v. 8)

1. This is the point of the passage that I have agonized over; warning passages are meant to be a warning to us all.
2. This whole time Paul has been driving the idea home that if you are not in Christ, you are not like the rest of this world.
 - a. The one "rejecting" this teaching is merely demonstrating that separation between the believer and the unbeliever.
 - b. Those who do obey are under the care of the Holy Spirit, which gives you not only the means by which you can be sanctified - but places you in that realm of sanctification.
 - i. The idea here is that you actually have a vested interest in pursuing sanctification.
 - ii. You don't belong to this fleeting age; therefore, you certainly have no place participating in deeds of darkness that Christ paid the penalty of death for.

III. CONCLUSION

CG Questions

1. Paul spends much time contrasting the believer and unbeliever in this passage. What does that look like when we consider some of the activities or means of entertainment we partake in?
2. Why do you think we often feel as if we are going to miss out on something when we refuse to partake in some of these things with the broader culture? How can we correct this thinking?
3. We view the sin of lust as a private sin; is it really private? Why or why not?
4. What are practical ways you can abound all the more in abstaining from sexual immorality as we seek to live in this world, but not be of it?