

Lesson 5

A Life Worthy of God's Calling

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Introduction

Paul's letters were usually characterized by two main sections: a doctrinal discussion and practical application in day-to-day Christian living. Paul follows that pattern in 1 Thessalonians. Because the foundation of doctrine matters, it brings expectations to live by in how we live. The main teaching section concludes at 3:13. Now, the appeal to pursue excellence comes with it.

There is perpetual danger in Christians assuming they've reached the pinnacle of sanctification, but Paul reminds the Thessalonian church and us that spiritual growth is an ongoing process. Despite their strong foundation in truth, they're urged not to settle but to strive for excellence. Paul's example of continuous pursuit serves as a model, emphasizing the importance of teaching truth and applying it diligently. Here, he encourages the church to aim for spiritual excellence, introducing vital elements in 4:1-2: priority, power, and pressure.

4:1-2 – We Must Excel in Our Faith

The Priority

Additionally then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you... do this even more (4:1a, d).

Paul's approach to urging the Thessalonians toward sanctification was characterized by humility, warmth, and encouragement. Rather than commanding them as a superior, he gently requested their perseverance, demonstrating his respect for them as equals. The term *excel* used by Paul emphasizes the call to surpass ordinary spiritual growth and strive for extraordinary progress. His priority was not merely to gain knowledge of God's Word but to deepen their relationship with God, understanding that spiritual growth stems from knowing God intimately. Spiritual maturity is marked by a deep knowledge of and intimacy with God, going past mere adherence to doctrinal knowledge or religious activities. Thus, gaining spiritual growth is a lifelong pursuit to know God more deeply and intimately.

The Power

in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received instruction from us on how you should live and please God... (4:1b).

Being *in the Lord Jesus* signifies a state of regeneration (they had been made alive, Colossians 2:13) wherein individuals share in the divine life of God. Paul's prayer emphasizes the necessity of the Lord's assistance in spiritual growth, recognizing that true excellence in virtues such as love comes from the power of the indwelling Spirit (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22). Paul's authority as Christ's apostle adds weight to his appeals for spiritual progress within the church.

However, this power for excelling operates within scriptural principles and gospel doctrine. The Thessalonians had already received instruction in these foundational truths¹⁴, guiding them daily to please and glorify God. Wherever Paul went, he and his companions were committed to teaching the saints how they should walk in daily life¹⁵. Thus, while the saints were familiar with the basics of Christian living, Paul's exhortations aimed to motivate them to continue growing and excelling in their spiritual pursuits.

The Pressure

as you are doing ... For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus (4:1c, 2).

Spiritual growth is a gradual, lifelong journey rather than an immediate achievement. Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians reflects this reality, urging them to continue progressing with Christ. He often emphasized the need for perseverance and discipline. Here is what he wrote to the Corinthian brethren:

Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown. So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air. Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

In verse 2, the Thessalonians were reminded of the authority behind Paul's exhortation – that the Lord Jesus gave them commands. This word is not found often in the New Testament¹⁶. But where it appears, it describes an order passed from one person to another, such as *when a command is passed along a line of soldiers*, and it is often used for military orders¹⁷. These solid and authoritative *commands* were not to be taken lightly, as they came with divine authority and were essential for spiritual growth. Obedience to Scripture's commands is crucial for Christians seeking more profound knowledge of God, greater love for Him, and fuller obedience to His will.

4:3-8 – Sexual Purity

In the Roman Empire, sexual promiscuity was rampant and widely accepted as normal behavior. However, the Thessalonian Christians were encouraged to stand firm in their conviction that sexual immorality was sinful and incurred God's wrath. They were called to refuse to conform to society's lax standards and adhere to Christ's teachings, emphasizing purity and righteousness.

Paul's teaching against sexual immorality remains relevant in today's world, which lacks high moral standards. In a culture where promiscuity is normalized, it is crucial to reaffirm the seriousness of sexual sin. Sexual sin is grievous and deserving of serious consideration and avoidance by all followers of Christ.

4:3 - God's Will

Keep away from sexual immorality (4:3).

Living in a manner that pleases God is a fundamental aspect of Christian life, and the pursuit of such living should continuously intensify. The command in verse 3 isn't open to interpretation or optional; it is a clear directive from God. The question shifts from "How far can I go without sinning?" to "How can I

maintain holiness in physical relationships and remain pleasing to God, continually striving for improvement?"

Sexual immorality encompasses any behavior that violates God's principles, including impure thoughts leading to sinful actions. It is a broad term covering all forms of sexual sin, emphasizing the importance of maintaining purity outside of monogamous marriage relationships. Ephesians 5:3-4 emphasizes the severity of such sins, stressing that they should not even be mentioned among believers, as they are incompatible with sanctification. Similarly, Colossians 3:3-5 highlights the necessity of putting to death behaviors associated with earthly desires, including sexual immorality, as they are inconsistent with the process of sanctification.

Paul prioritizes sanctification in God's will, as stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, indicating that we have been set apart for holiness. This also aligns with Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 for our hearts to be blameless in holiness before God. Ultimately, God desires believers to be separate from impurity and sin, reflecting His holiness in their lives.

4:4-6a - How to Do God's Will

With such a clear-cut directive in verse 3, naturally comes the question of how we can do God's will when we are continually bombarded and overexposed to all types of enticements to participate in sexual sin.

Control Your Body in Holiness and Honor

that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor (4:4).

Every Christian is called to exercise mastery over their body, recognizing that the body often leads to temptation and sin. The prevailing worldview suggests that the body dictates conduct, urging individuals to act based on feelings. However, Scripture teaches otherwise, emphasizing that the body should not be allowed to control or master one's actions. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul acknowledges that while believers have freedom, they should not allow anything to become their master, including bodily desires.

Additionally, in 1 Corinthians 6:13 and 6:15, Paul reinforces the idea that the body is not for sexual immorality but is intended for the Lord, and believers are to maintain holiness in their physical actions.

Scripture teaches that believers can gain control over their bodies and resist temptation. As Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 9:27, believers can avoid disqualification and maintain their spiritual integrity by disciplining the body and bringing it under strict control. This discipline involves walking by the Spirit, as outlined in Galatians 5:16-17, and being filled with the Spirit, as stated in Colossians 3:16. Through a deep understanding and application of God's Word, we can yield to the Spirit's leading and exercise control over their bodily desires, thereby declaring the holiness of God through our conduct.

Don't Act Like the World Who Does Not Know God,

not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God (4:5).

Note how we are called to live in a manner that distinguishes us from the world's ways. While the world may indulge in lustful passions, characterized by uncontrollable desires and overpowering urges,

believers are called to a different standard. In Galatians 5:24, Paul emphasizes that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires, indicating a deliberate rejection of worldly inclinations. Instead of being enslaved to such desires, Christians are called to live lives marked by holiness and self-control. Unlike those who do not know God and may prioritize gratification over holy conduct, we must remain steadfast in living according to God's standards.

Don't Take Advantage of Others

This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, (4:6a).

When individuals engage in sexual sin that surpasses God's prescribed limits, they not only violate His commands but also transgress against others. This involves selfishly and greedily taking something at someone else's expense. For instance, indulging in sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage is robbing another person of their rightful boundaries and dignity.

When individuals participate in extramarital affairs or engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage, they are essentially taking what does not belong to them. This selfish act disregards the sanctity of the marital bond and violates the trust and respect owed to one's partner. While what is taught here may seem straightforward, the consequences of such actions can be profoundly damaging and treacherous, impacting not only the individuals involved but also their relationships and those in the local church or community.

4:6b-8 – Why We Do the Will of God

The Lord is an Avenger

because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you (4:6b).

The severity of sexual sin is emphasized by the severe warning in Hebrews 13:4, which states that God will judge those who engage in such behavior. We need to see the gravity of the matter and how it serves as a reminder of the accountability we hold before God for our actions. Sexual sin is not a trivial matter but a direct affront to God's commands and standards for holiness. It involves a deliberate disregard for His divine will and a rejection of His authority over human conduct. By engaging in sexual immorality, individuals defy the sanctity of marriage and violate the boundaries established by God for sexual intimacy.

Also, sexual sin demonstrates a blatant disregard for the love, grace, and mercy extended by God towards humanity. It is an act of disobedience that prioritizes selfish desires over obedience to God's moral law. In essence, sexual sin represents a profound ingratitude towards God for His blessings and provision, as it distorts His intended purpose for human sexuality and relationships.

God's Purpose

For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness (4:7).

The call to salvation extends beyond mere forgiveness of sins; it encompasses a move toward holiness. Ephesians 5:25-27 illustrates this principle by describing Christ's sacrificial love for the church and His ultimate aim to present her as holy and blameless. Christ gave Himself up for her sanctification. The

imagery of cleansing with water through the Word emphasizes the purifying effect of God's truth on his children, leading to their spiritual renewal and transformation. The overarching goal of Christ's redemptive work is to present the church as a radiant and unblemished bride. This imagery highlights the divine expectation for believers to live holily, free from sin and moral impurity. Sexual sin stands in stark contrast to this divine mandate for holiness. It defiles the sanctity of the marital union and tarnishes the purity that Christ seeks to cultivate within His church. Therefore, indulging in sexual immorality contradicts the very essence of the call to holiness and undermines the sanctifying work of Christ in the lives of believers.

God's Spirit

Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit (4:8).

When individuals reject the call to holiness and indulge in sexual sin, they disregard the divine presence of God and His Spirit within them. The Holy Spirit, given by God Himself, is a continual and unceasing gift to believers, dwelling within them to guide, convict, and sanctify. To engage in sexual immorality is to undermine the work of each divine person of the Trinity. It disregards the sacrifice of Christ, who died to redeem believers from sin, and it grieves the Spirit, who seeks to lead them in the path of righteousness.

4:9-12 – Walking in Faith

4:9-10 – Love One Another

The mark of a Christian is seen in one's purity of life and profound love for others. Paul transitions from discussing purity to emphasizing brotherly love (*Philadelphia*), which differs from *agapē*, the universal love characteristic of those who have experienced God's *agapē*. While *Philadelphia* typically refers to familial love, in the New Testament, it exclusively denotes the bond between Christians. Here, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their brotherly love, attributing it to their divine instruction. This teaching, imparted by God Himself, underscores the role of God in shaping believers' attitudes and behaviors. These verses praise the continuous practice of brotherly love among the Thessalonians, highlighting their habitual commitment to this virtue.

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to excel even further in expressing brotherly love. The repetition of "more and more" emphasizes continuous growth and abundance in their love for one another.

4:11-12 – Love in Action

Although common in secular Greek writings, the counsel to lead a quiet life and attend to one's own business appears only once in the New Testament, specifically in this passage. Whether Paul directed this warning to a specific group within the Thessalonian church or addressed a broader issue remains unclear. Regardless, Paul likely intended to urge the Thessalonians to focus on their responsibilities, refrain from interfering in others' affairs, and diligently attend to their tasks.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12, Paul revisited this theme, addressing those leading undisciplined lives, neglecting their work, and engaging in idle gossip. He sternly commanded them to work quietly and earn

their living in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. By neglecting their responsibilities and meddling in others' affairs, these individuals were wasting their labor and causing unnecessary disturbances.

Paul prescribed diligent and faithful labor as the antidote to such unwise behavior. Drawing on principles from Proverbs and other epistles¹⁸, he encouraged the Thessalonians to work diligently, avoid meddling in others' affairs, and lead quiet lives that serve fellow believers and testify to the glory of God before unbelievers. The Greeks believed that manual labor was beneath free men, relegating such work to slaves. However, early Christians, many from working backgrounds, considered manual labor honorable. Consequently, Paul urged the Thessalonians to persist in their jobs.

It is possible that some Thessalonian converts, particularly those from the working class and slaves, may have misconstrued their newfound freedom in Christ, neglecting their work obligations. Their anticipation of Jesus' return likely exacerbated this attitude, leading them to rely on others' resources instead of working for their livelihood. In response, Paul admonished them to engage in honest labor, warning that those unwilling to work should not eat.

In verse 12, Paul provides two reasons for earning their living. First, he suggests that their daily lives should earn the respect of outsiders. While Christians should prioritize living according to the standards of their faith, they must also be mindful of not discrediting it. Second, Paul emphasizes the importance of independence, whether financial or otherwise. He encourages them to rely on their efforts rather than depending on others, thereby highlighting the value of self-sufficiency.

The practical, straightforward lifestyle taught here and other instructions regarding love, peaceful living, and respecting others' privacy were aimed at evangelism. By demonstrating integrity in their conduct, believers could effectively show unbelievers the power of the gospel, making it credible and appealing. Additionally, adhering to proper behavior would ensure the Thessalonians' self-sufficiency, eliminating the need for assistance from more industrious Christians.

Christians who embody sacrificial love, maintain tranquil lives, prioritize personal responsibility, and diligently fulfill their work duties while proclaiming the gospel present compelling testimonies to their unsaved friends and acquaintances.

What's in this for Us?

Continuous Spiritual Growth. Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonian church reminds us that spiritual growth is an ongoing process. Despite having a strong foundation in truth, we must not settle but strive for excellence in our faith. We need to see the danger of becoming complacent in our spiritual pursuits and embrace the encouragement to pursue a deeper relationship with God continually.

Sexual Purity in a Secular World. In an age where sexual promiscuity is normalized, Paul's teachings on sexual purity remain relevant today. Christians are called to stand firm against societal norms and adhere to Christ's teachings, prioritizing purity and righteousness in their relationships. We need to be conscious of the seriousness of sexual sin and see the importance of maintaining God-honoring standards in a morally compromised world.

Discipline and Self-Control. Paul emphasizes the importance of discipline and self-control in pursuing holiness. We must exercise mastery over our bodies, resist temptation, and align our actions with God's will. It means to walk in obedience and honor God in all areas of life.

Integrity and Personal Influence. Paul's practical instructions regarding work ethic and personal responsibility were not only for the Thessalonian church but also relevant to Christians today. By demonstrating integrity in our conduct, we can effectively influence unbelievers, making the gospel credible and appealing. The importance of living out our faith authentically in everyday life serves as a powerful testimony to the power of the gospel.

Conclusion

Paul's teachings here offer principles that stand with time and are relevant in every culture, especially ours today. By following these commands and applying them diligently, we can honor God, uphold His standards of righteousness, and effectively demonstrate the power of the gospel. Commit yourself to pursuing excellence in faith, maintaining purity in all aspects of life, exercising discipline and self-control, and living a life marked by integrity and love. By doing this, you honor God and fulfill your role as an ambassador of Christ in a world desperately needing His saving grace.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does Paul's emphasis on continuous spiritual growth challenge our tendency to become complacent in our faith journey?
2. How can we apply Paul's example of humility and encouragement when urging fellow believers to pursue excellence in their spiritual lives?
3. What does it mean to prioritize deepening our relationship with God rather than merely gaining knowledge of His Word?
4. How can we rely on the power of the indwelling Spirit to help us excel in virtues such as love and holiness, even in the face of challenges and temptations?
5. Reflecting on Paul's authority as Christ's apostle, how should we respond to his appeals for spiritual progress within the church today?
6. What practical steps can we take to maintain perseverance and discipline in our spiritual walk, as encouraged by Paul's analogy of the race?

7. How does our understanding of sexual sin as a direct affront to God's commands impact our approach to maintaining purity in today's culture?
8. In what ways can we exercise mastery over our bodies and resist temptation, as Paul advises, while still living in a world that promotes indulgence?
9. Considering the societal norms around us, how can we distinguish ourselves as followers of Christ by living lives marked by holiness and self-control?
10. How do Paul's teachings on love, peaceful living, and respecting others' privacy inform our approach to evangelism and our interactions with unbelievers?

.

¹⁴ See Acts 17:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6; 2:7-8, 14.

¹⁵ See Romans 12:9-21; Galatians 5:16-26; 6:6-10; Ephesians 4:25-5:21; 6:10-18; Colossians 3:12-4:6).

¹⁶ The only other places this word is used in this sense is 1 Timothy 1:5, 18.

¹⁷ Morris, p. 79.

¹⁸ See Proverbs 27:23-27; Galatians 6:5; Ephesians 4:28; 6:5-7; Colossians 3:22-24; 1 Timothy 6:1-2.