

This morning is Family Sunday. Once a quarter, we take part of our service to focus on the families in our congregation. At the end of this morning's service, we will be praying for fifteen parents who will stand before you to make a public commitment to raise their children up in the Lord. They will dedicate themselves to teaching their children how to walk with God and a life pleasing to him. We will rally around them as the family of God to support and encourage them in their commitment, and ask God to guide their steps as they seek to raise their kids for him.

We also continue in our series in 1 Thessalonians. Paul, who is the spiritual father to the young church in Thessalonica, wrote a letter to remind and instruct his spiritual children how to live a life pleasing God and to encourage them to keep going in it. Paul had received a report from Timothy after his visit to the church and, as we read last week, was relieved and overjoyed to hear of "the good news of their faith and love." But the report wasn't all positive. Timothy informed Paul the Thessalonians were living in ways contrary to what Paul had taught them. They were having some difficulty in letting go of practices they participated in before coming to faith in Christ. And while Paul spent the first three chapters of this letter praising and encouraging them, chapter four shifts gears to address those behaviors so that they could continue to progress in their relationship with the Lord.

If Timothy observed your life, what would he report? Where would he make note of the good news of your faith and love? Where might he note areas of your life where you struggle to live in accordance with God's Word and will? The Christian life is an opportunity to make an impact for the Kingdom of God. But if that life is lived contrary God's will, it will be rendered ineffective for his Kingdom. The longer we know God, the more we should be like him, and the greater our impact should be.

As we read Paul's words this morning, would you invite the Holy Spirit to show you both where your faith is thriving and where you need to make progress? This is not an exercise in judgment or condemnation. It's an invitation to God to lovingly encourage you where you are pleasing him and lovingly correct you where you are holding a part of your life back from him. That's what Paul wants for the Thessalonians, and that's what God wants for us.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-3a] Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup>For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification.**

The one question all followers of the Jesus must ask is "how do we live a life that pleases God?" It is not something we do perfectly the second we come to faith in Christ. In fact, perfection is not our goal. Growth is. That means:

**We are all a work in progress.**

The Thessalonians have made incredible progress in their faith, particularly in light of the quick exit of Paul and Silas, and the persecution they are experiencing at the hands of their countrymen. But, in spite of that, there are behaviors among them that show they want to hold on

to the ways they used to live that are contradictory to what they have been taught. This is a young church who wants to have it both ways; Jesus, and some of their life before Jesus.

Paul begins with a mixture of encouragement, exhortation, and a reminder that he is addressing things he's already taught them. It is a master's course in correcting someone under your care. In our day of everyone having their own truth, and living by the mantra of "you're not the boss of me", many resist having wrongdoing identified in their life. But correction is loving. Training others in godliness is a good thing, and that often includes lovingly challenging someone when they fall short of God's standards.

As a father of three boys, I do a fair amount of correcting...and sometimes I even do it well! And while my boys are rarely thrilled to receive it, they know I do it for their benefit. In fact, whenever I get the response of "Why?" (which is hardly ever...), my first response is "because I love you." Paul loves this church, and a loving act of a spiritual leader is to help his people see where they are falling short of God's will. Who has permission to speak into your life in this way? Part of calling each other is lovingly addressing where we fall short of God's will.

So then what is God's will? Paul says it's our sanctification. That's a big Bible word that also gets translated as holiness. It means to be set apart to live for the purposes of God, and it is a lifelong process by which we become more and more like Jesus.

Many of the students here with us this morning are a picture of sanctification. We have musicians, athletes, and leaders in our midst. They have been set apart to pursue the purposes of their orchestras, teams, and student bodies. And, over time, we would expect them to play their instruments with greater mastery, to tackle and shoot and hit with ever-improving effectiveness, and to expand their influence over a growing number of people. **The people of God are set apart to pursue the purpose of God, all the while becoming more like the person of God.**

It's also a process that never stops. Paul desires these things happen "more and more". That is not dissatisfaction or dismissal. It's that, if our standard is a perfect and holy God, we have a long way to go. And while we'll never get there this side of heaven, we are to progress in godliness all the days of our lives. Paul then moves to address certain behavior that falls short:

**[1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8] <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.**

Sanctification is more than changing what you do with your mind. It's changing what you do with your body. Where you put it. How you use it. It more than a change of thinking. It's a change of action. The Bible says your body is not your own. You've been bought with a price. You belong to God. We have also been given the Holy Spirit, and our bodies are his temple. Whatever you do with your body, the Holy Spirit is there. Wherever you take your body, the

Holy Spirit is going with you. When we use our bodies according to God's will, we honor him. When we use our bodies outside of God's will, we dishonor him.

Paul tells them to not take morality lessons from the prevailing culture. It is no wonder the Thessalonians were immersed in a culture full of sexual immorality. They didn't know God and, therefore, lived in way contrary to his will. Some of the Christian Thessalonians had not progressed beyond the old practices of their culture, choosing instead to keep one foot in the past and they tried to move forward with Jesus. They listened to the wrong voices, and it impeded their growth as believers.

To whom or to what are you listening to inform you about this? Our culture has lots to say about sexuality, and little, if any, aligns with what God thinks. Like the world of the Thessalonians, this world does not know God either. But if you are a follower of Jesus, you do. And he also has lots to say about this subject. **Someone progressing in their faith ignores the ill-informed voice of the culture and instead listens to and follows the voice of Jesus more and more.**

This sin is particularly destructive because it involves others. There is a growing philosophy in our culture that says as long as an action doesn't hurt anyone else, it's ok. While both parties may be consenting, it doesn't mean no one is hurt. There is always a cost for disobeying God, and both people are hurt. That means it's not ok to encourage someone to disobey. While you are not responsible for other's actions, you can influence them. And if you influence someone into this type of immorality, you bring God's judgment on both of you. Love is doing the best thing for someone else. Enticing someone into sexual impurity is not loving. But being an influence for holiness is.

Martha and I taught the premarriage class here for years. The second-to-last week was always teaching on God's design for sex and marriage. And towards the end of that class, I would issue a challenge to the couples who were living outside of God's will. I would ask them what they think God thought by their request to bless their marriage while living disobediently before they got married. "God, we don't want anything to do with you here but, after we say "I do", we want all of you there." No obedience now, but bless me later. And I would tell them two things: 1) You have the power to influence your fiancé towards holiness or towards disobedience. 2) It's never too late to be obedient to God. And I promised them that if, in obedience to God, they would abstain from sexual immorality, they would honor God and bless not only their relationship with him, but with each other. And, almost without fail, I would have a couple or two come to me several weeks after that class and say "thank you". They had made the decision to sanctify themselves to God, and through it, they experienced a deeper relationship with him and with each other. That's what being a work in progress looks like; making a decision to follow God's will, and then seeing the fruit because of it.

Now, is it easy? No. If any of you think God's standards are too high and too difficult to live by, you'd be right, if we were on our own. But Paul ends this section with a reminder of what we've been given to live out the sanctified life. The God who calls us to holiness gives us his Holy Spirit. He is called the Counselor, who reminds us of all the things Jesus taught. He is God's provision of holiness that empowers us to be holy and fulfill the purpose for which God made us. Just like wind is the power that enables a sailboat to fulfill the purpose for which it is made, the

Holy Spirit empowers the follower of Jesus to progress in their faith and live a life set apart to God.

Paul continues his instruction, but instead of a negative prohibition, he gives them a positive encouragement, challenging to do it more and more, and telling them the intended outcome.

**[1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12] <sup>9</sup> Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, <sup>10</sup> for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more. <sup>11</sup> and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, <sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.**

You ever get the sense that love is important to Paul? He mentions their love in chapters 1 and 3. At the end of chapter 3, he prays they would abound in it. And here in chapter 4, though this is a community characterized by love, he encourages them to do it more and more.

If you're ever unsure of how to make progress in your faith, do something loving and you'll probably be on the right track. Think of just a few of the ways we see the centrality of love in God's Word. Jesus said "By this the world will know you are my followers, that you love one another," and "If you love me you will obey my commands." Peter tells us "love covers a multitude of sins." And the Great Commandment that sums up all of God's Word says simply "love god and love others." **Love is the irreducible minimum for those who have set apart their lives for God.**

Love manifests by making us a good neighbor. That is somewhat of a lost art these days. Paul is particularly concerned about how it impacts how non-believers view Christians. It's not that you are to carry the burden of the reputation of our entire faith, but your life is a reflection of the Gospel to those you interact with where you live, work, and play.

In just the last couple weeks, you have two incidents that illustrate this; one negative and one positive. The first was a university professor who said vile things about Barbara Bush after she passed away. That institution has scrambled to do damage control. And then you have Southwest pilot who stood tall during the recent accident and saved a lot of lives in the process. They've been happy to claim her. Paul's concern is not about image, but about others being attracted to the Kingdom of God by the way we love and live

Paul says we are to live a quiet life and mind our own affairs. Clearly God gave him a vision of Gladys Kravitz or what happens on the Next-Door app...also known as the "I'm about to get up in your business" app. What was intended to be a place to notify each other of neighborhood cookouts or to ask your neighbors to keep an eye out for your dog who got loose, fallen humanity has taken it to a very dark place. Your grass is too tall, your kid drives too fast in the neighborhood, your house is an ugly color, and your music is too loud.

We will live a quiet life when we have a genuine desire to not add to the abundant noise. One good check: Would you be willing to sign everything you post on social media "in Jesus name"?

Why are you squirming? We will mind our own business when we realize that, if you are living your life for God, you won't have any time to try and live someone else's too.

Paul also says we are to work. A busy body can't be a busybody. There were a few things at work that Paul had to teach against. The first is that manual labor was despised by the Greeks. They believed working with your hands was for slaves and artisans. As we discussed last week, Thessalonica had a system of patronage, where a citizen would be supported by a patron in return for their support publicly. This created divided loyalties and compromised a person's ability to enhance the reputation of the Gospel. Lastly, some just gave up working because they anticipated the immediate return of Jesus. This led to dependence, freeloading, compromise, indebtedness; all of which was a poor witness to outsiders and an undue burden on insiders. This would be such a point of contention that Paul would address it again in his second letter, this time saying that, if anyone was unwilling to work, don't let him eat.

I had a family member who wound up compromising his relationships within the extended family because rarely had a job and instead drifted from one to the next to borrow money. This is not to say that we should not help those in need, and if you've experienced times where you've been in need, you know how difficult it can be. Paul is saying self-supporting hard work is loving because it keeps undue burdens from others.

A life progressing in faith is a life that abounds more and more in love. A life set apart for God, characterized by love, respect, and hard work, is winsome. One of the greatest witnesses we have for Christ is how we live our lives.

### **How far have you progressed?**

How different is your life now than it was last year? Five years ago? Think about how far you've come since you trusted in Christ for salvation? This is more qualitative than a quantitative. It's a spiritually wise and humble exercise to see how your life stacks up against the standard God sets forth in his Word. It's also an exercise of encouragement and thanksgiving, to remember who helped get you here, and to glorify God for what he has done in your life.

Paul expresses how they've changed to spur them on to more and more. He encourages them in how far they've come to show them how far they can go. If you've ever spent some consistent time at the gym, one day you walk by the mirror and see some results, whether it be a flatter stomach or a more defined upper arm. This progress gets you up the next morning because you have seen the fruit of your labor and you want more of it. Our progress in our faith can be the catalyst for us to keep running hard after Jesus and continue living the sanctified life. As you look back, how do you see the hand of God, and the people of God, at work?

If it doesn't look different, why? What are you keep from God? What are you holding back? Maybe it's not sexual immorality or a lack of love or lack of neighborliness. Whatever it might be, God knows about it. Bring it into the light, let him deal with it, and move forward in progress.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, how would you like your life to look different going forward? From what you know about Jesus, do you think he could help get you there? We would love to help you with that.

So, we close this morning by bringing out these parents and their children. Each and every one of us was a baby at some point. And, if you are a follower of Christ, you were also a baby in the faith. God never intended for us to stay there. **Sanctification is not a scary word. It may, at times, be difficult, but anything that makes us more like Jesus is of infinite value, and worth the cost.** Our call is not one of perfection, but of progress. Set yourself apart for the purposes of God and let him go to work.