

**A HEALTHY WALK**  
**1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-12**

I. I thought that I would begin this morning by sharing with you one of the formative works of literature of my generation. Unfortunately, my generation has not been very successful in learning the lessons that are present in this literary work. We will see how many of you are familiar with the story. The book is entitled--- *Tootle*. Are any of you familiar with it?

I was blessed with a mom who read to me as a child. I especially enjoyed the Golden Books, and this was one of my favorites. Many kids of my generation were fascinated with trains, and my grandfather worked for the railroad. That was an added bonus. So I appreciated this story that my mother read to me.

*Tootle* is a story about a young locomotive who learned how to be a grown-up steam engine. In locomotive school there were two main rules that Tootle was taught. One was that a locomotive always had to stop for a red flag waving. A red flag waving meant that there was trouble ahead. The other rule was that a locomotive had to stay on the rails no matter what. But as Tootle practiced riding the rails he discovered that there was a beautiful meadow on his route. Tootle could not resist the temptation that this meadow presented. So Tootle starting going off the rails and playing in the meadow during his daily exercise run on his assigned route. There were problems which this yielding to temptation produced. You will have to read the story to find out what happened and how Tootle learned to stay on the rails.

Those two rules are lessons that my generation and succeeding generations have not learned so well. We need to stop when we see red flags waving, and we need to stay on the rails no matter what. Our Creator has provided us with red flags waving, and He has given us rails to travel

on, but too often we are inclined to ignore the red flags, and we don't like to stay on the rails. In the passage before us this morning we will learn something about those red flags and those rails that we are designed to travel upon.

In our study of 1 Thessalonians we have seen that the Apostle Paul came to the Greek city of Thessalonica on his second missionary trip. After preaching in the city for a short time, he was forced out by Jews and pagan Greeks who did not like his message. He fled to Athens. After that he went to Corinth. While there, he got a report from his coworker Timothy about how the Thessalonian Christians were doing. He found out that the church there was doing well, and he sent a letter to them which we know as 1 Thessalonians.

In this letter we have seen Paul describe the Christians in that city as having a healthy church. The church was not large, but, according to the first chapter, Thessalonian Christians demonstrated faith, love and hope. In the second chapter Paul described his own example of healthy ministry and the positive response it received in Thessalonica. Then, two weeks ago, we saw him describe in Chapter 3 what healthy love looks like among Christians. Today in Chapter 4 Paul describes a healthy walk.

II. First, according to vv. 1 & 2 of #4, the apostle says that **A HEALTHY WALK WILL FOCUS ON PLEASING GOD.** (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A HEALTHY WALK WILL...) Paul writes in vv. 1 & 2, "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. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus."

Paul's "finally" does not mean that he has come to the conclusion. It means that he has come to the last section of his letter. The first three chapters focused on the behavior of the Thessalonian Christians and how commendable it was. In these last two chapters Paul is giving additional instructions to them. In v. 10 of #3 the apostle said, "...we pray most

**earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith."**

**For some reason Paul is not able to leave Corinth to go to them at the present time. So he is sending this letter that, beginning in #4, contains instructions that will help to complete what is lacking in their faith. Some of these instructions may be responses to questions passed along from the Thessalonians through Timothy. Some of them may be the result of what Timothy told Paul about the condition of the church there.**

**So Paul begins by encouraging the Christians that they are doing well. They just need to keep it up. Excel still more. Follow the instructions about the Christian life that we originally gave you. Make sure that you are focused on pleasing God.**

**Our natural temptation, and the message that the society around us often sends, is "Please yourself." Personal fulfillment should be your goal in life. You need to look out for #1. At the end of life you need to be able to say, "I did it my way."**

**Paul says that the Christian's motivation should be to please God. Rick Warren recognizes this priority at the beginning of his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. (PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE) He writes, "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind or even your happiness." That is the same message that some of us saw Tony Evans teach at our men's breakfast last week.**

**The desired behavior of the Christian is described by Paul as a walk. Christians are to walk with God. This metaphor for living the Christian life appears a number of times in the New Testament. In Ephesians #4 v. 1 the Apostle Paul writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..." In #5 of**

**the same book he adds, "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."**

**In Galatians #5 v. 16 we are told, "...walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." In v. 25 of the same chapter Paul also says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also [walk] by the Spirit."**

**Some Christians treat the Christian life like a sprint. They start out with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. They get involved in ten different programs at church. They read the Bible for two hours a day. But they burn out.**

**Others treat the Christian life like the triple jump. They jump over to this church because it has a great music program. Then, before you know it, they decide to jump over to this other church because the Spirit really seems to be working there. Then they hear Pastor So-and-so on the radio and decide that he is really an anointed preacher. So they jump over to his church. The Christian life is supposed to be a walk with God. That implies a steady, purposeful, intentional continuation with God.**

**In verse 2 of our passage Paul adds, "For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus." Paul did not make up the rules that he told them about when he was in Thessalonica. They came from God. They were given with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian life is basically a positive venture. But there are some red flags we need to watch for. And we need to stay on the rails.**

**Since this is Mothers' Day, perhaps there are some moms who have kids who gave them a new car today. Any moms get a new car today from their kids? Well, if you had kids who really loved you and who had the minor additional requirement of having a few thousand dollars laying around, perhaps you would have received a new car. If you had, you would have received an owner's manual with it. This owner's manual comes from the manufacturer, and it describes how to operate and maintain the car. It has some rules. It will say that the oil needs to be changed every so many**

**thousand miles. It will say that tire pressure and fluid levels need to be checked. There are warning lights that are to be heeded. The car needs to be serviced periodically.**

**When you get your new car, you could decide that you don't want to follow the directions in the owner's manual. You could probably drive your car and have fun with it--- for a while. You could decide that changing the oil is a pain, and that you don't want to bother with it. But eventually there will be engine problems if that is the decision that is made.**

**There are a few vehicles that are designed for off road driving. But most cars are designed for highway and street use. As you are driving along one day, you might notice a beautiful meadow filled with flowers, like Tootle did. You could decide that it looks so beautiful that you are going to drive over into, and around, the field. The problem is that there could be rocks in the field or mud. You could mess up your new car. You could get stuck. You could run into some kind of wildlife.**

**Or perhaps one day you are driving along by the ocean, and you see this beautiful beach. So you decide to pull off of the road and take your new car through the surf. You might be able to do that for a while, but that sea water is eventually going to cause problems. You also could get stuck in the sand.**

**The point is this: Our Manufacturer has provided us with an owner's manual. That owner's manual is the Bible. The Bible tells us how we may have the most effective and meaningful and productive life possible. It also give us boundaries and rules that we need to follow, largely for our own benefit.**

**But then we also need to understand that our manufacturer has gifted us with life. He has also gifted us with eternal life, if we have trusted in His Son who died to pay the penalty for our sins. If we grasp something of the significance of this, we should want to please Him.**

**Amy Carmichael was a missionary in India for many years. She grew up in Ireland. Her father died when she was young. But her mom did an excellent job of raising Amy without a father. One day when Amy and her mother and her brothers were leaving church, she saw an old beggar woman coming out of an alley. She felt sorry for the woman. She and her brother helped the old woman down the alley. When she saw other people from church pass by them, she was embarrassed to be seen with this poor beggar.**

**As she continued to walk with the woman, Amy noticed a fountain in the center of the road. As she looked at it, she heard a voice say, "Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw--- the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If the foundation survives, he will receive the reward." Amy turned to see who was speaking, but saw no one. She was no longer embarrassed. When she got home, she searched the Bible and found the words which she had heard. Amy knelt by her bed and promised God that in the future she would only do things to please him. That is the best motive to have in life. Being motivated to please God is a mark of a healthy walk.**

**III. In vv. 3-8 we also find that A HEALTHY WALK WILL PURSUE SEXUAL PURITY. This is one way to please God. It is also one of the boundaries that God has given us in His owner's manual that will enable us to have the best life possible. Paul writes in v. 3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality..."**

**The Greek word for "sanctification" literally means "holiness." Holiness has to do with being set apart for God. In some places in the New Testament the term for "holy," or "sanctification," is used in reference to what happens to people when they trust in Jesus as their Savior, when they are born again by trusting in Jesus as their Savior. In being converted, people are sanctified. They are set apart to God. Thus the New Testament uses the term "saints," which literally means "holy ones," to describe all those who are truly Christians.**

**But the New Testament also describes an aspect of holiness that is progressive in nature. We who are Christians should become more holy in our behavior. We are set apart to God at the time of salvation. But as we grow in our spiritual life, our behavior becomes more holy. Thus, later in this book, in #5 v. 23, Paul prays, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely..."**

**The area of behavior that Paul proceeds to discuss in terms of sanctification is sexuality. Sanctified behavior in this realm means abstaining from sexual immorality. The Greek word for "immorality" is *porneia*, from which we get our word "pornography." Immorality in the New Testament refers to sexual relations outside of marriage. Our owner's manual tells us not to drive over there. There are red flags waving when we get off of the rails in this area.**

**In first century Thessalonica sex outside of marriage was regarded as normal. Worship of many of the Greek and Roman gods encouraged it. The opinion of an earlier Greek philosopher by the name of Demosthenes seemed to prevail in Paul's day. Demosthenes said, "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households." (*Against Neaera*, 59.122)**

**The Roman philosopher and lawyer Cicero lived for a time in Thessalonica. He encouraged young people: "Let not pleasure always be forbidden.... let desire and pleasure triumph sometimes over reason." (*Pro Caelio*, XVIII)**

**Such is the attitude of much of the culture around us. Generally I think that our culture still frowns upon married people who break their wedding vows. But beyond that pretty much anything goes. Christian journalist Janie Cheaney observes, "The cause of sexual freedom, meaning the legalization of same-sex marriage, abortion on demand, and unlimited access to contraceptives, is advanced under a single overriding principle, that individuals should be free to do whatever they want with whomever**

they want so long as all participants are consenting adults." (*World*, 4/21/2012)

The general expectation is that teens will also play around before marriage. California Congresswoman Barbara Lee commented a few years ago, "An abstinence-until-marriage program is not only irresponsible, it's really inhumane." (*Christianity Today*, 9/2004)

You see, the flowers in the meadow are so beautiful that we can't really expect young locomotives to stay on the rails. We can't expect owners of new cars to obey the manual and stay on the road. But there are consequences that come from ignoring the red flags waving. Charles Colson pointed this out a short time before he died: "The truth is that sexual licentiousness has produced epidemics of abortion, disease, divorce, broken families--- and great unhappiness. .... [Also] pollsters tell us that those who report the highest levels of sexual satisfaction are monogamous married couples who were chaste before marriage." (Breakpoint, 7/20/2009) Isn't it amazing that our Manufacturer knew what He was talking about when He gave us our owner's manual?

In vv. 4 & 5 of our passage Paul indicates that the purpose of abstaining from immorality is "that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God..." The actual word for "body" in our translation is "vessel." Some commentators think that the apostle is referring to one's wife. I think that our translation is more likely to be the correct understanding. The author is referring to one's own body in regard to its sexual desires.

Harvard archaeologist Lawrence Stager describes the moral climate of the Roman Empire in this time period. He writes, "In Roman families, the ideal daughter was expected to enter marriage a virgin and then to remain faithful to her husband throughout marriage. However, a double standard was applied to males. Little or no stigma was attached to sexual affairs before or during marriage, whether with males or females. For free born males, premarital and extramarital affairs were socially acceptable so long



as they did not violate norms pertaining to power and status in Roman society. It was socially acceptable, for example, for young bachelors, or a married man and a young bachelor, to have sex together. Sexual relations with a person of inferior status, such as a slave or a foreigner or a prostitute, regardless of gender, fell within the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Adultery, involving the wife of another freeborn Roman, did not. Fleeting liaisons, however, should remain discreet and not be confused with much more serious marital relationships."

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia in what we know as Greece. So there was this Roman influence, as well as Greek influence, that was felt by Christians at Thessalonica. We can see then why Paul was focusing on the responsibility of men in this area. The culture of his day promoted the sexual purity of women, except for temple prostitutes. Men were expected to be less chaste. Today our culture puts pressure on both males and females to have sexual activity before, and outside of, marriage.

Paul continues his thought in v. 6, "...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." How does one defraud his brother? By messing around with another man's wife or, perhaps, by messing around with the daughter of another man who will some day be another man's wife. Perhaps Paul is addressing a report that he has received that a man in the church at Thessalonica was acting inappropriately toward a woman who was part of another family in the church.

The Lord is said to be the avenger in such matters. Does that mean that He is going to come after us as His enemy? In Romans #8 v. 1 the Bible tells us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In other words, once we truly become Christians, we are going to heaven. We are no longer objects of God's wrath. But He can, and will, discipline us if we get out of line, and He allows us to experience the consequences of wrong decisions.

**King David did a very bad thing when he messed around with Bathsheba, the wife of another man, and got her pregnant. He tried to cover things up, but he could not. He got depressed. He felt guilty. Then the Lord sent a prophet to confront David about his wrongdoing. David eventually came clean before God, and the Lord forgave Him. But he experienced negative consequences for this big mess-up in his life. He had family division. One of his sons rebelled against him. Others in his administration resented him for his wrongdoing.**

**In the same way today, messing around outside of marriage always has negative consequences. These include STDs, unexpected pregnancies, abortions, injured relationships, guilt, loss of reputation and other family members who get hurt. We Christians have a responsibility to avoid sexual immorality.**

**Paul adds in vv. 7 & 8, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you." God wants His people to be holy. Part of holiness means the pursuit of sexual purity. It also means focusing on pleasing God. These are not the church's rules. These are not Paul's rules. These are not the pastor's rules. These are boundaries established by God. These directions come from our Manufacturer. They are not designed to keep us from something good, but to protect us for our own good. To reject these boundaries is also to reject God, according to v. 8.**

**Notice that v. 8 in our passage makes reference to the Holy Spirit who is given to us. He is the source of our power. He is the Divine Being who gives us the ability to overcome temptation. We have a power supply in Him that is not available to unbelievers.**

**Sexuality is a great gift from God. It is a very good thing. But it has to be expressed in the right context. William Frey, the president of Trinity Episcopal Seminary, writes, "Christians, in other words, are not prudes. We like sex. We celebrate sex. We thank God for sex. But--- and here we differ radically with our society--- we do not see sex as a right or as an end in**

itself, but as part of discipleship. When we say no to promiscuity or other substitutes for marriage, we do so in defense of good sex. It is not from prudery that the Bible advocates lifelong, faithful, heterosexual marriage, but out of a conviction that the freedom and loving abandon that are necessary for sexual ecstasy come only from a committed marital relationship." (*Christianity Today*, 8/19/1991)

IV. In the last section of our passage, vv. 9-12, we learn that **A HEALTHY WALK WILL DEMONSTRATE LOVE OF THE BRETHREN**. In v. 9 Paul writes, "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..." Love of the brothers is *philadelphia* in the original Greek. The term was used by the Greeks of the relationship among blood relatives. Paul uses it of the relationship among Christians in the family of God.

Here in v. 9 Paul turns away from the issue of sexual purity to another subject. His fellow missionary Timothy apparently told Paul about a problem with at least a few of the Christians in Thessalonica. Paul gets into the issue by starting on a positive note. The Thessalonian Christians have already been commended for their demonstration of love. In one sense they don't need more teaching about the subject. Love is one of the products, or results, of God's presence in their lives.

In v. 10 the apostle continues, "...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..." Macedonia is the Roman province of which Thessalonica is the capital. Just how the Thessalonian Christians were expressing love toward fellow believers in the rest of the province is not clear. Perhaps it was by showing hospitality toward Christians from the rest of the province who showed up in this city for business reasons or to deal with government officials. Perhaps they had a deacons' fund that was helping poor Christians in other towns. We don't know.

**Whatever the expression of this love was, Paul encourages the Christians to excel still more. We never completely master the subject of brotherly love. There is always room for growth.**

**Then in vv. 11 & 12 we get to the specific issue that is on Paul's mind in regard to brotherly love. He writes, "...and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."**

**The Roman and Greek attitude toward work was often that manual labor was beneath the dignity of a proper Roman citizen, at least a Roman who had some degree of "class." Getting your hands dirty was the job of slaves. The Jewish attitude was different. Many even of the rabbis had a trade that they practiced in addition to their religious work. Paul, for example, was a leather worker. So he encouraged Christians to have a positive attitude toward manual labor.**

**Many scholars are suspicious that the background of this exhortation from Paul is also the patronage-client system that was present in many parts of the Roman Empire. If you were a wealthy businessman in Thessalonica, you would probably have slaves working for you. But you might also have freemen working for you. These freemen might work full time or part-time. If you had political aspirations, they would be expected to show up at a meeting and cheer for you. If you were opening a pizzeria, they would be expected to hold signs down by the street and try to bring customers in. You might have to run errands for them. And you, as the wealthy businessman, would have to throw some money their way and see that they were taken care of. I picture this in my mind as a situation a little bit like belonging to the mob in earlier years in Las Vegas, or perhaps a little bit like belonging to a street gang, although the patron in this first century situation was not necessarily a criminal.**

**If this is the kind of situation that Paul has in mind, he is concerned about new Christians being dependent on non-Christian patrons who do not have**

**the same worldview and the same values as Christians do. It would be better for Thessalonian Christians to become financially independent and not be dependent on these unbelievers.**

**So the basic application that I take away from this is that it is good for Christians to strive to be financially independent. It is especially good not to be financially dependent on unbelievers who have a different set of values than we do. I don't think that this means that we can't work for a secular company or a government organization or some other group. In this country most employers cannot tell us who to vote for or what church we can go to or who we can marry or not marry. In first century Thessalonica patrons had that kind of control over their clients. And occasionally in the course of our lives we may run into employers who may want to exert that kind of control over us.**

**But then also in the course of life we do encounter unexpected problems and tragedies where fellow Christians need to step in and help. Sometimes that help may be of the financial variety. That is why we have a deacons' fund that we use to help out people in our church family who have financial challenges. This is where a healthy walk will demonstrate love of the brethren, not only by not being unnecessarily dependent upon other people but also by helping out fellow Christians when they need it.**

**Christian love takes many forms. For Amy Carmichael, loving God meant going off to India as a missionary. Amy herself had experienced the love of God, and she had a loving mother who demonstrated that love toward a fellow believer, her daughter. Amy's mom was Catherine. Biographer Patricia Chadwick writes, "...Catherine's greatest act of motherly love was when she completely released her daughter to God when Amy heard His call to the mission field. With much prayer and soul-searching, Amy wrote a letter to her mother asking for her mother's permission to follow God wherever He called. Catherine's reply? Did she express shock at the news? Reluctance? Fear? Uncertainty? No. Catherine gifted Amy with a parental blessing. She wholeheartedly and unreservedly released her child to God. "Yes, dearest Amy, He has lent you to me all these years... my heart**

**unfailingly says, 'Go ye.'" A healthy walk and a healthy love sometimes means letting go.**

**So Amy went off to south India where she started an orphanage, primarily for girls. That orphanage still exists today. This is the Christian staff who watch over 130 girls. It also includes a hospital Amy became involved in rescuing girls who were homeless and who were given over to prostitution in Hindu temples. Sometimes it was parents who had directed them off of the rails and ignored the red flags waving. Amy rescued countless girls from hopeless situations and showed them the love of Christ and became a mother to them.**

**A healthy walk means focusing on pleasing God, pursuing sexual purity and demonstrating love of the brethren.**