

The Legacy of Holiness  
1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Introduction

1. Review:
  - a. Legacy of Imitation (1:1-10)
  - b. Legacy of Ministry (2:1-16)
  - c. Legacy of Encouragement (2:17-3:13)
2. Paul begins the second half of the book, moving from thanksgiving and praise to encouragement and motivation (4:1-2)
  - a) Paul begins by exhorting them to not only continue but to “excel still more” at applying the commands he gave them (1-2)
  - b) He covers five areas: sexual immorality, brotherly love, the Rapture, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming and general Christian conduct.
  - c) In our passage today he focuses on holiness in relation to sexual purity

A. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to excel at living in a way that pleases God (1-2)

1. Our passage today begins with an exhortation (1): **“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus”**
  - a. An exhortation is basically a call to do something
  - b. Paul used two different words here which are basically synonyms of sorts
    - 1) The first simply means to ask, while the second is a word Paul has used repeatedly in this book—it’s the word for encourage
    - 2) So, we should understand these words here as an urgent plea—most translations use words like exhort, urge, encourage
    - 3) We also see this urgency in the phrase **“in the Lord Jesus”**—which implies the full weight of Jesus’ authority (e.g. Paul is asking not on his own behalf but on behalf of Jesus)
2. His exhortation was for them to EXCELL at something they were already doing (1b): **“that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.”**
  - a. Paul had already provided them with some teaching on how to behave as Christians
    - 1) The word “walk” here is a way of referring to one’s manner of life, how one lives and behaves (see also Ephesians 4:1)
    - 2) See v. 2 as well: **“For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus”**
    - 3) Paul likely provided them with instruction in Christ-like living when they were saved
    - 4) He might also be referring to 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians if our assessment is correct that it was written before this letter
    - 5) Finally, Timothy likely provided instructions on his first visit (when he delivered 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians)
  - b. The goal of the instructions was to help them know how to **“please God”**

- c. To their credit, Paul believed they were already walking in a way that pleased God: **“just as you actually do walk”** (1)
- d. However, he called on them to go above and beyond what they were already doing—he urged them to **“excel still more”** (1)
  - 1) In essence, we’re talking about spiritual growth here
  - 2) As we can all attest, the more we grow in our relationship with Christ, the more it changes our behavior, the more Christ-like we live in this life (at least that’s the hope)

B. One area where the Thessalonians needed to excel (e.g. grow) was in the area of sexual purity (3-6)

- 1. God has a purpose for His children—it is His will for us to be sanctified (3a): **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification”**
  - a. Another word for sanctified is holiness
  - b. In essence, to be holy means to be like God in his character, attributes, behavior, etc.
  - c. So, God’s will for us is to be like Him:
    - 1) Now, in one respect we are perfectly holy because we are in Jesus Christ and have His holiness: **“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him”** (Ephesians 1:4)—this is our position in Christ
    - 2) However, we still struggle with the flesh and therefore we have to be reminded to behave in a holy manner: **“but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior, because it is written, ‘YOU SHALL BE HOLY FOR I AM HOLY.’”** (1 Peter 1:16-17)
- 2. One area where Paul felt the Thessalonians needed to be challenged in regard to holiness was the area of sexual immorality (3-6): **“that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality”**
  - a. Paul uses a single greek word here, *porneia*, which in its broadest sense refers to any form of sexual expression that extends beyond Biblical boundaries
  - b. It can refer to sexual relations before marriage, adultery, homosexuality, transgenderism, pornography, etc.
  - c. Ancient Greek culture was a very sexual one and sexual immorality was common: Paul mentioned sexual immorality in nearly every letter he wrote
  - d. We can certainly say the same thing about our own culture
  - e. All this has a desensitizing effect on us and ultimately makes us more tolerant of sexual immorality, not just in how we view sex but what we feel is appropriate

A Brazilian Bishop appointed by Pope Francis recently declared in a homily that homosexuality is a gift from God

- f. The bottom line: sexual activity within the confines of marriage between a husband and a wife pleases God; everything else dis-pleases Him
- 3. Paul issues three reminders regarding his instruction on this matter:
  - a. The **FIRST** reminder was to abstain from sexual activity that dishonors God
    - 1) To abstain means to keep your distance from something, to avoid it
      - a) Elsewhere Paul says to **“flee sexual immorality”** (1 Corinthians 6:18)
      - b) In Ephesians 5:3 he wrote that immorality is improper for saints and should even be named among us (Ephesians 5:3)

- c) In Colossians 3:5 he wrote that we should consider ourselves dead to immorality
- 2) The early gentile church struggled with this because it was imbedded in their culture (think: Corinthians), as do many Christians today because it is imbedded in our culture
- b. The **SECOND** reminder was to acquire a spouse with holiness and honor (4-5)
- 1) There is some difference of opinion on how to interpret these two verses:
- a) Paul is speaking of how one controls or treats his own body
- b) Paul is speaking of how to acquire a wife (or spouse)
- 2) The evidence suggests Paul has in mind option number 2, acquiring a wife:
- a) The Greek word translated here as “**possess**” means *to acquire* (4).
- It is used only seven times in the New Testament and in each of these occurrences it refers to acquiring something (Matt. 10:9; Lk. 18:12; 21:19; Acts 1:18; 8:20; 22:28; 1 Thess. 4:4).
  - In the NT it never refers to the idea of possessing or controlling something. Therefore, in this verse it is better translated as “acquire.”
- b) The Greek word translated here as “vessel” or “body” has a variety of uses in the New Testament (4).
- It literally refers to *any kind of instrument, tool, weapon, equipment, container or property*.
  - In some contexts it is used as a reference to people (Acts 9:15; Rom 9:22-23) but nowhere else does it specifically refer to the human body.
  - However, of special note is the fact that Peter uses it as a reference to a wife (1 Peter 3:7).
  - Therefore, it is unlikely that one’s own body is in mind here. Rather, wife fits the context much better, especially in light of the remaining points.
- c) Paul says that this acquiring is to be done with “**sanctification and honor**” (4).
- The Greek word for honor here refers to *honor, worth or respect*.
  - **It is the same word Peter used in 1 Peter 3:7 when speaking of the honor a husband is to grant his wife.**
- d) The language and context of this passage is similar to that of 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 where Paul is also dealing with sexual immorality and says that the solution is for each man to have his own wife and each woman her own husband.
- e) Verse 5 says that they are not to acquire their own vessel “**in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.**”
- Sexual immorality was common in Greek culture with men having many partners, including a wife for bearing children, a concubine for sex and a hetera (prostitute) for going out on the town
  - There were five different kinds of \*marriage\* only one of which reflects Christian marriage
  - We are not all that different here in the US where dating and relationships are often predicated on passion, lust, sex, etc.—even within the church

- As Christians, we are called to a different way of acquiring a spouse

#### Courting Amy

- f) The final consideration is what Paul meant by “transgress or defraud” a brother in verse 6. If Paul simply had in mind controlling one’s own body this statement seems out of place for how would failure to do this be a sin against a brother?
- c. The THIRD reminder was to not sin against fellow believers in this matter (6)
- 1) Sexual immorality almost always involves more than one person
  - 2) In this verse, Paul reminds the Thessalonians not to “**transgress and defraud**” a Christian brother through sexual immorality
    - a) Transgress means to go beyond or step over the limits of something prescribed by God
    - b) Defraud means to take advantage of someone
  - 3) Paul doesn’t provide a list of ways that such activity transgresses or defrauds another, but some come to mind:
    - Adultery causes both parties to sin and defrauds the spouses
    - Pre-marital sex causes both parties to sin, defrauds the father and mother, as well as the future spouse

#### Asking Amy’s dad for permission to marry her

#### Conclusion

1. Paul concludes this passage with a reminder that God has called us to holiness: “**For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification**”
2. When we reject His commands regarding sex and sexual immorality, we’re not rejecting man’s laws, but God’s: “**So, he who reject this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.**”

Conversation with female college students at church one morning regarding friend who committed adultery—they were more interested in \*supporting\* their disobedient friend than His wife he cheated on, the other woman he drew into sin, or God

3. Paul reminded the Thessalonians to excel in this area by:
  - a. Abstaining from sexual activity that displeased God
  - b. Pursue a spouse in a Biblical way
  - c. Avoid causing others to sin and defrauding others