

Thessalonians, Part 8: The Will of God is Your Sanctification

1 Thessalonians 4:1 ESV (Pg. 574) 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. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3** For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4** that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, **5** not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; **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. **7** For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8** Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

- I. Paul has spent the first three chapters rejoicing that the Thessalonians have continued in the faith, in spite of the persecution that they had been undergoing. But now he begins chapter 4 by picking up right where he left off when he was with them; Instructing them about how to live in Christ now that they are following him. He begins by urging the Thessalonians to be distinct by pursuing holiness.
 - A. Paul placed a very high value on the evidence of a transformed life. He didn't emphasize merely believing a set of facts about Christ and his work, but rather he was adamant that our belief must impact the way we live our lives.
 1. You can see it in the way refers to Jesus Christ in the passage we read: he does not call him simply "Jesus", or "your savior, Jesus." Rather he says, "we ask and urge you in the **Lord** Jesus". After that, he says when they were there, they gave them instruction "through the **Lord** Jesus".
 2. Lord in the Greek is **kyrios** (kü'-rē-os). The word literally means "master". Paul is saying that Jesus claims the sole right of how to use you, reward you, discipline you, train you, etc. In other words, to call Jesus "Lord" acknowledges that he possesses you as his own property; literally his slave¹.
 - a) When Paul says that they "**ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus**", they are pleading for something higher than that the Thessalonians keep the rules of their new religion, or clean up their act, so they can boast of being good little boys and girls.
 - b) He is pointing to Jesus, he is reminding them that Jesus died to purchase them; and not just to forgive their old, corrupted life so they could live however they please. He means Jesus ought to get what he has paid for.
 3. Furthermore, when he says he gave them instruction "**through the Lord Jesus**", he is saying that by speaking to them in the authority that Jesus has granted him as an Apostle, Jesus himself was speaking to them.
 - a) Last week on Twitter a well-known Bible teacher stirred up controversy by implying that Paul's words in the Bible were somehow inferior to Christ's because Paul was just a man². But that is a terrible way to think about the authority of scripture! The Bible says that all scripture is given by the inspiration of God himself³, without varying degrees of authority.
 - b) Remember that no matter who said it, if the Holy Spirit made sure the instruction was preserved in scripture, it has the authority of Jesus.

- B. So what is it that Paul is asking them and urging them to do “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.**” He is imploring them to continue to intentionally grow in holiness. They have done well since they believed, but they must continually seek to grow into the image of Christ with greater and greater earnestness. This is great counsel for us all.
1. Paul says that when they were together, they were given some rules; “**you received from us how you ought to walk**”. If they were going to be associated with Christ, there are certain things that they should be doing, and other things that they should refrain from doing. When we talk about the “rules” of Christianity, there are two extremes that believers should avoid:
 - a) The first extreme is called “**antinomianism**”⁴. The word comes from two Greek words: *anti*, meaning "against"; and *nomos*, meaning "law." So *antinomianism* really means “against the law.”
 - b) It is the false teaching that because we are saved by grace through faith, that there are no moral laws God expects Christians to obey. But there are several New Testament passages, including the one we read this morning, that show us this is not the case. God expects our behavior to reflect his holiness and glory more and more every day.
 2. But before we crack that open, we should also mention the other extreme, which is “**legalism**”. While antinomianism teaches that your obedience may not matter at all, legalism say that its all that matters! It says that if you want to keep God from smiting you with locusts, you better keep all the rules well.
 - a) It makes you responsible for your righteousness, without regard for the work of Jesus. Even if a legalist **says** they’re trusting Jesus, their actions prove that they’re trying to work their way into heaven by good deeds.
 - b) This “working for your own righteousness” is exhausting and ultimately doomed to failure, as anyone who’s been delivered from it can testify.
- C. The real danger of both antinomianism and legalism is that they both have a a spoonful of truth mixed in with the lie. Legalism sounds true because God **does** demand perfection⁵, and commands us to be holy, as he is holy⁶. But legalism fails to recognize that the only source of the perfection that God demands is never found in us. We are incapable of that standard. Jesus is the fountain of our perfection. **2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**
- D. On the flip side, antinomians rightfully believe that the work of Jesus has delivered us from both the burden and the curse of the Law. But they don’t understand that God hasn’t lowered his standards because of the cross, he has just fulfilled the obligation we had (the debt) through Christ, and has changed our motivation for obedience from fear of punishment, to love for God.
1. **Ezekiel 36:26 ESV And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.**

2. God still expects us to walk in his way of holiness, but we reach our goal not by trying as hard as we can to be good so we can stay out of hell; but we obey from a renewed heart of love, guided by the Holy Spirit into right living.
- E. This is the change that the gospel brings about. It's what Paul is talking about when he says he not only told them how they ought to walk (the Old Testament Law had already done that), but that he also told them how to "please God".
 1. As believers, we are motivated by our great love for Jesus, and our gratitude for the mercy that he has poured out upon us, to live in a way pleasing to God! We are not avoiding punishment; we are pursuing the one we love.
 2. "(A lot of people) think that Christianity is you doing all the righteous things you hate and avoiding all the wicked things you love in order to go to heaven. **No, that's a lost man with religion. A Christian is a person whose heart has been changed; they have new affections.**" -Paul Washer
- F. We are not suffering the loss of all the fun things we used to get to do as sinners, we are joyfully walking in the freedom **not to sin** that Christ has provided through his cross, with the power the Holy Spirit supplies to us daily. And we do it joyfully, out of an ever-deepening well of love for the Savior.
- II. Paul deals a devastating blow to the misinterpretations of the antinomian when he says "For this is the will of God, your **sanctification**". The Greek word used for sanctification is found 10 times in the Bible, and it is translated into two different English words: sanctification and holiness⁷. God's will is for you to be holy.
 - A. Paul, as he does so often in his writings centers his call for holiness on the sexuality of the Thessalonians. "**abstain from sexual immorality**"
 - B. Although there are many types of sin that Paul deals with elsewhere, his focus is on the sexuality of the Thessalonians. There are at least two reasons for this...
 1. First, the Roman world was notorious for its use of every type of perverse sexuality to oppress and dominate others: women, slaves, conquered foes were all subject to being sexually assaulted and humiliated.
 - a) Additionally, many of the rites of pagan worship (which was thriving in Thessalonica) involved the misuse of sex, including temple prostitution.
 - b) Very similar to how the West is being transformed before our very eyes, the Thessalonians occupied a world where the abnormal was celebrated as normal, and the perverse as beautiful, good and virtuous⁸. But Paul, through the Lord Jesus, was calling the believers to be distinct from the world; a hallmark of holiness, a word which literally means "set apart"⁹.
 2. Second, Paul understood the fact that since we are all sexual beings, and we are all sinners, that at some level we are all sexual sinners.
 - a) Neither modern people, nor ancient people have any claim to moral superiority in this area of our lives. The spectrum is vast, but we are all sexually broken in one way or another, no matter how you may appear.
 - b) This applies to the single person with an unhealthy obsession with sex, to the married person with no interest in sex, to the one drawn into various perversions; all of us have much baggage from which to be redeemed.
 - C. So Paul gives us several reasons to walk in holiness in our sexuality:
 1. "**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**" In

Galatians, Paul lists “self-control” as a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in someone’s life. He says here that the operation of that fruit results in increased holiness in us, and honor toward the Lord we love.

- a) But here he contrasts the Spirit’s fruit of self-control to the out-of-control sexuality of the Gentiles who have no relationship to God. Once again, he is saying that Christianity should absolutely make us different from (though we are not superior to) those who are perishing in the world; as different as a dead, rotting corpse is from a living, breathing person.
 - b) What is it about you and I that makes us really different from the world? Is the way we act and the things we value any different at all? If not, it may be an indication that you do not belong to Christ at all. At the very least, it should make you beg that God grant you the gift of repentance.
2. **“that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter”** Paul appeals to the fact that our unredeemed sexuality is a crime against our brothers and sisters in the family we call the Body of Christ. This is certainly true when two Christians engage in sexual immorality together, but I don’t think that this only what Paul is talking about here.
- a) There is a nationally known preacher that had been fired from two separate churches in the last 4 years after seducing women he was pastoring¹⁰. But guess what? In the last year, he has started a brand new church¹¹, and is speaking at conferences because he’s really, really sorry.
 - b) It is true that this man can be, and hopefully has been, forgiven by God for these sins. But he has no business being in the ministry ever again. He has brought tremendous reproach on the Body of Christ¹², and in so doing he has sinned against his brothers and sisters in Christ (not to mention his ex-wife and children!). He should repent, and humble himself, instead of using his sin as a springboard for another attempt at celebrity.
3. For many people, it is far too easy to forget that our sin is never personal. It always has a ripple effect on the ones that I love the most. Sexual immorality in the church harms our brothers and sisters by bringing reproach, but may also harm them by causing them to disbelieve the power of the gospel to change lives, or it may give them justification to sin in similar ways.
4. **“because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you”** After reminding us to be distinct, and urging us not to sin against our brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul points to God’s justice as a deterrent to sexual immorality, warning them solemnly, and in so doing devastates an antinomian position regarding God’s holy law.
- a) The Bible teaches us in many places that there is a promise of judgement for those who are adrift on a sea of their own passions. “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral...nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality...will inherit the kingdom of God.”¹³
 - b) There are many among us who struggle with sexual purity. Pornography, same-sex attractions, affairs of mind, heart and body, etc. have wreaked havoc in many lives and continue to do so. But there is a huge difference between a person who is daily repenting and hating their sin more and more, fighting for a God-pleasing holiness; and someone who is giving

- up to every lustful impulse, even looking for new opportunities to satisfy your dark cravings. One has hope; the other is marked for destruction.
5. Do not play with the fire of hell! Today is the day to come clean, to be honest and repent, falling on the mercy of God that you might be saved. Why should you die in your sin, when you can not only be forgiven, but healed of your backsliding¹⁴, and delivered of your slavery through the power of the cross?
 6. **“For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.”** When the Bible says that God has not called us for impurity, it means that God’s intention all along was not to allow us to stay just like we were when he found us, with the only difference being that we now had a ticket to heaven. Rather, he would make us into living reflections of his holiness and Godly character.
 - a) But notice a little wordplay here. Had you or I written this verse, it might read, “For God has not called us for impurity, but **for** holiness.” But that’s not what it says. It says God has called us **in** holiness.
 - b) That means that God hasn’t called us to work hard, sweating bullets to try and be something he can appreciate; or that he died so that we could keep working hard for our holiness. It says that he called us **in** holiness, meaning we’re invited to enter into **his** perfect holiness (not building our own version of it). This only happens by faith and surrendering to the very available power of the Holy Spirit he has bestowed to see it through.
- D. Paul ends this passage by saying **“Therefore whoever disregards this (call for holy living), disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”**
1. The antinomian who says we don’t need to worry about God’s holy requirements anymore is not thumbing his nose at a religious establishment or the demand of a clergyman, but is rebelling against God himself.
 2. The legalist who says “I must be holy, and I will do it on my own” is not impressing God with his sacrifice of blood, sweat and tears; but he is defying the God who offers him free grace to do what he never will be able to.
- E. Both are disregarding the God “who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” He is the Spirit who convicts the antinomian’s heart of the sin he so readily ignores. He is the Spirit who empowers the legalist to give up on his own efforts, and trust that it is God who is working in him both to will and to do his good pleasure¹⁵.
- III. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Visitor Info, Offering

TONIGHT, we will be meeting at Cooke Park (6302 18th St. Lubbock TX) at 5:30pm for a time of fun, fellowship, and food. BUY TICKETS TODAY \$5 for age 13 and up, on sale after service in the foyer.

October 6th: Quarterly Missions offering. We have a commitment of \$6,000 quarterly to fund our missionaries, we still need \$2,650 to complete our commitment.

Benediction: 1 Peter 1:13 ESV Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. **14** As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, **15** but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, **16** since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” **17** And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, **18** knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. **20** He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you **21** who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

¹ See Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Colossians 4:12

² Beth Moore (@BethMooreLPM) see Twitter thread here: <https://twitter.com/BethMooreLPM/status/1176471324593721350?s=20>

³ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomian>

⁵ Matthew 5:48

⁶ Leviticus 11:44-45; 1 Peter 1:15-16

⁷ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G38&t=KJV>

⁸ Two helpful resources discussing these aspects of the Roman sexual ethic can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexuality_in_ancient_Rome; and here: <https://www.challies.com/articles/3-awful-features-of-roman-sexual-morality/>

⁹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H6918&t=KJV>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tullian_Tchividjian (See sections 2.2.4 “Resignation” and 2.3 “Willow Creek (Winter Springs, FL)”

¹¹ <https://churchleaders.com/news/357546-tullian-tchividjian-starts-new-church-after-affairs.html>

¹² 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

¹⁴ Jeremiah 3:22 NIV (ESV says “faithlessness”)

¹⁵ Philippians 2:13