

Intro.:

We live in a day when we have lost sight of the holiness of God. The Church is not that different from the world. We can all think of examples of Christians and churches doing things that cause the most irreligious to be disgusted. That's the negative side. The apostle Paul knew how important it was for the church to be holy. That is why he gave this instruction to the young Thessalonian church. We need to hear and apply this teaching as desperately as they did. There is a positive side that we must catch a vision for as we begin to consider the topic of practical holiness. The writer to the Hebrews calls us to, "Make every effort to . . . be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14) There is the positive opportunity. As we pursue holiness - in every area of our lives - people will see "the Lord." That is true of us as well as those around us. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." (Matt. 5:8)

As I read I Thess. 4:1-12, remember that with chapter 4 we come to a turning point in Paul's correspondence. As is true of most of his letters in the N. T., they divide into a doctrinal or historical first half, followed by exhortations and answers to specific questions. So listen not just for the content, but for specific applications that Christ wants you to make in response to these commands.

Read I Thess. 4:1-12.

## I. LIVE TO PLEASE GOD - RADICAL, YET FLEXIBLE GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Before he gets specific, Paul gives a general exhortation in vs. 1-2. "Live in order to please God" What good advice. What a radical concept. Imagine if at every decision point your mind turned upward to consider what would be most pleasing to God. It is not a rigid set of "do's and don'ts." But a dynamic principle that would shed light on a host of ethical decisions that you face." Today the popular phrase is "W.W.J.D." That's good, but I suspect it can seem somewhat removed from your everyday decisions. Even Jesus had a "guiding principle". It is recorded in John 8:29, "For I (Jesus) always do what please him (the Father). So if we want to use W.W.J.D., we can say that the guiding principle is to always seek to please the Father.

### PLEASING GOD - GROUNDED IN THE SCRIPTURES & PROGRESSIVE

Notice that this principle is grounded in biblical teaching. 4:1 "we **instructed** you how to live." And 4:2 "You know what **instructions** we gave you." In fact, throughout this section of exhortation, Paul refers back to previous teaching that he gave when he was present with them. See also 4:6, 11. When it comes to learning how to live to please God, we need to hear the same instruction over and over again. And we need to continue to learn what the Scriptures say so that we can grow in the knowledge of what pleases God.

### PLEASING GOD - URGENTLY APPEALED IN THE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD HIMSELF

Paul is not simply offering a mild suggestion when he calls us to live to please God. He is adamant. The English is softer than the original Greek. "Ask, urge" don't fully reflect the passion he is expressing. This is how they **must** live. It is not optional. He emphasizes this imperative by twice pointing to his source of authority in this opening. Paul is urging them **in the Lord Jesus**. It is by the **authority of the Lord Jesus**, that he makes this statement.

Before we go into the specific areas of instruction, I need to pause. Is it your intention to seek to live in order to please God? Perhaps you just haven't looked at life that way? Pleasing God would be nice if it fits in, but you wouldn't describe that aim as the "guiding principle" in your life. Let me challenge you, Why would you want to live your life any other way - in view of the spiritual realities. I am not trying to paint a pretty picture. To seek to please God is difficult, and demanding. It will cause much internal turmoil as changes are made. But let me go back to my opening words, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

## II. Live a Pure Life: (vs. 3-8)

The first specific area Paul addresses is that of sexuality. I don't think he could speak more forthrightly. He describes our calling positively, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" and then goes on to explain it negatively, "that you should avoid sexual immorality." Immorality stands for any expression of sexual involvement outside of marriage. It includes pre-marital sex as well as adultery. I believe Paul starts with our sexuality b/c I can't think of any other area in our life that has the potential to reflect God's life. Recall that throughout the OT the relationship between God and Israel is frequently portrayed in marriage terminology. God had taken Israel to be his bride. She was to be wholly devoted to Him. Yet what happened - she played the harlot - she was unfaithful. In the NT the relationship between Christ and the church is pictured in the marriage bond. God has given us sexuality to reflect his life in the world. And from the beginning of time he set boundaries for the proper expression of sexuality - marriage. Singleness is recognized throughout the bible as the one alternative. Jesus was a single adult. If you are single - the calling is to be pure and dedicated unto the Lord, If you are married - the calling is to be faithful to your spouse alone. Whatever your status, married or single, our sexuality lies at the core of who we are and how we reflect God's life in the world. Heterosexual marriage is God's plan and the context for sexuality.

The situation that the Thessalonian believers were living in was no better than 20<sup>th</sup> Century America and may have been worse. Gross immorality was promoted under the name of religion. A man might have a mistress who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine, while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot. The function of his wife was to manage his household and to be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs. It is out of such an environment that the believers in Thessalonica had come to Christ. And they like we need much help in learning how to live a holy life.

Paul gives a command that sums up his teaching on this matter. "Learn to control your body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God." Self-control, the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit, was the new way of living - not in unrestrained passion. It is interesting to me that Paul goes into such detail on the matter of sexuality. I have to conclude that many at Thessalonica were struggling, some failing, some confused, no doubt all were tempted. Let me insert that if you are one of the many who have stumbled in this area - there is forgiveness and cleansing. The main concern I have is that you not leave here today feeling defeated or overcome by guilt. I do want you to clearly understand God's standard, "As a Christian you are called to live a holy life and not be impure." But I also want to know that He will supply the power to live a pure life sexually. By accepting this teaching, you are opening yourself to the Holy Spirit who will guide you in the decisions you will need to make to be pleasing to God and holy in this area of your life.

Before I move to specific suggestions for application, I must complete Paul's instruction. There is more to understand about sexual immorality that gives us even more reason to avoid it. Sexual sin will damage you and wrong others. Paul is clear in this text and in a related passage in I Cor. 6:12-20, that the person who sins sexually actually sins against his or her own body. "The Lord will punish men for all such sins." How that punishment is worked will vary. In our day there is an incredible risk from Sexually transmitted diseases. Even some secular sources are advocating abstinence for this reason alone. Young people, please do not believe the advertisements that give the impression that proper use of birth control really makes for "safe sex" It is a lie. But, not every immoral person contracts an S.T.D. There are psychological and emotional consequences to immorality. Recently Ann Landers filled her column with comments from people who had been involved in affairs. Some were filled with remorse - even if their spouse never found out. But, to be honest, some reflected positively on the experience. So some people may not show signs of emotional or psychological consequences. But somehow, whether in this life or in the life to come, God says there will be negative consequences for immorality. It is like the law of gravity, you simply cannot escape it. So God instructs us for our good. He wants us to enjoy sexuality as the wonderful gift of our loving creator.

Paul does make clear that the sexually immoral person “wrongs his brother or takes advantage of him.” By this I understand that other people are hurt by immorality. In adultery, there is the other spouse who has been violated. In pre-marital sex there is the future partner who will not receive virgin as his/her partner. And there are children of the immoral adults, the painful consequences of an immoral parent will be felt for years to come.

One of the safeguards that our EFC district superintendent challenged each of us to do was to list all the people who would be affected if we were to have a moral fall. At first you think of your spouse and children. But then consider the young people I was serving as their youth pastor. Then parents, siblings, friends. Include all the people that I had ever witnessed to who might find out. The purpose was clear. Don't let the passion of a moment cloud your thinking as to the long term consequences of immorality.

Now in reality, falling into sexual immorality is rarely an isolated event. It is preceded by long-term erosion in one's mind. Though expressed in different ways, I think it is true for both men and women. The battle is initially in the mind. And it is here where we must prepare to fight and learn to be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

What are your fantasies? What are you putting into your mind? Are you giving in to escape from a hurt in your relationship with your spouse by compromising mentally? If you are single, is the pressure of loneliness causing you to drop your guard? If you are a young person, is the desire for acceptance causing you to consider going against what you know to be God's standard? Whatever your situation, you need some brothers or sisters in Christ with whom you can be honest. People who will remind you of God's good purposes, and the power of the Holy Spirit. People who will confidentially hear your confession and pray for your purity.

Trans.: Now Paul will make a shift from purity to love. He leaves self-control behind and talks about self-sacrifice. It has been said that two things in particular set apart the early Christian Church from its contemporary society: 1. The purity of the lives of its members and the love they so fully practiced toward one another. The following quote comes from an anonymous letter possibly dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, “They marry and have children just like every one else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present “in the flesh” but they do not live “according to the flesh”. . . They love every one, but are persecuted by all. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things.”

### III. Learn to Love Each Other (vs. 9-10):

Read again vs. 9-10. The subject is “brotherly love”. The Greek word is Philadelphia (from which the city in PN was named). In secular Greek it was used exclusively of the relations between brothers and sisters of one father - love within the family. But in the NT, it is used exclusively of the warm relationships within the community of faith. It is a different word from (Grk. Agape) which is used later in vs. 9 “you have been taught by God to **love** (agape) one another.

Note what Paul says first by way of commendation, “we do not need to write to you for you yourselves are taught by God.” I have to conclude that by the indwelling Holy Spirit they were learning how to genuinely love the brethren. It quickly became evident. And note also they put into practice what they were learning, (vs. 10) “And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” It is one thing to know how to love others, it is even more significant that they were doing it. Recall Jesus example to his disciples in the upper room. After washing his disciple's feet he sat down, told them to wash each others feet and said, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you **do** them.” (John 13:17)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the same commendation that Paul gave the Thessalonians would be said of us at Grace EFC? I believe God has already been at work to teach each of us how to love the brethren. I trust that over the years, we will not only grow in our understanding of how to love, but even more in our practice. I've tried to reflect on what God has taught me about loving “the brethren”. I'm

thinking about lessons learned over the past 20 years of interacting closely with other Christians. Here's what I came up with (I encourage you to make your own list)

1. Differences will enrich you - if you can really accept them.
2. Difficult people are God's tool to purify our hearts. (Must guard against becoming callous)
3. God will give some gems - treasure them. Be careful not to become too possessive. Don't get angry if He takes them away. They were a gift initially. Sometimes God removes special people - treasured gems - Trust Him with the reason why.
4. Each person has a story worth telling. Take the time to listen and look for the evidence of God's grace.
5. Christians are still sinners - don't be surprised. Develop discernment without discounting
6. What you share is eternal.
7. Learning to love means learning to give. It's not what you get, but what you can give.

And so Paul urges them, and I urge you to "Do so **more and more**".

#### IV. Lead a Quiet Life (vs. 11-12)

Loving one another does not mean failing to exercise discernment. At Thessalonica it seems that there was a minority who were taking advantage of the generosity of the majority. Paul develops this theme further in the second letter. There he gives a harsh rebuke to some who appear to have been caught up with expectation of the return of Christ to the point that they had quit working. So Paul adds another command as he rounds out his picture of a holy life.

He begins with an interesting word play. "Make it your ambition to have no ambition" or "seek restlessly to be at rest". Specifically they are told to 1. Mind their own business (the idle who are rebuked in II Thessalonians are there called "busybodies") and 2. Work with your own hands. In the Greek world manual labor was despised - fit only for slaves. It is so easy to become discouraged with our work. But here Paul validates the significance of work - even the work that the world considers unimportant. I personally have found great encouragement from Col. 3:23-25, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Whatever God has called you to do - it can be filled with significance - if not in the world's estimation, then certainly in Heaven's eyes.

To this command he adds two results (note the repetition of "so that"). 1. Your Daily life may win the respect of outsiders and 2. You will not be dependent on anybody. It all refers back to practical holiness. By living this way they will provide a good witness to the watching world.

Think for a moment about your work - whether you receive pay for it or not. Imagine Christ validating the significance of what you do, day in and day out.

Conclusion: Make every effort to be holy. Without holiness no one will see the Lord. But as we pursue holiness - many will see. Make it your ambition to please God. In every area of your life. Recall the three specific areas we have talked about this morning. 1. Sexual Purity 2. Relationships with other Christians 3. Work. Ask God to guide you toward greater holiness in each area.