

# PM 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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Preacher: Rev Jonathan Watson

[ 0 : 00 ] Thessalonica, and we're going to read from chapter 4, and we'll read from verses 1 to 8. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, and verses 1 to 8, that's on page 1188 of the Pew Bible.

So, finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you receive 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. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, 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, 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.

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.

Amen. May God bless this reading to the word. Let's pray for God's help as we... During my visits over the past few months, and it's been a few months since I was last here, so maybe you need to be a little reminded of what we were looking at on mainly Sunday evenings, and that is this letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

[ 2 : 40 ] We've seen how the gospel came to Thessalonica, and how the gospel produced a church of the living God in that city, where there had been no gospel witness in previous years.

But the Lord worked mightily through his word, and he brought many people to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, and a church was established.

Not long after the ministry of the Apostle Paul had begun, it had almost finished, and he had to leave Thessalonica, as we learn from Acts chapter 17, and it was perhaps about five years before he was able to visit again.

And in the meantime, he writes a letter to the church, this letter that we have before us. And in the next two sections of the letter, up to the end of chapter 3, Paul defends, first of all, his ministry, while he was in Thessalonica, from his detractors who were trying to slander him, and talk him down in his absence, in order to drive a wedge between the Christians in Thessalonica, and the man whom God used to establish that church.

If they could do that, they could probably also drive a wedge between Paul's teaching, Paul's gospel, and the church members themselves. So, in a way, the church was at stake, and Paul's not just defending himself because he's an egomaniac, but he's defending himself because he is so closely aligned to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[ 4 : 27 ] It is so closely aligned to the gospel that he often refers to it as my gospel. Not that he invented it, he received it as a revelation from God, as he makes clear in his letter to the Galatians, but he had so personally appropriated it, that you can't have one without the other.

Where you have the apostle Paul, you have the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is part of him, and essential to all that he taught and proclaimed.

And so he defends his ministry while he was in Thessalonica. In chapter 2, he paints this lovely picture of his ministry by using four word pictures.

He's a steward of the gospel. He's like a mother to these people. He's like a father to these people. And he's also a herald who proclaims the gospel.

The steward guards what has been entrusted to him. The herald preaches and proclaims the message that his king, his master has committed to him.

[ 5 : 38 ] And this gospel is preached and proclaimed and taught in such a sensitive and pastoral manner by a man who feels that these converts are like his own flesh and blood, his own children.

He's like a mother to them. He shows them great care and compassion and love and tenderness. He's also like a father who leaves no stone unturned to make sure that all their needs are provided for.

And they are trained and instructed in the truth of the gospel. And then in the second part of chapter 2 and into chapter 3, he defends his period of absence from the Thessalonians.

And we looked at about five different points that he makes in that section, which again highlight the tenderhearted nature of this pastor who was so deeply concerned for the welfare of these children of his, these spiritual children.

And you remember how he speaks about the great anxiety that he had when he heard no news. Were the Thessalonians still standing firm in the Lord and in the gospel?

[ 7 : 00 ] Or had the trials and tribulations and the persecutions and the opposition and the slanderous attacks on Paul hindered them in their Christian walk?

Oh, when he could bear it no longer, he sends Timothy to Thessalonica to minister to them, but also to find out for himself how they were doing.

And when he receives Timothy back from this ministry errand, he is overjoyed at the news that God's work is still going on amongst these Thessalonian believers.

And for him, it's almost like life is worth living again. I'm out of my suspense. I've heard this good news. These people are my joy and glory and crown of rejoicing.

So we come now to what is a new section of the letter. And you might be forgiven for thinking when you read at the beginning of chapter 4 the word finally, that the letter is about to close.

[ 8 : 19 ] But actually, Paul still has quite a bit more teaching to give to the Thessalonians, not least on the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we may look at next time I visit.

So the word finally really could be translated perhaps more accurately as simply, now then, brothers.

And Paul introduces the subject matter that he is deeply concerned about.

And I think he is probably deeply concerned about this because this must have been mentioned in Timothy's report of the state of affairs in Thessalonica.

Paul is concerned about the behavior of these Christian believers. This young church and a number of the believers within it are giving him cause for concern.

[ 9 : 34 ] Yes, Timothy's report brought back good news which rejoiced the heart of the apostle. But it also contained some not so good news.

And the not so good news was that there were problems in the church at Thessalonica.

Now what church doesn't have problems? Every church has problems. That's why the Lord provides elders, overseers.

That's why the Lord provides pastors. Because the church is far from perfect and it needs shepherds to look after the sheep and to encourage them, to admonish them, to instruct them, and to guide them in the ways of truth and righteousness.

And in chapter 5, verse 14, if you flick over to that chapter, I think there's a little clue in verse 14 as to the nature of the problems that were in the church in Thessalonica.

[ 10 : 53 ] where Paul speaks about admonishing the idle, encouraging the faint-hearted, and helping the weak.

And some commentators think that that is a little indication of the nature of the problems and difficulties. There were, if you like, three groups of people within the church who needed help.

The weak, the idle, or unruly, and the faint-hearted.

And if that is the case, then Paul begins his practical instructions as to how the church is to live in the world by, first of all, addressing the weak.

That's chapter 4, verses 3 to 8. Sexual temptation threatens the Christian at the level of one of the most basic and powerful of human urges.

[ 12 : 14 ] Would these young, immature believers find the strength to resist such temptations? Secondly, then, Paul focuses attention on the idle.

And you see that in chapter 4, verses 9 to 12. The word idle in our ESV translation renders a Greek word which was originally used to describe the attitude of an insubordinate soldier.

Someone who was insubordinate. Someone who was argumentative with the senior officers.

Someone who was rebellious of the commands handed down.

But by the time of the first century AD when Paul was writing this letter, the word was applied also to schoolboys who were playing truant and missing their classes.

And the apostle used the term to describe people in the church in Thessalonica who were basically absconding from their work. Perhaps because of a misunderstanding of the nature of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 13 : 31 ] if the Lord's return was that close at hand, why do we need to work? We should be concentrating on more pressing matters.

And so they were idle, absconding from work, not taking up their responsibilities and duties and being a burden on the others.

And then thirdly, Paul addressed himself to the faint hearted. this is a third group in the fellowship of the Thessalonian church who were concerned about their loved ones who had died.

And Paul takes this up in chapter 4 verses 13 to 18. And not only were these faint hearted believers concerned about their loved ones who had died, but they were also concerned about their own hopes for salvation.

And Paul takes up that aspect of the issue in chapter 5 and verses 1 to 11. Of course, the chapter divisions you have to remember are not original and divinely inspired.

[ 14 : 43 ] They were added sometime in the Middle Ages and as a help to divide up the scripture for memory purposes and study purposes.

but the teaching on the second coming with its two aspects of application would just run seamlessly through from chapter 4 verse 13 right into chapter 5 and verse 11 as one block of teaching in the original letter.

So, if we put these three areas of concern together, we have Christian teaching on sexual purity, Christian teaching on work ethic and Christian teaching on bereavement.

and I think we can see how important Paul's instruction was and still is today.

We modern Christians need to learn how to live for God in these areas of our lives every bit as much as the first century young converts did in far off ancient Thessalonica.

[ 16 : 08 ] These are still very pressing and important issues. But notice how the passage begins with what we might call a general word of exhortation in verses 1 and 2 where Paul says finally or now then brothers we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive 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.

So we begin then with these first two verses of chapter 4 in which you will notice just how bold and forthright the apostles language is.

Like a mother and a father as we've seen in previous studies he is deeply concerned for the welfare of these his spiritual children in the Lord and his deep desire is that his children should strive after excellence in their Christian lives.

I want you to notice the words that he uses here. He uses the term walk in verse 1. How you ought to walk.

And that's a common word in scripture to describe the Christian life. The Christian life is a walk. It's a walk.

[ 17 : 52 ] And that is a word that involves progress. Progress. A Christian in other words is not someone who stands still.

A Christian is someone who goes forward. He she is walking with the Lord. And as we listen to Paul's general exhortation in these opening two verses and as we think about this phrase how you ought to walk the question we need to ask ourselves is am I making progress in my Christian life? Am I going places with the Lord? Am I walking in the right direction? And Paul's pastoral concern comes through in the words that he uses.

I think these are very pastorally sensitive words but they carry great personal power with them. He speaks about asking and urging the Thessalonian believers to do certain things and to refrain from doing certain things.

I ask we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus these are words of pleading it's almost as if he's on his knees with these people pleading with them exhorting them with regard to their behavior but the apostle doesn't leave it at that.

[ 19 : 47 ] Look at the other words he uses in this passage. He uses the word instructions which could also be translated as some other versions render it as commandments.

The word translates a word in the Greek doesn't often occur in the New Testament. It's a word with a decidedly military feel to it.

It really speaks of orders handed down by those in authority. In this case by the one in the highest authority the Lord Jesus Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords because it was through the Lord Jesus you notice that these instructions or commands were given to the Thessalonian believers. See how Paul weaves this together. We ask and urge that's the pastorally sensitive bit. he's not coming down on them from on high as it were but he's on his knees pleading with them but it's in the Lord Jesus he's doing it.

In other words his instructions are not coming from a man who has his own ideas about how people ought to live their lives but his instructions his urging his asking his pleading his exhortations are coming from the Lord Jesus Christ himself the Lord Jesus doesn't only teach us what to believe the Lord Jesus also pinpoints sometimes in very specific terms how we ought to live and he has the authority to reach into the very most intimate parts of our lives and he has the authority to say this pleases me but this displeases me continue to do this more and more as Paul says here but with regard to this aspect of behavior you've got to stop it you must abstain from it it must not be part of your life as a

[ 22 : 28 ] Christian so both the teaching on the doctrine of the gospel and the application of that gospel doctrine is to be delivered in the way Paul delivers this teaching with pastoral sensitivity on the one hand but also with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ I think that's very important for us to underscore especially in the times in which we live where the authorities often want to overreach their power and reach into the church and say to us you cannot preach this you cannot teach that you cannot forbid this behavior or condemn this lifestyle and they think that they can do this kind of thing because the message that we proclaim is just on the human level that it just has the authority of men or of tradition but we've got to tell the authorities this is not the word or instruction of men this comes from heaven from our maker and our redeemer who will also be our judge and it's like what the apostles said to the authorities and the acts of the apostles you judge for yourselves is it right to obey

God or is it right to obey men we will obey God whatever the consequences so before we move on to consider the specifics of the teaching the apostle gives I want you to notice this most important phrase in verse 1 how you ought to walk and to please God we should live our Christian lives with this great aim and view to please God to please God because that is the crux that is the central and key thing to grasp because this simple little phrase how to please God walk in such a way as to please God clarifies everything it removes the confusion it clarifies our vision it clears up any confusion how are we to live live to please

God live to please God so if you're asked how should a Christian live what will your answer be don't answer by giving a detailed list of rules and regulations that try to cover every aspect of life's complexity but remember this little phrase this is the heart of the matter live to please God reminds me of what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 8 to 10 where he says at one time you were darkness but now you are light in the Lord walk as children of light for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true and try to discern what is pleasing to the

Lord try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord walk as children of light for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true is it good is it right is it true these questions will help us to discern what is pleasing to the Lord and of course we don't ask those questions in a vacuum we ask them with the knowledge of the scripture behind us now doesn't that bring clarity isn't that in a sense wonderfully straightforward and almost liberating whatever the circumstances whatever the situation the child of God falls on his knees and says father will this please you while simple and straightforward it's also profoundly challenging isn't it for we know what human nature is like and the temptation is always to make our own satisfaction our number one priority and goal but the apostle Paul asks and urges and instructs us with all the authority of the Lord

Jesus Christ to look beyond our own needs to look beyond our own urges to look beyond our own pleasures and to ask will God take pleasure and joy in the thing that I'm about to do so I think it's important before we go into the detail now to remember this general word of exhortation in verses one and two walk in a manner that pleases God let's move on then to the apostles instructions for the week which we read of in verses 3 to 8 of chapter 4 verse 3 begins his address to the week with a general statement what does please God well here's the answer to that question and it couldn't be plainer the sanctification of his people that's what pleases

[ 29 : 28 ] God this is the will of God your sanctification sanctification isn't an optional extra which you can choose to have or not to have when you're converted to the Lord Jesus Christ no sanctification is absolutely integral to what it means to be saved because it is God's will and God's purpose to save us from sin in every shape and form that it takes it is God's will to save us from the penalty of sin it's God's will to save us from the pollution of sin it's God's will to save us from the power of sin and one day God will save us from its very presence now the word sanctification is derived from a

Latin word which means basically holy holy and so to sanctify someone is to make that person holy and according to the teaching of the New Testament sanctification is accomplished in two ways first of all sanctification describes what takes place when God transfers a person out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of his own dear son Colossians 1 verse 13 and in that sense every believer without exception however weak and feeble they may be has been sanctified because they've been taken out of the kingdom of darkness and they've been put into the kingdom of light the kingdom of his own dear son and in that sense they've been set apart they have been made holy definitively God has been pleased in his sovereign love and grace to pluck us out of the vast sea of humanity and set us apart for his own use and purposes that the safe person now belongs to a new category of people once he was a sinner now he is a saint and a saint is simply one of God's set apart ones one of

God's holy people but secondly sanctification also refers to the process by which the Christian cooperates with the Holy Spirit to grow in Christ likeness and it is this second meaning that Paul has in mind when he writes to the Thessalonians here he wants them to understand that God actively desires and works towards the spiritual progress of his people and that's the challenge that faces us too today we must not allow ourselves to get stuck or to stagnate in our Christian living or in our sanctification we must daily strive to reach new levels of devotion new levels of obedience new levels of usefulness in the service of our

Lord Jesus Christ I was struck as we sang the last verse of our final hymn this morning oh that my soul could love and praise him more his beauty's trace his majesty adore live near his heart upon his bosom lean and then the last line obey his voice and all his will esteem that's progress isn't it that's the kind of growth and grace that's the kind of sanctification that the apostle would want to see not only in the lives of these Thessalonians but in the lives of every Christian believer and now Paul wanted to see this sanctification process at work in a particular area of

Christian character which was causing concern in the Thessalonian church and that is the area of sexual morality now in the first century and in the 21st century real Christianity will often set a person at odds with the society in which they live they're in the world but they're not of the world and the world should see that just as much as the Christian should be aware of it as well and I want you to think of what it must have been like to have been a new convert to Christ living in a city like Thessalonica in the first century AD think of how steeped the city was in the pagan culture of ancient Greece notice the couple of phrases in

[ 35 : 25 ] Paul's instructions here in chapter 4 which I think gives us a hint as to what things must have been like in verse 3 he commands the Christian to abstain from sexual immorality why did he need to command that well I think there's a hint there that the society in which they were living was so characterized by this kind of thing sexual immorality was the norm in that society in those days but the Christian was to be different abstain from sexual immorality and then look at the phrase he uses in verse 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God you are not someone in that category anymore because you do know

God they live in the passion of lust because they don't know God but you do know God and the God that you know will not let you live in that lifestyle anymore and then look at verse 7 he says God has not called us for impurity they were living in a sea of impurity as far as society was concerned but God had called them not for impurity but for purity and holiness from other sources we can understand better the situation in which the first generation of Christians in places like Thessalonica had to live in Paul's teaching in 1st Thessalonians 4 verses 1 to 8 would have sounded very strange and foreign to the ears of a first century Greek because in these verses the apostle emphasizes that there is only one context for the expression of human sexuality and that is the union of one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant of friendship known as marriage but the idea that a man should limit himself to his own wife would have seemed far too narrow and restrictive to the first century

Greek pagan salvation in the Greek and Roman world of that day it would have been argued that it was not realistic to restrain a man and keep him to one partner that was more than flesh and blood could endure and besides there were many avenues open for a man to have extra marital sexual relationships for example a man in those days didn't marry for companionship but to provide a mother for his legitimate children and to have a manager for his own home there was absolutely no stigma attached to taking a mistress for stimulating companionship as much as for sexual gratification and as for more casual encounters the possibilities were almost endless in the society of those days it wasn't difficult to take advantage of female household slaves and there were always harlots on hand as well indeed prostitution and religion often went hand in hand fornication with prostitutes who were on the staff of many temples was part and parcel of the ritual demanded by certain cults religions and religions of the period and to add to this awful picture and how relevant this is to today homosexual relationships were tolerated and often approved of and even applauded now over against all of this the apostle

Paul taught a high view of marriage a wife was not a mere domestic skivvy nor was she there for the purpose of domestic breeding she is a friend she is a companion and therefore she deserves love and commitment and loyalty now I don't need to tell you that 21st century Britain bears a remarkable resemblance to the ancient world of Thessalonica and other such places mentioned in the New Testament the Christian is called to live by the biblical ideal in a climate where sexual experimentation before marriage is almost regarded as a legitimate activity of our teenagers today and where extramarital affairs instead of being condemned outright as the betrayal of a sacred promise and vow are regarded as permissible a permissible outlet for those trapped in an unfulfilling marriage and then we have the aggressive and confident gay lobby who have successfully argued its case and has gained widespread public acceptance for its belief that stable homosexual relationships should have equal status with conventional heterosexual marriage so we need to be clear about the teaching of the word of God in this area

God's will is for our sanctification and that reaches into the area of sexual morality and what does that mean for us it means that we insist that the only God given context for sexual activity is marriage what are the ramifications of that heterosexual relations before marriage which is fornication or outside of marriage which is adultery and any kind of homosexual activity are forbidden by God in his word look at what Paul teaches here now I'm taking the marginal reading of verse 4 you'll notice that maybe in the footnote of your

[ 42 : 52 ] ESV as the true proper rendering of Paul's instruction here I think it should read that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honour now some commentators have argued that the word in the original which literally translated as vessel refers not to a man's wife but to his own body and that's why we've got in the text of the ESV the rendering that each one of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honour but I think it's more accurate to understand this difficult sentence in the Greek as meaning that each one of you know how to take how to possess or take or acquire a wife for himself in holiness and honour but in a sense either way the argument still stands holiness honourable behaviour but I think the marginal reading makes more sense in the context so this is the first point in Paul's instruction to the young

Christians in Thessalonica who've been converted you remember out of a pagan background sexual relations are only legitimate in the eyes of God within the context of a marriage between one man isn't it terrible we have to spell this out today but a marriage between one man and one woman let's move on to the next point in Paul's teaching here the Lord through his apostle has also something to say about the nature of sexual conduct within marriage because the marriage relationship is not some kind of legalised sexual free for all and notice what the apostle Paul says here about it in verse 4 honour honour this concept is placed in stark contrast to the phrase the passion of lust the acquiring or taking of a wife to oneself must be done in honour not in the passion of lust in other words a husband or wife is more than a tool for sexual gratification

I don't need to tell you that the tabloid newspapers speak of sexploitation and how sad a thing it is that such behaviour takes place within the homes of married couples it's also a terrible fact that the police estimate that the overwhelming majority of rapes take place within marriage within the domestic home now the Christian view of sexual love is that kind of love that is characterised by passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 verses 4 to 7 which shows us that love is patient and kind love does not envy or boast it's not arrogant or rude it does not insist on its own way it's not irritable or resentful it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth love bears all things believes

all things hopes all things endures all things that's the kind of love that should mark and characterise the sexual relationship within the marriage and then notice also that there is more to adultery than just the physical act

Paul uses terms in this passage like transgress and wrong see what he says there in verse 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 these words transgress and wrong his brother or sister remind us that such considerations as the betrayal of one's own partner and the theft of another's partner come into play when adultery takes place and in one sense the sex as it were is almost incidental because adultery in the first place in the primary place is about broken promises and about a ruthless self assertion we need to remember this don't we when temptation comes our way that an adulterer is a cheat if only we would remember what we are told here and take these things on board the Lord is an avenger in all these things what terrible terrifying words those are that the

Lord will avenge the pollution of the sacred marriage bed think of Hebrews 13 4 let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous so let's gather the threads of this passage together and try to sum up the apostles teaching here in 1st Thessalonians 4 1 to 8 what are the lessons we can take away I've jotted down a few first of all let's keep the general exhortation at the very forefront of our minds that general exhortation with regard to all aspects of sanctification temptation let us walk let us walk as to please God let that be your prayer Lord I want to walk to please you and let that be the question that comes into your mind when you're confronted by temptation or with a difficult choice or whatever it is will this please my father in heaven and then secondly

[ 50 : 07 ] I think we can draw from this passage that we've got to train ourselves to think christianly not worldly but christianly no longer think like those who do not know God their thoughts are crazy their thoughts lead to darkness to sin to judgment to hell but we're children of light children of knowledge enlightened in the things of God we know God we know his law we know what's in keeping with his law we've been given the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ where he takes the law of God and he expounds it in a spiritual manner and he's given us the tools to do that with other aspects of

Old Testament moral law so let us think shaped by this kind of teaching and I think it's worth pointing out that the battle against sin is lost first and foremost in the mind so let the truth of the gospel guard your mind let it shape your thinking in this as in all other areas of Christian behavior and then third point and this is so basic to the passage we must abstain from sexual immorality and the passions of lust don't even think about them I remember hearing Sinclair Ferguson preach on one occasion and he gave this wonderful illustration of being given a lift by one of the students at Westminster

Seminary in Philadelphia who lived in New York and was a New Yorker and do you know what New Yorkers are like a bit rough and brash and not sure if Sinclair regretted getting a lift into the city from this local from this native but one of the features of the car ride was the driver this New Yorker would keep a very short distance to the car in front and if any car from the left or the right tried to get into that space his reaction was twofold as he put his foot to the floor to speed up and close the gap he would say don't even think about it don't even think about it and as a result of course the car couldn't get into that space and Sinclair's application was do that with regard to temptation when it comes put the foot down accelerate close the gap say don't even think about it abstain from sexual immorality don't even think about it and instead instead control or develop self-control by the power of the Holy

Spirit and remember self-control is one of the ninefold fruit of the Spirit it's what the Spirit delights to produce in the life of the believer love, joy, peace patience, kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness and self-control and then in the fourth place pray for your own sanctification and do so with the confidence isn't this great sometimes we don't know what to pray for but that's not the case with sanctification because we're told in black and white this is the will of God for you even your sanctification so pray with confidence to God and your prayers will be answered and then fifthly lastly develop and put into practice living in holiness and honour remember this is a command of God the God who gives his Holy Spirit to you he's not asking you to do things in your own strength in which you will fail miserably but you notice what he says there in verse 8 therefore whoever disregards this disregards not man but God who gives the Holy Spirit to you what a word of

encouragement in such a strong and forthright passage dealing with matters of great sensitivity yes and things that are very personal and private but but this is the teaching of God who gives his Holy Spirit to you so that you may obey it and put it into practice may God bless this portion of his word to us and keep us as a church as well as individuals on the right track maintaining a biblical holiness in every area of Christian living and behaviour

[ 56 : 21 ] Amen out of Jesus in every another virgin Harry