

Called to Holiness

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[0 : 00] You may like to have open the Bibles at the second reading, page 960 in the Bibles, page 960 to 1 Thessalonians 4.

This is the third of our five sermons on the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. And I'll pray for us before we begin to look at these words.

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee, mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Well, if there's one word that encapsulates the theme of our age, it might well be this.

Indulgence. We're urged to indulge. The advertisements on TV and magazines, the encouragement of our society in general, is to indulge ourselves.

[1 : 00] Indulge ourselves in eating, in food, in fine dining, in wines. To indulge ourselves with luxuries, luxury cars, luxury cosmetics.

To indulge ourselves with travel and holidays. To indulge ourselves in relationships. And our society tends to think, I think, that personal fulfilment is found in indulgence that brings satisfaction and happiness, so they say.

And perhaps nowhere more evident is that, or at least in two main areas, is in sexual relationships and in work. Now, I don't think there's anything new here. The theme of indulgence, some might think is brand new in our society, but it's actually an old theme.

The secularists and the liberals of our age boast that our society is moving on and we've arrived at the time where indulgence is possible and ought to be followed and pursued.

But in fact, it's a regression, not a progression. More and more, we're becoming like the ancient Greco-Roman society of 2,000 years ago. More and more, the theme of our age is actually just a mirror image of what it was like 2,000 years ago in the times of the New Testament.

[2 : 19] Luxury, idleness, sensuality, libertinism, indulgence. Yes, that's our age. But it's also the age of the New Testament as well.

Whether it's then or now, being a Christian in such a society is a challenge. In a society where there is the indulgence sexually, for example, that's the norm, being a Christian stands out.

I'm marrying a couple just before Christmas, a couple who are Christians, and she is from Korea, he's originally from China, and she's applying for permanent residency on the basis of being married.

It's much easier for her to do that if they'd live together. But given that they've not lived together because they're Christians, it actually becomes harder to give the evidence that the government looks for that their relationship is serious and long-lasting.

Now, that's just one example. But our society is full of examples whereby the sexual liberty of our age, like the ancient Greco-Roman world, is so evident, the Christian behaviour becomes almost odd in the eyes of our society.

[3 : 34] And on the issue of work, although it seems that people work very hard, there is also an element of laziness that abounds, can infiltrate our own thinking as well.

Sloth and lust used to be two of the seven deadly sins, but now there's some things that people almost boast about these days. They're the boasts of an indulgent era.

In the short time that he was in Thessalonica, in 50 AD, Paul, it seems, taught quite substantially about the Christian life and the gospel. Though he may have been there just as short as three weeks, but maybe two or three months at the most, we might think that Paul really taught just the basics of becoming a Christian.

But it's evident, at least in these verses, that Paul had taught far more than that. Far more about the Christian ethical life, behaviour, character, godliness, holiness, and so on.

For what he teaches in these verses of chapter 4 is really reiterating what he's already told them in the short time that he was with them. It wasn't simply a matter of the very basics of the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus to bring you forgiveness by grace, full stop, that's all I've got time to do in the few weeks that I'm here.

[4 : 49] But rather we find through these verses of chapter 4, time and again Paul's saying about the ethics that he's teaching here, you've already learned it from us. In verse 1, as you learn from us.

In verse 2, you know what instructions we gave you. In verse 6, just as we've already told you. In verse 9, you yourselves have been taught by God, which at least in part probably refers to Paul's preaching to them.

And indeed, we saw last week briefly at chapter 2, verse 12, that Paul had already urged and pleaded with them that they lead a life worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. Now Paul in writing here about their ethical behaviour is not fundamentally rebuking them. Unlike in some others of his letters, he's not saying this is what God demands, but you're totally failing to live up to the standard.

Rather, here we've seen already in the letter that he's commended their faith and love. Back in chapter 1, verse 3, their work of faith, their labour of love and steadfastness of hope.

[5 : 57] Chapter 3, verse 6, he also commends again the news of their faith and love. But what he's looking for is more and more. Twice that expression occurs in these verses.

In verse 1 at the end, he says, you should do so more and more. That is the pursuit of holiness and pleasing God. More and more, he says. Yes, you're doing it to some extent, and that's great, and I commend you for it, and I give thanks to God for that, but more and more.

And then in verse 10 at the end of that verse, the same thing, we urge you to do so more and more. That is love for each other and love for people in general. Yes, he commends their love, but he says more and more.

Because the Christian life is a life of progress. It's a life of growing more like Christ, more like God, growing in godliness, and growing in holiness, being evidenced by more and more pleasing God and more and more loving each other.

So Paul, in writing these words, is not fundamentally chastising them, but rather encouraging them more and more to give evidence of holiness in their character and in their behaviour.

[7 : 11] The way Paul describes the Christian life at the beginning of this section is it's to be a life pleasing to God. In verse 1, he says, finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you learn from us how you ought to live and to please God, as in fact you are doing, you should do so more and more.

Now, there's a fundamental obligation here. He says, as you ought to live and please God. As you must live and please God. It's obligatory.

This is not an optional extra for the super-Christians or the mature Christians. This is for every believer, including the new junior Christians, we might say, of Thessalonians.

They are to please God. It's obligatory for all Christians. We can't opt out of this. It's not an optional extra. And notice then how the expression pleasing God sums up the Christian life.

Sometimes we think of the rules of God as being, I've got to obey this law, I've got to obey that law, and so on. But fundamentally, it's not so much obedience to laws, though that's part of it.

[8 : 26] It's pleasing the lawgiver. That is foundational to Christian behaviour and character and ethics is relationship with God. That is, we know God and we seek to please Him.

We seek to please Him above pleasing ourselves. We seek to please Him above pleasing others. Christian ethics, behaviour and character is relational. It's from a relationship of God that's been established by grace through Christ that we now come to relate to God by seeking to please Him above all others.

In contrast to the pagans, the non-Christians, or the Gentiles, as they're called in verse 5, who do not know God. It's only Christians who know God. Our knowledge of God comes to us through the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We come into a relationship reconciled with God through those saving events of Christ. Now we know God, we are to seek to please Him in our lives.

And what pleases God most is holiness. Verse 3 says this, this is the will of God, your sanctification.

[9 : 42] Well, the word sanctification there is perhaps it's related to the word holiness, although it comes out differently in English. But it's the process that leads to the result of holiness, we might say.

That's God's will for us. That we are morally and perfectly holy as a result of a progress towards that holiness in the Christian life.

That's God's will for us. That's why He saves us. He saves us so that we may be holy on the day of Christ when Christ returns and thus give God all glory and honour.

Literally, holy is to be set apart for something. We strictly call this the holy table. It's certainly not an altar, but it's a holy table. It's not holy because the wood comes from Jerusalem or something like that.

It's holy because it's set apart for a particular purpose in the service of God for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Holiness is being set apart. But because God is morally holy and perfect Himself, being set apart as believers to God carries with it a moral component or obligation.

[10 : 53] If we're set apart for God, then it will mean that we live moral lives reflecting the character of God's own morality and perfection. Paul elaborates on this will of God to be holy in two general areas.

One is sexual practice and the other is mutual love but reflected in particular in the way we work. And that's at least in the verses before us today from chapter 4 verses 3 to 12.

On the issue of sexual practice, Paul makes three commands in effect. At the end of verse 3, firstly he says, that you abstain from fornication.

Fornication is simply sexual immorality, any illicit sexual activity. That is sexual activity outside the confines of marriage in effect. It's a fairly general term.

To abstain from it is to refrain from it absolutely. It's not to indulge in it in moderation but rather not at all. It's a high standard indeed.

[12 : 01] And it's a striking command in the ancient Greek world. Sexual liberty there was a boast and a norm in their society. A man may well have a wife who looked after his house and children but he would often have access to prostitutes, a concubine, a mistress or whatever.

And that was known, it was tolerated, it was almost approved in their society. It was the norm. And indeed of the ancient Greek world, Corinth where Paul is writing from and Thessalonica where he's writing to were both apparently notorious places for such sexual promiscuity.

Extramarital sexual activity then was unashamedly common. A bit like today. A bit like today where periodically we hear of famous people, politicians, sports stars and others who are sexually liberal in their practice sometimes get caught out, rarely are really repentant of it but somehow turn it into an aspect of pride.

I often hear people saying things like the church is only ever on about sex these days. That's the thing that the church is always fighting about. Why isn't it even fighting about something more important?

One of our senior bishops in Australia has recently said that not because he thinks the issue of sex is important we should get it right so much as he thinks doesn't really matter, let's ignore that issue.

[13 : 33] But the Bible often places sexual activity at the forefront of ethical practice and codes of behaviour both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Jesus said words about sexual activity, Paul says words about sexual activity, the Old Testament does the same.

We're dealing here with a serious matter, we're not dealing here with an incidental matter. This is not an issue of secondary importance really, it's of primary importance. It's the issue that's actually probably tearing the Anglican Church communion in the world apart.

If you ever read that sort of stuff which is not particularly edifying, the Anglican Church in the United States is, well, there's huge pressures to actually in effect excommunicate it from the Anglican communion worldwide because of its extremely liberal promotion of all sorts of other sexual practices outside of sexual activity in marriage.

And the same sort of thing even in our own area. In my reckoning, the key issue that brought about the hostility and division in the process leading up to the election of an Archbishop of Melbourne was actually sexual practice, or at least what is promoted or allowed or condoned or prohibited depending on who the candidate is.

I reckon the undercurrents in all the board meetings that I was part of not wanting to break confidentiality, but also in the Synod, that's the undercurrent, that's the real issue actually that's causing the division it seems to me in the Anglican Church in Melbourne.

[15 : 08] I don't think we can escape from the importance of right sexual practice as important and essential for Christian holiness. It's why Paul addresses the issue here like in so many other places in the Bible.

That's the first part of the sexual practice. Paul says abstain from fornication or sexual immorality. The second thing and just building on that point in effect he says then in verse 4 that each one of you must know how to control your own body in holiness and honour.

If we are to abstain from sexual fornication then we need self-control to control our body in holiness and honour in the way we relate to people and in the restraints we exercise. Now the control of our body is a mark of holiness.

Paul contrasts this expectation for Christians with the practice of the pagans. He says in verse 5 not with lustful passions like the Gentiles who do not know God.

Lustful passions there are something that somebody has surrendered to. They are dominating or controlling the person, the pagan. Paul says instead we are to control our bodies in holiness and honour.

[16 : 25] But of course as fallen human beings despite being saved we don't have within us the resources of our own strength to control our bodies.

But remember that the gift of God's spirit which Paul refers to later on in verse 8 includes the fruit of self-control amongst the fruit of the spirit that are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

So Paul here in saying that we are to control our own bodies and having prayed at the end of chapter 3 for God to strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonians he's alluding here to the strength that God gives us by his spirit to exercise self-control and in sexual practice in particular in this example here.

The pagans the Gentiles as they're called the non-Christians of verse 5 the explanation for them succumbing so readily to lustful passions is that they don't know God.

The contrast is that we know God because we're believers and therefore in a relationship with God we must under obligation exercise self-control but reliant on the strength that God gives us by his spirit to do so.

[17 : 45] The explanation for the Gentiles not knowing God is not an excuse they are without excuse for succumbing so readily to lustful passions. It's the explanation but not the excuse.

We have no excuse if we fail to live up to these standards of God. The third part of the command is in verse 6 that you do not wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter.

To wrong someone here is to go beyond the bounds the boundaries so it's to engage in sexual activity outside that which is legitimate or legal in God's law that is outside marriage.

To exploit someone is to take advantage of them the word's got the sense of greed or avarice about it that you're greedy for somebody else's spouse is presumably the context of wronging or exploiting a brother or sister in this matter.

In particular Paul is saying we must not have sexual immorality within the fellowship of God's people. They're the three parts of this charge.

[18 : 54] Abstain from fornication verse 3 control your own body verse 4 and don't wrong or exploit a brother or sister in verse 6. Paul finishes this little section on sexual activity and ethics with some theological statements at the end of verse 6 through to the end of verse 8.

Firstly he says in verse 6 that the Lord that is Jesus is an avenger in all these things. An avenger here is a rare word it only occurs once else in the New Testament but it's got the sense of the judge at a trial.

It's not somebody who's maliciously avenging somebody but somebody who's uprightly doing that by way of exercising judgment and punishment. Jesus is coming to be the judge that's the context and indeed next week we'll see the focus on the second coming of Jesus very clearly.

Paul is saying here yes the Lord is coming the Lord Jesus is coming he's coming to be the judge and he will judge these matters and the fact that he will judge these matters or these things as verse 6 says reminds us that there is no secret before the Lord who sees all and knows all including our hearts.

It may be that some of this sort of activity is done secretly out of the eyes of other people but it's never out of the eyes of God or the Lord Jesus who is the judge. So the coming judgment that Jesus brings is to be a serious motivation to us to live holy lives now.

[20 : 20] We won't be perfect now until the day when he finally comes and we're taken to heaven but before then the coming judgment of Jesus is to be a significant motivation and spur to us to live holy lives.

Secondly, verse 7 says God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Earlier on we saw in verse 3 that the will of God for us is holiness. His call to us we're now told in verse 7 is holiness not impurity. And at the end of verse 8 he gives us his holy spirit to help strengthen us to be holy as well. Holiness is what God has saved us for.

He doesn't save us so that we continue living the life that we lived as pagans and unbelievers. He saves us by his mercy and grace in Christ so that we live holy lives reflecting the character and standards of God himself.

That's what he saved us for. Therefore, now, more and more are we to live holy lives reflecting that. So holiness is not an optional extra.

[21 : 25] it's called of us by God he saves us for that. So if we appreciate his grace and mercy properly we will strive more and more to live holy lives.

And then finally in this little section Paul says in verse 8 whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God who also gives his holy spirit to you.

Paul's words here in verse 8 strike me as being astonishingly foresighted. Paul is saying and perhaps to try and refute the opponents of the Thessalonian Christians we saw the last two weeks that they are under opposition and persecution from people in Thessalonica who force Paul to leave the city.

Paul is saying reminding the Thessalonians these are not just my words they are God's words. It is God's authority. If you reject these ethical standards you're not rejecting me but God.

And I say that these are very strikingly foresighted words because what I hear from the sort of liberal end of the church or even the non-believing part of our society is it's only Paul it's only Paul who goes on about all this sort of ethical standards.

[22 : 46] We've moved on over the last 2,000 years. It's only Paul. They think they're rejecting human authority but actually it's a rejection of God's authority and we must never forget that.

Indeed in several places in this letter Paul is in effect equating as he has taught the gospel and its implications to the Thessalonians that they've been taught by God. That's indeed what we saw back in verse 1 I think it is.

And in other verses in this passage as well as in this letter. So that's the first area that Paul deals with under the general heading of holiness or pleasing God.

The second one begins from verse 9. Its context is love of brothers and sisters. Perhaps he flows into this out of talking about sexual practice now to actually correct that and say what true and proper love is.

In these verses he commends the Thessalonians for their mutual love. Concerning love of the brothers and sisters literally the word is Philadelphia you do not need to have anyone write to you for you yourselves have been taught by God that is probably including Paul's teaching to love one another.

[24 : 07] And so he says in verse 10 and indeed you do love all the brothers and the sisters throughout Macedonia. He uses a different word for love there agape which is an even stronger word for love but in effect there's not a significant difference between the two I suspect in these two verses.

Paul is saying that real love Christian love love of your brothers and sisters is what we are obliged to do as Christian believers not the sort of illicit sexual activity that's far from love but rather this is proper love in verses 9 and 10.

But then he does seem to suggest there are some concerns he has for the Thessalonian behaviour in verse 11. Three things he mentions there. The general context is love of your brothers and sisters.

The three things are aspire to live quietly. Well that sounds very attractive some days let me say. I don't think Paul has in mind a sort of rocking chair in front of a wood fire and an endless stream of crime fiction to read.

Although that's part of the dream. Living quietly probably comes in the context of people who are perhaps building up a feverish anticipation of the Lord's return.

[25 : 18] That certainly seems to be part of the Thessalonian thinking. Paul will address that issue as we'll see next week in the verses that follow. So maybe he's saying hey calm down a bit.

Live quietly. Don't sort of get so feverish that Jesus is about to return. Yes he's coming soon but keep on living your normal life. The second part of verse 11 is to mind your own affairs.

Now remember the context is commending their love of each other. So Paul is not saying separate yourselves from everybody and just sort of live a quiet life, shut your front door, have nothing to do with anyone.

That's not what he's talking about. He's talking about yes love each other properly and deeply but also mind your own affairs. Don't confuse your love for each other with meddling in other people's business, with gossiping about them, with being a busy body and so on.

That seems to be something that the Thessalonians fell into in the second letter of Paul to the Thessalonians which is written not all that long later. He mentions in the last chapter of that letter that we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busy bodies and not doing any work.

[26 : 29] So maybe here there's an early concern about that matter as he says in verse 11 here, mind your own affairs and then later on he hears that some of them are actually real busy bodies.

They're idle. They've got nothing better to do than intervene in other people's lives. Yes we are to be interacting rightly with each other, loving each other deeply.

That will mean an interaction and a fellowship and an involvement in each other's lives but not a meddling in other people's affairs as busy bodies. And the third thing of this verse is to work with your hands.

Now he's not there saying that manual labour compared to white collar working is better or something like that. He's saying work, don't be idle. And again there's a hint of what you find explicit in the second Thessalonian letter.

That is that there are people who are idle and lazy. Paul is saying you are to work with your hands, you are to earn a job, you are not to be dependent on anyone as the end of verse 12, the next verse says.

[27 : 32] That is that you are responsible to look after yourself and that is an act of love for your brothers and sisters. That is we're not to presume upon the generosity of our fellow Christians because we're too lazy to get a proper job.

We're actually to labour so that we're independent but also if love is part of this context there will be a sense of ultimately and rightly generosity that out of what we in a sense earn for ourselves we generously give for the sake of others worse off as well.

So they're the hints of concern in verse 11 that if we properly love one another then we'll live a quiet life then we will mind our own affairs and we will work with our hands.

In that also we will set a good example to outsiders as verse 12 says as part of the motivation.

Remember that the Thessalonian Christians were under attack and opposition and persecution. some of them may have been ridiculed by their opponents as you're just lazy you're just sitting back waiting for the Lord to come you're not working what sort of example is that? Paul says a fair charge actually he says work and don't just be lazy.

[28 : 46] Now often laziness it seems comes under the cloak of all sorts of different excuses. We can say that we're too busy or that we've got enough money or somebody else will provide for us or the government will look after me or something like that.

Paul says don't con yourself with such excuses. Some people might be lazy because they don't actually like their job. But Paul says yes work is a chore.

The Bible makes that clear. Work is going to be hard. It will be by the sweat of our brow since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Work is not easy but we're still called to work. It's an expression of our love for our brothers and sisters.

And it's also an example for our world as well. That we of all people must not be lazy. That we of all people as believers in the Lord Jesus and knowing God must work.

At the end of chapter 3 Paul prayed for the Thessalonians and what he prayed for is actually in effect what he's elaborated on in a command to them here.

[29 : 52] they go together. At the end of chapter 3 Paul prayed that the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

If he'd left it there you could misinterpret that as though well okay we Thessalonians we're just going to sit down and we're waiting for the Lord to come upon us to make us love each other more and more. But not so.

The commands of this chapter go with the prayer of chapter 3. Paul prays that the Lord will make you love each other more and more therefore love one another more and more is in effect what he's saying.

The same for the last verse of chapter 3. May God so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Again Paul doesn't give any hint that they're to sit back and just wait for some supernatural strengthening in their hearts. I pray that God will strengthen your hearts so live holy lives more and more.

[30 : 54] The commands go with the prayer. But when we put them together we realise that yes we are to expend the effort to be pleasing God more and more, loving more and more, being holy more and more, but it's God who will strengthen our hearts to do that.

And also that prayer that God will strengthen the hearts reminds us that holiness is not a charade, it's not a pretense, it's something that flows from within. It's not simply a matter of some external behaviours that we can put up and con people with, it's a come from our heart.

And because we know that the Lord Jesus is coming as the avenger of these things, the judge of all these things, he knows our hearts. We can't pretend before God's eyes that we're holy when we're not.

There's a trend these days to wear little bracelets for Christians that have on them the letters WWJD. What would Jesus do?

That's not a bad thing. It's a prompt to good Christian behaviour, I suspect. I think it's weak because of the uniqueness of Jesus. I mean, what would Jesus do? Well, sometimes he might do a miracle. Well, I'm not sure that that's necessarily the example for us there, to pick a trivial case.

[32 : 11] But I wonder sometimes if WWPG might be better. WWPG.

You see, this passage is driving us from our hearts more and more to be holy, more and more to strive to be like Christ, more and more to be pleasing God, more and more to be holy and godly.

And so we've got to ask ourselves more and more, what would please God? Let's pray. O God, for as much as without thee we are not able to please thee, mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.