

Called To Be Holy

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[0 : 0 0] 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.

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 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. We've reached a significant turning point in Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. He is moving here from his desire for the Thessalonians to continue in the faith to now focusing in on specific instructions for continuing in obedience.

So for the first three chapters, he's really zeroed in on his desire for them to stay faithful, to persevere in the gospel. And now that Timothy has returned with his report and their faith in the gospel and their perseverance in the gospel has been confirmed, Paul now transitions to speak of a different type of continuance.

[1 : 5 1] He speaks of how they must continue in obedience to the Lord. And those two ideas are intentionally ordered in the letter. They're also necessarily linked, which is made clear in the opening words of verse one.

Paul says, Finally then, brothers. Finally, not being an indication that he's closing the letter, but that he's drawing some conclusions based on everything that he has just said.

Finally then, brothers. And he moves on with his instruction. And Paul's instructions and teaching from here to the end of the letter are based on their understanding of and belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And this is an essential pattern that we actually find in the New Testament. Paul speaks to them in this passage as speaking to those who have received salvation, not as if they are those he hopes will receive salvation.

And that is a necessary structure for us to pay attention to. If you're not a Christian today, I'm glad that you're here, but I don't want you to misunderstand this text since we're parachuting in to a portion of the letter.

[3 : 1 4] And you may not be aware of what he's just said before. Please don't take the instruction of Paul in these eight verses as the means of becoming a Christian.

That's not what this is. No, obedience doesn't create a Christian. It reveals one. And to become a Christian, you must trust in Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness and life.

And truly, you must understand your sin before God and the judgment against you as a result of your rebellion against him and turning from that sin to faith in Christ.

But I don't want you to come to this text and this focus we have on Christian instruction. I don't want you to come to it and think that, well, if I just live with the kind of morality that Paul mentions here, then that is the thing that will make me acceptable to God and earn me eternal salvation.

That's not true. And that's not the point that Paul is making here. And we know that because there's three chapters worth of gospel emphasis leading all the way up to this instruction. So when Paul instructs them on how to live in righteousness, he instructs them as those who have already received salvation, not those whom he hopes will receive it through their obedience.

[4 : 35] Belief always affects behavior. And we should not be surprised that following Jesus involves submitting to his authority over our lives.

And again, while godly behavior does not contribute to our salvation, it is actually a consequence of it. And that is one of the things that comes immediately to the surface as we begin this text.

Now, the opening verses of chapter 4 make this truth actually abundantly clear. The text begins Paul's instruction regarding Christian behavior, and it emphasizes holiness, righteousness, purity as God's divine will for his people.

In fact, Paul actually goes above and beyond to stress that the commands in this text do not originate with him, but they actually originate with God and are simply delivered through him as God's messenger.

Their holiness is God's desire, and it is to the Lord that they will answer. Let's just trace this. In the text, verse 1, he says, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus.

[5 : 54] In other words, we're saying these things with his authority. Again, in verse 1, how you ought to walk to please God. In other words, your desire, Thessalonians, should not be just to please Paul.

This doesn't originate with me. We want you to please God. This is his will for your life. Verse 2, the instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. In other words, he's just repeating what Jesus taught.

Verse 3, this is the will of God. Verse 5, not like the Gentiles who do not know God. Verse 6, the Lord is an avenger in all these things.

Verse 7, God has called us in holiness. Verse 8, disregards God who gives his Holy Spirit. Now, what am I saying?

The bottom line is, God calls his people, those whom he saves by faith in Jesus Christ, to be holy.

[7 : 00] Our faith in Christ dramatically affects our behavior before Christ. And how we live matters to God.

Matters. He instructs us about his will, and he enables us by the power of his Holy Spirit to perform his will, breaking us free from the bondage of our sin.

Now, two instructions flow out of Paul's argument in the text. The first is broad, general. Christians should seek to please God. The second instruction is narrow and specific.

Christians should seek to please God through sexual purity. And then he concludes at the end that rejecting this instruction for purity is tantamount to rejecting God himself.

Okay? So that's the aim of what we're doing. We want to see the broad instruction that our aim as God's people should be to please God in all things. We want to see the narrow instruction that God calls us to obey him in specific things.

[8 : 14] And in this text, that's sexual purity. And then we want to understand concluding thoughts that if we disregard this instruction on sexual purity, we disregard God.

So let's first look at the broad instruction. Christians are called to please God. They're called to please God. Look at verses one and two again. 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.

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. Now this first instruction for living as a Christian is broad, isn't it? He doesn't address any specific area of life here.

He considers godliness holistically. Righteousness holistically. There is an urgency to what he's saying. He literally uses the term urge here.

But there's also divine authority behind what he's saying. He urged them in the Lord Jesus with instructions that came from the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 27] But what is it exactly that Paul is instructing them with the authority of Christ to do? Well, very simply, he instructed them to live a life that pleases God.

Live a life that pleases God. In other words, before he confronted any specific area of sin in their lives, he begins his argument by saying that their entire lives were to be oriented to glorifying and obeying God.

A necessary starting point for any of us. Before we ever dive into specific areas of our lives that we need to correct or change or transform in obedience to God, we need to start from the understanding that we're actually called just to obey God with all of our lives.

That there is no part of our life that God does not care about. And of course, if you're a Christian, you should understand this to be God's purpose in saving you.

He created each of us in his image so that we might display his glory in the created world. However, because of our sin, that image is marred.

[10 : 38] We all fall short of God's glory. So what did God do? He sent his son in human flesh, Jesus Christ, to do what?

To redeem us from sin and to restore us to glory. By the blood of Christ, our sins are forgiven. And by the power of his spirit, God breaks us free from the bondage of sin so that we might indeed please him, fulfilling the purpose for which he created us, his own glory.

This is the transformational work that God does in those who trust in Jesus. And pleasing him in all of life should be our desire and it should actually be our delight.

We are saved by faith unto works, which is made clear for us in Ephesians 2. Paul says, for by grace, you have been saved through faith.

This is not your own doing. It's the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. But then he follows that up with, but you are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

[12 : 12] Now there's two implications of Paul's opening instruction that I want to highlight before we get to his narrow instruction. The first thing I want you to understand here or see here is the reality of progress.

The reality of progress. Look at what Paul says. As you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God. And then notice what he says. Just as you're doing, that you will do so more and more.

There's progress here, isn't there? Based on Timothy's report, Paul recognized that the Thessalonian Christians were indeed actively seeking to please the Lord with their lives.

They received Paul's instruction from the Lord. They received it as from the Lord. And they were presently aiming to please God in the way that they lived.

What Paul urged them to do in this moment was to increase in that godliness more and more. In other words, he says, you're pursuing God.

[13 : 17] You're pursuing obedience now. You're doing it. We praise the Lord for that. Keep doing it. Do it more. This introduces us to the reality of progress in the grace of God.

Holiness, it's a lifelong work of God's grace. We should expect to grow in it. We should expect that in the progressive work of God's grace that we're more obedient to the Lord today than what we were a year ago or five years ago or 10 years ago.

But there's another side to this, isn't there? The reality of progress might bring comfort, at least in this regard, that we ought not be surprised that we do indeed still fail.

God calls us to pursue holiness. But in the end, he is the one who will bring it to completion.

And we see that finally in chapter five. If you just set your eyes on it. In Paul's prayer at the end of the letter in verse 23 of chapter five, now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, make you holy completely.

[14 : 35] Bring this work of grace that he's started in your life. May he bring it to full completion. When? At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And then just to make sure that they understood the comfort of that statement, he follows it up by saying, he is faithful. He will do it. I hope that's an encouragement to you.

I hope it's an evaluative tool that you examine your life and hopefully there's a progress of grace and obedience there since the day that you came to Christ. But I hope it's a comfort to you to know that you're not going to be perfect today and you're not going to be perfect tomorrow unless tomorrow is the time that the Lord returns.

He is doing this work. He is faithful to do it. And one day he's going to complete that work. And we should rest in that as we pursue it in our daily lives. So the reality of progress. I also want you to see here the necessity of Christian community.

The necessity of Christian community. Now I want to belabor the point because we've talked about it a lot in the previous chapter. But just as God used Paul and his team to strengthen the faith of the Thessalonians, he uses them here to increase their obedience as well.

[15 : 50] As we discovered in chapter 3, verses 11 to 13, Paul expected that through their ministry to one another, God would establish the church in holiness until the return of the Lord.

Just set your eyes on it again in chapter 3 and verse 12. May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you so that through your love for one another, he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness at the coming of the Lord.

Our sanctification is a progressive work of God's grace that God accomplishes, in part at least, through our ministry to one another.

We need one another in this. When our feet begin to slip in a particular area, we need Christians who love God and love us to come alongside of us and say, hey, let me just remind you to walk to please God.

Isn't that the work that God does? Isn't that how he uses us in one another's lives? Now, the church didn't need for Paul to rehearse every instruction that he had given them before.

[17 : 13] I think that's the implication of verse 2. He says, you know what instructions we gave you. You're aware of those things. Keep doing them. Keep growing in them. But there were some areas he believed needed to be specifically addressed for this church.

And that brings us to the narrow instruction of the next few verses. Let's look at it together. The narrow instructions. What is it? Christians are called to please God in sexual purity.

Now, in verses 3 to 7, Paul moves from this broad instruction again to please God holistically to a narrow instruction to please God specifically.

And the specific area of holiness he addressed is sexual purity. But significant to the way he addresses it is that he confronted the issue by bookending it with two explicit statements of God's will for their holiness.

He does the sandwich effect here, doesn't he? He starts with God's desire for their holiness. He ends with God's desire for their holiness. And sandwiched in between those two affirmations is the instruction on sexual purity.

[18 : 27] Just look at verse 3 and verse 7. He says, for this is the will of God. This is God's will. Your sanctification. Verse 7, God has not called us for impurity.

God's will, God's call, is holiness. Now, what's translated in verse 3 as sanctification and translated as holiness in verse 7, it's the same exact word.

Same exact one. It refers, of course, to the concept of moral purity. And in the broad sense, holiness refers to a life that is set apart for God's glory.

That's a part of that transformational work in the gospel. God takes a sinner, he redeems the sinner, and he transforms the sinner, sets them apart for his own glory to display his glory to the watching world.

Paul uses the term here narrowly to refer specifically to sexual purity. So on the front end, he reminds us that holiness through sexual purity is God's will.

[19 : 37] And on the back end, his charge is followed up with the assertion that in calling us to salvation, God doesn't call us to impurity, but to holiness.

What am I saying? As a Christian, God calls you to live a life that is pleasing to him. and living in sexual purity is one such way that we fulfill his divine will.

It's not an option. It's not a request. It is the explicit command of God for our lives.

and if you are indeed a Christian, that will mean something to you as you come to this text. Now, I probably don't have to convince you of the relevance of this instruction for us today.

The dominant thought in our day is not only that sexuality is a matter of preference, but that is an issue of identity. It's understood by many not simply as something an individual does, but as crucial to who they are as a person.

[21 : 00] So, to acknowledge certain sexual behaviors as sins against God is received immediately as a personal attack against the individual himself.

This is a corrupt worldview. We understand that. But the corruption of it has actually infiltrated the church.

There's many professing Christians who are actively waging war against the will of God that they claim to know and worship. It is to the Christian who excuses and engages in sexual sin that God aims his words in this text.

And the instructions, there's three elements to them, each expanding a little bit further on the previous one. The first one is this. God's call to abstain from sexual sin.

God's call to abstain from sexual sin. Look at verse 3. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, your holiness, your purity.

[22 : 15] Number one, that you abstain from sexual immorality. Now, this needs a point of clarity, doesn't it? The command here is not to abstain from sex.

That's not the command. Christians through the centuries have mistook this and they have treated sex as if it's a disease, as if it's a problem that by its nature is something wrong and dirty.

That is not what the scripture teaches at all. The call for abstention is not from sex itself. It is from sexual behavior that is out of line with God's design and therefore disobedient to God's demands.

Now, to understand the prohibition fully, we need to grasp the fact that sex is God's idea and he has given it to mankind as a wonderful blessing.

He created it as a conduit for human pleasure, for procreation and also for promise. But he also set the terms for how this blessing is to be enjoyed.

[23 : 32] And I want to just point out three dynamics of God's design from creation. And I'll just get you started on this and you can run with it in your own study.

First, I want you to notice that God sets the parameters biologically. He sets the parameters biologically. Genesis chapter 1 verse 27.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them.

God created humans with two distinct genders, male and female. And he fashioned their bodies so that they might naturally engage in this blessing.

God's design for sex, therefore, is made clear in human biology in the way that he has created us. But we can't stop at biology, can we?

[24 : 35] If we just stop at biology, we might get the male and female part right, but then we might assume that, well, it's permissible then to participate in this kind of behavior with any male or any female or in any combination.

So we can't just stop at biology, we have to move forward. And we learn, secondly, that he sets the parameters relationally. He sets the parameters relationally.

Genesis 2, verse 24, therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

God designed the blessing of sex to be freely enjoyed within the bonds of covenant marriage. And within this relational boundary from the very beginning of creation, we are free to reap the benefits and blessings of pleasure and procreation and promise.

But there's one more dynamic to understand. And of course, we have to understand this, especially as Christians. God sets the parameters biologically, he sets the parameters relationally, he sets the parameters spiritually, spiritually.

[26 : 00] And we might return to Genesis 2 to the one flesh statement as being created by God and ordained by God. That's enough for us. Let me just read a New Testament passage in relation to this.

Hebrews 13, verse 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.

Now what am I saying? The one flesh union is more profound than a physical act. It's more than that.

Sex is the physical fusion of a deeply spiritual union between a man and woman under God. God has designed it to connect the two consenting individuals in ways that go well beyond the physical act.

And we understand that intuitively. There is a spiritual nature to this. There is an emotional, psychological link that comes through this act. And God created it so.

[27 : 10] He designed it to do this. It is not merely a physical activity. It is a spiritual one that is to be kept sacred, holy.

Or in the terms of Hebrews 13, it should not be defiled. Biologically, man and woman only.

Relationally, a specific man and woman only. spiritually, a sacred act to be held in honor. Now back to 1 Thessalonians 4.

This term sexual immorality, we need to understand it. All of God's commands regarding sexual behavior in the Bible, they are not there to oppress you.

They are not there merely to withhold from you something that you think is good. He gave them graciously to us in order that He might protect the sanctity of marriage and the marriage bed.

[28 : 21] That's His design. And His design for human flourishing is always the greatest good. Sexual immorality, then, refers broadly to any sexual activity that is outside of God's design and protective demands.

It includes unnatural behavior that violates His biological design. Homosexuality. The Bible enumerates bestiality.

There's weird things happening with artificial intelligence now that we need to pay attention to in our world and in our culture. We cannot excuse that. God does not excuse that.

It also includes extramarital behavior that violates God's relational design. The biblical terms for this are fornication and adultery primarily.

Sex before you're married, sex with someone that you're not married to. Of course, we understand this to include pornography. All of these things would be a violation of God's relational design.

[29 : 37] It also includes irreverent behavior that profanes His spiritual design. That this is something to be held in honor, sacred, respectful, which means that anything that cheapens or dishonors even within the bond of marriage is prohibited by God's design.

Loved ones, God calls us to holiness, which means that He calls us to purity.

It's not merely an option on the table that we can take or leave. It is the command of God given for our good and for His glory, and we must obey it if we are to please Him.

And He has made it abundantly clear. It's not debatable. It's clear. Second, Paul shows us what it takes to abstain from sexual sin.

What it takes to abstain from sexual sin. Look at verses 4 and 5. He expands on that first instruction. He says that each one of you will do this by knowing how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

[31 : 15] Now just quickly, the pathway to sexual purity that pleases the Lord is self-control. Self-control. And what's so helpful on this point is the comparison that Paul uses to drive this home.

The Christian self-control that you may know how to control your body in holiness, the Christian self-control is set here against those who do not know God and are therefore mastered by their passions.

Now whether Paul is using Gentile here in the technical sense of a non-Jew or in the figurative sense of an unbeliever, the point remains the same.

Sexual sin is the mark of someone who is either ignorant of or rebellious to God and his word.

But the one who has been graciously freed from the bondage of sin, that has the ability of the control that God commands here. Oh, he's marked by self-control.

[32 : 25] He masters his passions rather than having his passions master him. And that doesn't mean that a genuine Christian will never be guilty of sexual sin.

That's not the point Paul's making. After all, Paul confronts it in Thessalonica after having just acknowledged confirming that they are indeed in Christ.

He says, I know, I'm confident that you are chosen of God. I've seen his work and the perseverance of your faith is what proves it. He's speaking to people that he believes to be genuine Christians who have a serious weakness of sexual sin in their lives and in their midst.

So he does not mean to say that the presence of sexual sin itself means that you're not a real Christian. But the point is clear that at the very least engaging in sexual sin is to live as if you do not know God.

So in the grace and power of the Spirit, we need to learn self-control, to take our thoughts captive, to employ the help and the prayer and the assistance of others in our Christian community to help us through this, to be committed first to pleasing the Lord holistically so that we might endeavor to learn self-control in the specifics of sexual purity.

[34 : 04] Third, he shows us the consequences of engaging in sexual sin. Verse 6, that no one transgress or 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.

Paul takes his argument one step further here. He reminds us that sexual immorality is not only a sin against God, it's a sin against others. when we engage in it, we violate the purity of those with whom we engage.

And that he mentions this as a warning or wronging of a brother, he introduces the potential of Christians engaging in this behavior together, wronging one another and transgressing one another before God.

And whatever the precise cultural context was in Paul's mind, and there's many that could have been in the forefront of his mind, he doesn't explain that, but the fact remains that sexual sin is a sin against God and it's a sin against others, which means that the warning here is serious.

It's serious. The Lord is an avenger in all these things. He avenges those who are sinned against in this way.

[35 : 35] the Lord will judge those who engage in sexual sin transgressing others in the process. Jesus himself said, it would be better that you wrap a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea than it would be for you to cause one of mine to sin.

Warning, warning, warning. Judgment awaits those who engage in this. Judgment in this letter always refers to the day of judgment at Christ's return.

Again, that doesn't mean a Christian who sins will have his or her salvation taken away and will be forced now to endure God's wrath. That's not what this means, but the implication is that those who willfully participate prove not to be saved.

And they will stand before God's judgment in the end. Our behavior doesn't save us, but it does expose us in many ways. So Paul issues the warning.

The Lord is an avenger on these things. The Lord will judge those who willfully, rebelliously engage in sin against God and against his brother.

[37 : 01] Finally, we get to the weighty conclusion of verse 8, which is summarized in this statement. To disregard the call is to disregard God.

To disregard the call is to disregard God. It's straightforward. Verse 8, therefore, it indicates he's drawing one massive conclusion to everything he's just said.

therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man, but God, who gives us his Holy Spirit.

A huge portion of this text is given to the specific issue of sexual sin. I said at the beginning that the main emphasis is that God calls us to be holy, not just about sex, but in all of life.

I pointed out how many times Paul stressed that the imperatives he gave came from God, and then here at the end, he drives the emphasis all the way home.

[38 : 06] Now, some of our consciences are bothered when we disobey people that we respect or love or that have some authority in our lives, but generally, it doesn't affect us too deeply to go against the commands of men, does it?

Some of us enjoy it, but when it comes to the commands of the Bible, it's not man we disregard. It's God himself.

Lest the Thessalonians shrug off Paul's instruction and say, oh, you know how Paul is. He's not married, he's celibate, he's given his whole life to this ministry thing, I get that he's on about this thing, but it's really not that big a deal.

After all, Christ has forgiven us, right? Paul says, look, if you're going to engage in this, don't think that you're shrugging off my command. This is not my command. This is coming from the Lord himself.

To reject God's will is tantamount to rejecting God himself. To willfully violate his commands is to quench his spirit by whom he writes his law upon the table of our hearts.

[39 : 23] And particularly with sexual sin, it is to profane the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is our bodies. So we cannot dismiss the biblical instructions on holiness.

It's what God calls us to, and we must seek to please him in all things. Now I want to finish the way I started. Paul was intentional in the ordering of his material.

We can't escape that, and we mustn't dismiss it. The emphasis on righteous living comes after he recognized the genuine faith of the Thessalonian Christians.

He rejoiced confidently in their conversion, not because they were morally upright. Clearly they had some moral problems. No, he rejoiced because they trusted Christ as Lord and Savior.

Many people begin to get this backwards, supposing that the way to salvation is morality. However, no present or future moral effort will ever be enough to satisfy God's perfect standard, which has already been broken by all of us.

[40 : 41] It's in our nature. In fact, you come to a text like this, and you may sense the weight of that reality, recognizing that if pleasing God requires this kind of purity, there's no way that you'll ever be able to please him.

And let me remind you that the weight of the law is a burden that not one of us can actually bear. We're crushed beneath it.

All of us are sinners before him. All of us destined for his wrath. So what's the solution then? If the solution isn't just to try to get things in order and hope that God says, ah, you tried hard enough, I guess I'll let you in.

If that doesn't work, what will? In his great love, God sent his son, who perfectly fulfilled all of his law.

He lived the life we were meant to live, never sinning even one time. But then he paid the penalty of God's wrath for sin in our place.

[42 : 03] On the cross, Jesus became the sacrificial lamb pictured in the Old Testament. And then God raised him from the dead, showing that his atonement, his death was sufficient.

That it did everything that we needed for it to do. We need to add nothing to it now. He is enough.

And then he turns and he says, come to me, if you will come to me, and receive this mercy. Mercy is all that you will receive.

On the cross, God treated his son as if he had sinned, so that in the judgment at the end, he might treat us as if we have not.

That's the hope. So if you're not a Christian, what are you supposed to do with this? I want you to recognize that Jesus is your only hope. You'll never be good enough, but you don't have to be.

[43 : 14] He was good for you. Turn from the ignorance and rebellion. Why wouldn't you? This is a great gospel.

There's none like it. And if you are a Christian, and perhaps you've fallen in this way and it's a struggle for you, can I just remind you that Christ's mercy is greater than your sin.

His mercy is great. But I urge you, however, to live to please God and do not disregard what he has said.

Let's pray. through the