

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 4:01-12

Lesson #7

Introduction

Last week we finished chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. At this point in his letter Paul has sufficiently covered the main issues for which he wrote this letter, namely to address persecutions. If you remember, he started out this letter pointing out that their initial response to the gospel was typical amongst believers everywhere, and this was an indication of the authenticity of the source of the message. He went on to commend them for recognizing the gospel as being from God and not just from men. And at the same time made it clear that the ability to make this distinction was entirely a gift of God as well. Both the ability to recognize and believe, and the resultant effects on the actions and attitudes are all a part of God's gift of saving faith. And then even more, the ability to persevere under adversity is also of the Lord. So, Paul's message is, the Lord initiates, the Lord sustains, and the Lord finalizes, therefore all the glory is the Lord's.

Now we're starting what we call chapter 4. At this point in his letter Paul begins to address the ongoing life of the believer. In spite of difficulties, in spite of persecutions, in spite of uncertainties, the believer has a mission and a purpose to which he has been called by the Lord. Among the many and diverse things that the Lord intends his elect to learn, before they're made ready to be with him, is that he intends them to engage themselves wholeheartedly in the act of sanctification. It is the Lord's will that we learn, by first-hand experience, both the difficulties and the value of a sanctified life. For this reason he has put the ultimate achievement out of our reach in this present age, but commanded us to pursue it nonetheless.

It is through this pursuit of the impossible that we learn the value of it, and are made capable of appreciating its value when the Lord finally brings it to fruition at his return. It's surprising how few Christians understand this principle, even though it's crystal clear in the Scriptures. Failure to understand this makes some people think that God is either unjust and unfair to his poor creatures, or that he's just plain vindictive. Then others, in an effort to justify God, claim that he would never call his children to do something that he knows they can't possibly do. Those who hold this view usually mean well, but they're simply ignorant of the Scriptures, and the final intended purpose of God for those whom he's chosen to be his eternal family of worshipers. He most certainly does command us to do what he knows we cannot do, so that we will eventually, through much effort, and struggles, and failures, be able to appreciate the gift that only he can provide. Perfect sanctification, perfect holiness, totally out of reach of humankind by his own efforts and resources. Until we know that with absolute certainty, and desire it desperately, from the depths of our hearts, we aren't ready to receive it. So, that's what we're all here learning, day by day. And this is what Paul begins to speak of now at this point in this epistle.

The Call to Sanctification

Verses 1-2: (The Believer's Obligation to God)

1 Finally then, brothers, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received from us how you must walk and please God—as you are doing —do so even more. 2 For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Paul starts this new paragraph with the words "finally then," indicating that his preceding teachings and statements were leading up to something, and he's about to tell them what that something is. God's gift of saving faith, and the ability to believe the gospel, and to endure persecutions, has an intended purpose of the Lord's own choosing. So what is that purpose? Paul says "that as you have received from us how you must walk and please God, as you are doing, do so even more." What does this sentence mean? It's very simple isn't it? It means to walk and please God in the manner that they were told, and to continue to do so in an ever increasing abundance. In other words, continue to grow in purity, sanctification, and obedience to the Word of God. As a believer there is never any point at which we can simply stop and say I've grown enough, I've learned enough, I'm holy enough, I'm satisfied where I am.

But, Paul is using these introductory words to prepare them for a very specific point which he's about to make in the next few verses. So let's move on now and see what it is Paul wants to tell them.

Verses 3-7: (God's Will - Our Sanctification)

3 For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, 4 so that each of you knows how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not with lustful desires, like the Gentiles who don't know God. 6 This means one must not transgress against and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. 7 For God has not called us to impurity, but to sanctification.

Now Paul starts to zero in on a specific issue. He starts by saying "for this is God's will, your sanctification." Now we know that God's will is our sanctification in every issue of sin and obedience to God. The Bible is replete with calls for the believers to walk in a manner that's worthy of God. To be conformed to Christ likeness in every aspect of flesh and spirit is the proper goal of every believer.

Now we know there are many common issues that plague mankind and tempt him to disobedience to God. But, if there is one single issue that is prolific among all humanity, the rich and the poor, the wise and the ignorant, every race, gender, and ethnic group, it is the temptation of sexual immorality. It cuts across all recorded times, and locations, and civilizations. Violence, murder, and idolatry are its immediate siblings, but it exists everywhere, even where these others may not. It is pervasive and inescapable, and the temptation lives and thrives in every human being.

In His design plan of creation, God wrote the innate desire into every living creature to procreate, and by this to perpetuate the species. Procreation is natural and necessary, and in and of itself is altogether proper, when exercised within the boundaries which the creator established for it. But, like virtually everything else, mankind does not observe the boundaries, either of procreation or anything else that the Lord has provided. Human beings, having a fallen and degenerate nature, have an instinctive propensity to misuse and abuse even the most wonderful things that the Lord has provided. And by doing so they diminish its value.

It is unfortunately mankind's propensity to ruin and diminish the value and joy of all of those things that he loves the most by his own intentional misuse and abuse of them. So to try to restore the joy and value that were once intrinsic in these things, he twists them and perverts them and distorts them by every devious means his mind can conceive. He removes all the stops and continually extends the limits seeking to recapture the lost joy that was once there. But this is a futile effort, because that which made it joyful in the first place was the boundaries, and limits, and appropriate application. Once these are removed, the joy and value can never be restored.

We saw a society like this described in the book of Genesis. It was called Sodom and had a companion Gomorrah. It was an entire society that had given itself over to the pursuit of sexual pleasures in means and manners that are forbidden by the creator. The stops had been removed, the limits had been exceeded too far, for too long, and eventually the inevitable took place. In the book of Romans we're told how this all starts. It starts by intentionally denying the existence of a supreme creator, when the creation itself is a testimony to His existence. You see, if one wishes to ignore the law, then they must first do something about the lawgiver. So, just deny that there is a lawgiver, and invent other gods who don't have such strict laws, and you can merrily go your way without being guilty.

Now this would be a great plan, if there really weren't a true omnipotent creator. But if there is, then a day of reckoning looms on the horizon, but even before that, there are more immediate repercussions. And as we begin to discuss some of those more immediate repercussions, let me remind us that the point we're talking about here in this verse is sexual immorality. According to the Scriptures sexual immorality is more of a result than a cause. The initial cause is mankind's intentional denial of God, the result is God delivers mankind over to his own sinful lusts, with which mankind then proceeds to defile himself and unknowingly diminish and ruin the very things that he desires the most. The more he practices them and defiles them, the less enjoyment he gets from them.

Like a drug addict who at first enjoyed a great high, comes to find that the high diminishes with every application and all of the joy that was once there cannot be found anymore, even though his use becomes continuous. And what's worse he finds he can't live without it, even though the joy is completely gone. He has become addicted and can't do without it, even though it doesn't satisfy his desires anymore.

Disobedience to God is exactly like this, and sexual immorality sits perhaps at the top of this list. Society is thoroughly and hopelessly addicted. If you see a television commercial for an automobile, they're saying it's a sexy automobile. If you see a television commercial for a breakfast cereal, they say it's a sexy cereal. Whether it's food, drink, clothing, cell phone or whatever else, it's said to be sexy. Sex is in, sex is good, sex is desirable, and everyone is encouraged to get their fair share. Forget the boundaries, and there are no limits, if it feels good do it. Push those boundaries to new limits, try new things, don't be inhibited, don't let some antiquated God tell you how to live your life. This is the 21st century, were not going to be held in bondage to those old and antiquated and obsolete rules and regulations that our parents and grandparents had to endure.

And this is certainly the prevailing attitude today. I don't think anybody would try to deny it. In fact, I suspect that most would heartily agree, and applaud the attitude. But, just like the drug addict, we will find that the law of diminishing returns applies to such a lifestyle. In fact, it's affects are already obvious, because just like Sodom and Gomorrah, we are openly and boastfully pushing the limits further and further every single day. We are changing our laws, we are redefining the acceptable boundaries of society, we are now calling "good," those things which we once recognized as evil, and at the same time calling "evil" all those things that we once knew full well where good and godly. We are intentionally substituting darkness for light, and bitter for sweet. Society hates those laws that God established, and, it hates those who still proclaimed them. And just as the Bible says, the ones who hate are the ones who call the lovers of Godliness, haters. Just as they have substituted evil for good, they now substitute haters for lovers. Those who love evil are called good, and those who love godliness are called evil haters.

Although it's frustrating, it shouldn't be at all surprising to anyone who knows the Scriptures. We've invented a new term lately. We call it hate crime. It seems that the way one becomes a hate criminal is by not loving, and endorsing, and supporting, every conceivable form of deviant sexual practices and behaviors. If someone says that they believe in their heart that there should be some reasonable limits and boundaries on sexual practices and behaviors, then it would seem that this declaration alone classifies them an official "hater."

It's like the Fox labeling the chicken a hate criminal because he doesn't wish to participate in the Fox's dinner. In today's society you're not allowed to have heartfelt beliefs, and hold to moral codes, that are contrary to those which are popular. If you do, then you're not just a citizen exercising his right of free speech, you're a hater. What's interesting though is that all of the hate seems to emanate from the accusers, and not from the accused. Hate would seem to be the right term, but it's cleverly redirected to the opposite party. But again, to stay on topic, all of this discussion of hate has grown up, and revolves around, the issues of sexual morality. Or immorality, depending on your perspective. And it grows from the root cause of not knowing God and honoring Him in reverent obedience. So what would be our conclusion as to the meaning of this verse? Quite simply, that it is God's will, and His command, for His elect to set themselves apart, and abstain from every form of sexual immorality.

Verses four and five are a continuation of the very same thought, in fact it's all one sentence. He says *"so that each of you knows how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not with lustful desires, like the Gentiles who don't know God."* I've been reading these verses since I first became a Christian, which at the time of this recording is 30 years and three months, and I have always felt that I understood what was being said. But in the course of preparing this study I found that there is some controversy as to its interpretation. Now this shouldn't surprise me I suppose, but I have to admit that I wasn't aware of it before.

The controversy revolves around the word "vessel," particularly the phrase, *"how to possess his own vessel."* One of the interpretations is that the term "vessel" is being used as a metaphor for spouse. The other is that the term "vessel" is being used as a metaphor for our own body. Now either way the point doesn't change that we are called to sanctification

and abstinence from sexual immorality, but the interpretation of “vessel” does affect the meaning and the point of this group of sentences. So, let’s endeavor to find the proper interpretation, because, as I have always said, it is the proper and true meaning of the Scriptures that are the Scriptures, and anything else is not Scripture.

Now I’ve read the points of view on both sides, and I acknowledge that a case can be made for both of these interpretations, and this is usually the case with these situations, which is why there are controversies. So, to resolve this to our satisfaction, that we have the proper meaning, what is our best procedure? Again, as I always say, the general context of the subject under discussion yields the most reliable means of proper interpretation. Now, one of the points of view cited a word study on the word ‘vessel’ as it’s used elsewhere in Scriptures. I agree that this can be useful, but I also know with certainty that many words in Scripture, can and do, have different meanings when used in different contexts, so, while this might be useful, in and out of itself, it would not necessarily be determinative.

So, if we seek a meaning that holds true to the context, what do we find? Well, the very next verse certainly seems to yield some definitive information. So what does it say? It says *“this means one must not transgress against and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warn you.”*

Paul tells us himself exactly what he means in the sentence. He says **this means** that one must not transgress against and defraud his brother (or sister) in this matter. What matter? The matter of sexual immorality. Paul says, I’m talking to you about not transgressing against, and defrauding, your brothers or sisters through means of improper sexual relations. So, how does one defraud his brother or sister through immoral sexual practice? One defiles himself, and defrauds the Lord Jesus by sexual immorality, as Paul told the Corinthians, but this wouldn’t be a transgression against a brother or sister Christian unless it somehow infringed upon them directly.

The only reasonable, sensible, logical, and contextual interpretation of this verse is that Paul is talking about Christians having sexual relations with each others wives and husbands. This is the only way one Christian defrauds his brother or sister, by having improper sexual relations with another members wife or husband outside of the proper marriage union. I can see no way, nor any compelling reason, to try to make this verse mean something other than what Paul himself says that he means. The only proper contextual meaning here is that the term “vessel” is referring to one’s spouse, not his own body. I fully knowledge that the term vessel, used other places, has other meanings, but not here, the context here demands the meaning of “vessel” in this specific application, as a spouse for the sentence to have any sensible meaning. (Footnote: It would also certainly apply to sexual activity of unmarried church members among themselves)

Furthermore, Paul says that the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses. Again what offenses? The offenses of defrauding and transgressing against a fellow Christian through having improper sexual relations. This is a strong scriptural warning that no good will become of such offenses, because the Lord himself is an avenger in such matters, and Paul says, we told you this earlier and we warned you as well. What does this mean? Does it mean perhaps that the practice of husband and wife sharing was common in that society? I don’t know, but the term “like the gentiles that don’t know God” would seem to be implying that it was. But whether it was or it wasn’t, either way, Christians are warned to abstain from such things through a holy and sanctified lifestyle. For God has not called us to impurity, but to sanctification.

(Footnote: Again, this includes promiscuous sexual activities of any unmarried church members as well)

Verse 8:

8 Therefore, the person who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who also gives you His Holy Spirit.

Now Paul finishes the thought with this verse that we’ve just read. Regarding sanctification and sexual morality he tells us that to reject this is not to reject man’s rules, but God’s commands. If we remember in verse five, Paul said that Christians are not to conduct themselves like the gentiles, which means unbelievers, who do not know God. You see it’s not knowing God that renders the gentiles hopelessly enslaved to their lustful desires. They are incapable of behaving any differently because they don’t have the means to do so.

And this is the reason why any expectations of repentance and sanctification of the unregenerate and unbelieving is totally unrealistic. We hear so many preachers and theologians calling our country to repent of its sins, but how do we think they’re going to do that when we acknowledge that we are essentially a godless nation?

Now I know that there are multitudes in our country, and around the world, who claim they believe in God, but their God isn't the God of the Bible. **And this is why their behavior isn't the behavior of the Bible.** This is why multitudes of people who call themselves Christians go into voting booths and vote for leaders that they know full well support and endorse every form of immorality and godlessness. Then they merrily go to church next Sunday and sing pretty hymns and put a few dollars in the collection plate. This is America's god, a god created in the carnal minds of the self-deceived. And this is why there can be, and there will be no repentance, because there is no desire for repentance. The heart of an unregenerate man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, said Jeremiah the prophet. (Jer 17:9) So how can he possibly behave Godly when in his heart he loves wickedness, even though he calls it good?

And this is the whole point of the second half of this sentence. This is why Paul ends the sentence with *"but God who also gives you his Holy Spirit."* The gentiles behave like they do because they do not have the capacity to desire any other way. They do not have the Holy Spirit, which is the one and only source of the desire for sanctification and repentance. Only those who have been reborn of the spirit of God have a new heart, and a new mind, regenerated and transformed to appreciate and truly desire holiness, purity, and sanctification.

Paul realizes he has just told the Thessalonians to set themselves apart in their behaviors, and not to behave like the gentiles who don't know God. So how is that possible? The answer is, it's not possible, unless one has been regenerated from within, so Paul says; here is the means by which you can do that which is impossible for an unregenerate man, because you have been given the Holy Spirit of God. And by this you can, and you must demonstrate a sanctified life, abstaining from all forms of evil, and especially sexual immorality. A command that's utterly impossible for those who don't know God, but absolutely possible, and commanded, for those who have been given his Holy Spirit.

Verses 9-12 (Holy Spirit Attitudes and Behaviors)

9 About brotherly love: you don't need me to write you because you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. 10 In fact, you are doing this toward all the brothers in the entire region of Macedonia. But we encourage you, brothers, to do so even more, 11 to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, 12 so that you may walk properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone.

1 Thess 4:9-12 (HCSB)

After having told the Thessalonians that they had been given the Holy Spirit he then goes on to describe some of the characteristics inherent in that gift. And the first thing he mentions is brotherly love. Do we remember what Jesus said to his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion? He told them that this was the means by which everyone would know those who were his disciples, and that was their self-sacrificing love for one another.

A deep and abiding, and almost inexplicable characteristic of those who are truly born again is a deep heartfelt love for other genuine Christians. Being a Christian certainly involves a great deal of learning, and has an aspect that is scholastic in nature, but foundational to all of this, is a new heart attitude of love for God, love for his Son our Savior, and also love for one another. All of the learning, all of the growth, all of the maturity and Christlikeness, must rest firmly on a foundational heart of love. Without it all our learning is just a big house built on sand, and will eventually collapse when tested.

Paul told the Thessalonians that he didn't need to write to them on this issue of love because they had already been taught by God, and had become well known throughout the entire region of Macedonia concerning this. But, he still encouraged them to continue on in that pursuit, and to do so even more, because this is the characteristic of the believers.

In the same sentence he goes on to tell them to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands. For many, seeking to lead a quiet life is their nature, for some it's not, but the point Paul is stressing here is regarding the appropriate behavior of a believer. Believers are not to be loud, boisterous, and pushy, but they are to be quiet, reserved, and know how to mind their own business. Now, like everything else, one can take this also to extremes. Paul is not advocating shutting oneself up in a cave or a monastery and severing all contact with the outside world. Neither does he mean that Christians should not be allowed to speak their mind on appropriate issues.

For example, I'm sure we've all met people who were loud and opinionated and quick to tell everyone else what they thought on every matter. These are busybodies always meddling in the affairs of others and quick to critique the words and actions of everyone else. We've all met these people, there's no shortage of them. So the admonition to Christians is to seek to live a quiet life, not necessarily a secluded one, and to pay attention to our own business and personal affairs, and keep our mouths shut concerning issues that are none of our business. There are times in life when a word of wisdom or encouragement, or even warning, are appropriate, and there are times in life when it is best to just say nothing. Paul's admonition is for Christians to recognize when to speak and when to be quiet.

Then he goes on to say "and to work with your own hands." Now this is a good one isn't it? And again we must always apply the proper parameters. Obviously we don't expect people who are too old, or handicapped in some way to have to work, this goes without saying. The point here is that all able bodied Christians are to work in the capacity which they're capable. But at the same time it doesn't mean that we are all obligated to do everything. Each one has his gift, his skills, his abilities, and his aptitude. Some are suited for physical labor, some are not. Some are suited for scholastic endeavors, some are not. But each is to contribute joyfully and enthusiastically within the scope of his abilities. There is no place in the body of Christ for slackers or deadbeats who seek to be carried along by others.

This was uniquely important to the apostle Paul. Time and time again the apostle Paul made it clear to everyone that although he was entitled to be supported entirely by the body of Christ, nevertheless to cut off any possibility of accusations that he was an opportunist, he chose to work with his own hands everywhere he went. He did this for the sake of the integrity of the gospel that he preached, lest anyone would think that he was doing it simply for monetary gain. And perhaps for this reason Paul made no place for slackers or deadbeats in the body of Christ. Each contributes and carries his own share of the load as is fitting for all who name the name of Jesus.

And then in verse 12, which actually is just a continuation of the same sentence, he says "so that you may walk properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone." We remember well that the Lord said to us who believe that we are like a lamp set on a hilltop, and like salt on food. Which is to say we are an outward visible testimony to the teachings of Jesus Christ here on this earth. We are the salt that gives flavor to the Lord's creation of humanity through our sanctified lives of obedience to Christ. Although we are to seek to live quiet lives, we are by no means taught to seek to live invisible lives. Quite the contrary, our lives are to be an open demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of a redeemed and regenerate humanity. Because this is a testimony to the glory of God through his Son Jesus Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit. We are His witnesses, not just in word and the gospel, but perhaps even more so in visible lifestyle, and behavior, and sanctification.

Therefore to be a proper witness of our Savior it is imperative that our lives are in conformity to his. The lives of the Christian community are the visible testimony to the glory of Jesus Christ. And for this reason we should be holy, sanctified, and productive, as is fitting for a proper witness. The body of Christ should not be dependent upon anyone else but the Lord Jesus himself. By that Paul means, we should be a thriving, self-sustaining community, that is willing to work and contribute their fair share, both to themselves and to their communities, as is a fitting witness to the Lord.

Conclusion:

in the first section of these verses we've seen that Paul has called the church to sanctification. In verse three he says specifically "for this is God's will, your sanctification." He spoke very candidly on sexual immorality and made it clear that there was no place whatsoever for this kind of behavior in the body of Christ or the life of any believer. When he finished his admonitions and warnings on this subject he sealed it with these words "the person who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who also gives you his Holy Spirit."

We then discussed that the gift of the Holy Spirit was the means by which mankind may live a sanctified life, and apart from the gift of the Spirit, a sanctified life is not possible, because a sanctified desire is not possible. The gift of the Holy Spirit involves a whole new heart and a whole new mindset in the deepest recesses of a person's soul, and this is the very essence of what it is to be a Christian, to be born again.

And then finally in verses nine through 12 we discussed the most visible characteristic of a true Christian, a deep and abiding and self-sacrificing love of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and all who are His. This love is also to spill over onto all mankind, as much as humanly possible, because doing so honors the Lord Jesus. It is by this that we know who are the Lord's disciples, those who have love for one another.

And just so that we're clear, just exactly like Paul's letters to the churches, genuine godly love always includes both encouragements and warnings, both instructions and rebukes, all intended for the ultimate good of our brothers and our loved ones. True love and concern for the welfare of our loved ones must include every component of love. To edit out some because they're unpleasant is to knowingly allow harm to come to those under our charge. This isn't true godly love, and this is by no means how Paul spoke to the churches, and how the Holy Spirit speaks to the children of God. Every father and mother who really loves their children knows full well that they cannot omit discipline from the lives of their children as they grow up, even though we wish very much that we could. Love means doing what is best for those we care about whenever it's pleasant, and also when it's not. This is the demonstration of true love.

Then the final verses that we covered in this study, verses 11 and 12, told us that we are seek, as much as it depends upon us, to live a quiet peaceful life within our community. We are not to be busybodies, we are not to poke our noses into other people's business where it doesn't belong. We have every right, even an obligation, to present our beliefs, and to demonstrate our lifestyle in a public manner, but always respectfully, kindly, and gently; showing genuine concern for the welfare of others, because this honors the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, we are to work with own hands if we are physically fit. We aren't to be freeloaders or slackers, because this dishonors both our Savior and our brothers and sisters. It is the intent of God our Father that we who are His should live on this earth in a sanctified and Godly manner as a visible testimony to the glory of His beloved Son, and to do anything less is both dereliction of duty and a tragic dishonor upon the name of our beloved Savior.

Therefore, let us all take these words to heart. Let us strive, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to live a sanctified life. To demonstrate integrity, morality, honesty, compassion, and self-sacrificing love in our visible lives, because, this is how we demonstrate that we truly love and appreciate what our Savior has done for us. We have nothing else to offer him but our hearts and our lives. So let us seek to do so with joyful exuberance every day of our lives, in everything that we do, because in so doing we testify both to His glory and to our genuine love for Him. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen

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