

1 Thessalonians 4: 1-12

11/10/09 11am

A prayer as we stand:

Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for your word and all you have to teach us from it. Please teach us this morning from Paul's challenges and encouragements to the Thessalonians, that we might develop in our gospel behaviour and in turn challenge and encourage others. For your glory, Amen.

Please sit down and please do turn to 1 Thessalonians 4.

In the last two sermons in our series on 'Being a Gospel Church', Carolyn has taken us through the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians, thinking about Gospel Evangelism and Gospel Ministry. We have heard that the spread of the gospel is ultimately God's work, but we have our part to play in sowing and tending seeds. We heard that we should share the gospel in a way that is loving and costly in terms of time and energy. And we were challenged to encourage others to live for God and take a risk in their discipleship and also to ask whether we had people to do that for us.

So now we come to the first 12 verses of chapter 4 and the topic of Gospel Behaviour. Following on from the theme of discipleship which we began to consider last week, this passage is a great model of accountability that we could well follow as a church, stirring each other up to excel in faith, hope and love. Such discipleship and accountability can take place in a larger group but is especially effective in small group settings and in our individual friendships.

Paul had only had a brief opportunity to share with the Thessalonians face to face, so in this chapter we see him seeking to disciple them in their Christian walk. He keeps them focused on the aim they should have for their lives - to live to please God. He reminds them of what they have learnt so that they will hold fast to the truth. He gives them specific exhortations and challenges to work on, knowing well the temptations they are facing and the bad habits they are prone to. And he won't let them rest on their laurels even though they're doing pretty well - he wants them to keep going for it more and more.

As we look through the passage at the specific exhortations Paul issues to the Thessalonians, of course we must examine how we're doing in these areas, but let's also be aware of how we, both corporately and individually, can disciple one another to excel in the face of these challenges.

Having reminded the Thessalonians that the gospel is all about a relationship with God, it is unsurprising that the gospel behaviour Paul exhorts them to is completely God-centred. He issues four exhortations:

- 1) To walk in a manner pleasing to God (vv1-2)
- 2) To know God and respond in holiness (vv3-8)
- 3) To love with God's love (vv9-10)
- 4) To have godly ambitions (vv11-12)

1) An exhortation to walk in a manner pleasing to God (vv1-2): The comparison between our lives as Christians and a 'walk' is a frequent image in the Bible. In our Old Testament passage we heard Moses challenge the Israelites that the Lord requires them to 'walk in all his ways'. Walking is a helpful visual aid for our Christian life: as we travel through our daily lives we move into different spheres and experiences. We take one step at a time. Some parts will be an uphill struggle. Sometimes we will move forward easily but at other times we will be susceptible to stumbling or going off track or will find ourselves stepping into trouble.

In v1, when Paul writes 'Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God', the word translated in the NIV as 'live' literally means 'walk' or more specifically 'walk around', giving the image of us taking our step-by-step journey with and for God into every area of our lives.

Paul may only have had a short time with the Thessalonians, but after he had led them to faith, he also took time to teach them how to live and please God. He says 'we instructed you how to live in order to please God'. This is part of the model of discipleship given in this passage which I mentioned earlier. Paul wasn't just interested in conversion statistics, only to abandon the young Christians shortly afterwards. He knows that learning to live and please God is a matter of Biblical instruction. It is not innate or natural to us. Without the Word, there is simply no way any of us are going to be able to walk as we should so as to please God. We heard from Deuteronomy 10 that we should 'observe the Lord's commands and decrees' which we will only know and understand if we get familiar with God's word. That is why we encourage people to join the Emmaus group after Alpha and to join home groups suitable to where they are on their Christian journey. That is why our 9.30 congregation, full of so many new members, study topics such as the current series 'I believe...', unpacking the Apostles' creed.

A hugely valuable resource in our church is the fact that we have people at so many different stages of both life and faith. New members, younger members and those less familiar with the traditional way of doing church have plenty to teach us with their fresh ideas and innovation. And those in our church who have been through more life experiences, who are more mature in their faith and who have a wealth of

knowledge to share must be valued deeply and their wisdom must be utilised fully. There are many experienced Christians in this congregation who have a role to play in instructing others how to live to please God, perhaps in formal ways like leading a homegroup or helping at Alpha or in getting involved with Oxygen's mentoring scheme mentioned on Notes and News, but also in informal ways, in our friendships, in our conversations over coffee, in getting alongside people, in holding each other accountable in our walk with God.

But we all need discipling, however young or old we are, both in age and as Christians. We may be doing relatively well but we shouldn't rest on our laurels. Paul felt that the Thessalonians were doing well and encourages them by telling them this. Verse 1 continues: we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are doing. He reassures them that he's not insinuating that they've gone off the rails, so why is he giving this instruction to them? He goes on to explain: Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. The use of the verbs 'ask' and 'urge' shows just how seriously Paul's taking this, in spite of the Thessalonians' seemingly good report. He wants them to excel more and more, to pursue excellence and to aspire to increased holiness in their walk with God. Just as Carolyn challenged us last week about taking a risk in our discipleship, Paul wants the Thessalonians to step outside their comfort zone and allow themselves to be stretched. Are we open to being held accountable in our walk with God? Do we have people we can rely on for this? Are we ready for God to push us to take risks and be stretched in our journey with him? Yes, we have new truths to learn, but we must also be willing to be challenged to excel still more in terms of the truths we already know and are already practising, but not to the full.

2) An exhortation to know God and respond in holiness (vv3-8): If the Thessalonians were doing pretty well in their walk with God, why does Paul now go to the trouble of reminding them of God's teaching and standards in order to extol the importance of sexual purity to them? Because Paul was well aware of the debauched society the Thessalonians lived in and therefore the daily temptations they must face. One commentary I read put it like this: The common practice of the day was that one had a wife to take care of the home and the children, a mistress for sexual and intellectual pleasure, and the service of prostitutes strictly for the practice of sexual activity. Some forms of religion not only sanctioned but even included extra-marital sex as an act of worship. This is what was considered normal in Thessalonian society.

Obviously the danger of forming a church in such a society is that the morals of the society will influence the church so much that God's standards will be set aside. In our society today we don't tend to call an extra-marital relationship 'adultery'; instead we call it an 'affair'. Society has tried to add some sparkle to the immorality

that is running rampant. Pick up almost any lifestyle magazine in WHSmith and you can read about the excitement, thrill, buzz and benefits of sex outside of marriage. You won't read it being described as adultery, let alone sexual immorality.

How easy then for us, and especially those less established or mature in their faith, to be influenced by these widespread opinions, so that we begin to accept these standards and forget God's point of view. No wonder Paul was concerned about the Thessalonians' purity.

The key for Paul is knowing God. We see that in v5 where it says: not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God. Not knowing God is the root of lust. Surely we have the evidence for that in our society, just as the Thessalonians did in theirs. Paul doesn't mean that mere head knowledge about God will overcome lust. He is thinking about the knowledge of God described in 2 Corinthians 4 v6: the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. It's the knowledge of God's greatness and worth and glory and grace and power. It's a knowledge that stuns you, humbles you, wins you and holds you. It's a knowledge that is lived out in a personal relationship with our God and saviour.

If we know God we will know his will for our lives: the call to holiness which is reiterated by Paul in both v3 and v7: It is God's will that you should be sanctified. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. God wants us to be set apart from the mentality and actions of a world that does not know Him.

Paul backs up his exhortation with three clear reasons. Firstly, in the first half of v6, he encourages them 'that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him'. Paul is referring to the fact that sexual sin always harms others besides those who engage in it. In adultery, for example, the spouse is wronged. Premarital sex wrongs the future partner by robbing him or her of the virginity that ought to be brought to marriage. The use of pornography wrongs those who have been exploited in the making of it. A Biblical approach to marriage and sex according to God's instruction will keep us from violating the rights of others or taking advantage of them in this area.

The second reason Paul gives contains a stark warning. In the second half of v6 he reminds them that: The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. Everyone who fears the wrath of God should abstain from immorality because judgement will follow. The fact that God judges sin is a basic Christian truth which Paul had taught them and warned them about. As he writes in 2 Corinthians 5 v10: For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. In that verse Paul is not talking about our justification, which

is credited fully to us because of Jesus' death on the cross, but rather the need for us to answer for what we have done with our lives as Christians.

Back to our passage, and the third reason Paul gives. In v8 he writes: Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. In other words, a further reason for chastity is that sexual sin is against God, who has given believers the Holy Spirit as an enabler in the call to holiness. Therefore, to live in sexual immorality is to reject God and specifically to reject the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Although the world has tried to whitewash immorality by giving it different titles, God says, 'If you reject these commandments you are rejecting me'. We may say, 'But we live in a different day and age. Our culture is different. Our society is different. Our morals are different'. God knows all of these excuses. The truth remains clear, 'he who rejects this is not rejecting man but God'. It should come as no surprise that unbelievers reject God - they are under the control of sin, but Paul is concerned that the church doesn't adopt those same standards. The provision of the Holy Spirit is constantly available to us so when we choose to indulge in sexual impurity we are rejecting God's provision for us to live a pure life. We need to remember that God's will for us is our sanctification and his call on our lives is to holiness. It is no different today than it was in Thessalonica, in fact, if anything, Thessalonica was worse. Yet Paul still calls us to purity. Those who are under the control of their passions are rejecting God. Do we think we can decide how close to godlessness we can get without going over the edge? No, the goal of our Christian life is to see how close we can get to being like our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

So, what exactly is Paul's top tip to the Thessalonians in order to avoid immorality? It's in v4: each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable. We should not be controlled by our body, but rather by God's grace, strength and enabling we should control our body and its longings. We have bodies so that God might be glorified in them. In Philippians 1 v20 Paul says: 'I eagerly expect and hope that...Christ will be exalted in my body'. In 1 Corinthians 6 v13 he writes: 'The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body'. Our body with its desires and longings is a gift from God and one that we should not abuse. We are to exercise control over our own bodies by drawing upon the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to be set apart for God's purposes. We are to restrict our body's sexual desire to the God given parameters of monogamous faithful marriage between a man and a woman. When we are sexually impure, we dishonour the body and we no longer treat it as belonging to God.

The word translated as body in our passage literally means vessel. I find the word 'vessel' a helpful image as it raises the question, 'What are we filled with?' If we are

filled with worldly standards or uncontrolled passion and lust, then we are facing an uphill struggle. But if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, God's grace and the knowledge of him and his will for our lives, we can be empowered and enabled for the fight against sexual immorality.

Individually we will know how we are measuring up to Paul's exhortation to know God and respond in holiness. We must be honest before him and ask for his help, whether it is in knowing him more by deepening our relationship with him or whether it is taking greater control over our bodies with his help and for his glory. Are we also ready to disciple others and hold them accountable when we see them straying in this area in their walk with God? This may be costly, causing us to appear 'intolerant' in the world's eyes and risking the loss of a friendship, but is what we will do if we are concerned for the sanctification of our brothers and sisters.

3) An exhortation to love with God's love (vv9-10): Paul goes from addressing sexual impurity to addressing the great love of Christ that they are to demonstrate in their love for one another. Even though sexual sins are couched in terms of love by our society, they are really far from loving towards others.

The brotherly love referred to in v9 is the Greek term 'philadelphia' which has nothing to do with cream cheese! It refers to the kind of love and affection that should exist, not because of physical birth or nationality, but because of our spiritual relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ. Regardless of personality differences and conflicts, all believers should be bound together in love and concern for each other because of their relationship in Christ.

In v9 Paul writes: Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. What does Paul mean by that? He is obviously not suggesting that we don't need Biblical instruction on loving one another because the New Testament has so much to say on this subject and because the church is often so weak in this area.

No, God teaches us to love one another by the example he gave us in sending his Son. As it says in 1 John 4 vv7-11: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

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And God also continues to teach us to love one another by the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. That passage in 1 John 4 continues in vv12-13: No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

The phrase 'to love one another' is one of the primary commands of the New Testament. Jesus said it should be the badge of our identity as disciples in John 13 v35: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

But the example of God's sacrificial love demonstrated in Jesus lifts the concept of brotherly love, philadelphia, to new heights, because the love which God teaches in this instance is agape love, which is a costly and sacrificial love, a love that reaches out to the unlovable or even to one's enemies. This self-sacrificing agape love is provided only by God. He gives us his Spirit in our lives to teach us how to love one another as believers and then he produces that love as well.

So in the light of that, how amazing is the testimony Paul makes about the Thessalonians: they are identified by their love for one another. v10 says: And in fact you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. They not only loved one another but they had a love for their brothers and sisters that stretched throughout the whole province, and Paul is encouraged by that. He does not exemplify how this love was demonstrated. Perhaps in hospitality. But however it was expressed, the challenge to us is the extent to which we must love. Our love must extend to all our brothers and sisters, not just to the few with whom we feel a special rapport. It should be limited only by the opportunities afforded to express it.

But despite this glowing report, again, as in v1, Paul presses them on to continued growth and urges them to excel and abound more in v10 where he says: Yet we urge you brothers to do so more and more. No matter how much we love, due to the very nature of love and the difficulties with loving, there is always room for improvement in our capacity to love, both in quantity and quality.

Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to develop sacrificial, costly love in us or are we limiting our love to those we find it easy to connect with? Do we need discipling in this area and, if so, who can we turn to for this? Are there people God is asking us to hold accountable in this area?

Paul's exhortations demonstrate that while the church in Thessalonica was a loving and growing body of believers, it was not a perfect church (as no church is), and there were things that needed changing. Are we looking for a perfect church or are

we willing to be part of the change process in our growing body of believers here at Christ Church?

4) **An exhortation to have godly ambitions** (v11-12): Paul has shown that he has ambitions for the Thessalonians to excel more and more in their walk with God. In v11 he lists three godly ambitions they should have: Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.

This verse suggests that some of the Thessalonians were not working as hard as they should have been. Perhaps they have become so excited about their life in Christ, expecting the Lord to return at any moment and not wanting to miss it, that they have become negligent at work.

Paul also addresses this situation in 2 Thessalonians 3 vv11-12: We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

Paul says our ambition is to live a quiet life, yet we would surely not describe Paul's life as quiet, so what does he mean by this? In the Greek the word translated as quiet means quiet in the sense of restfulness rather than silence. Paul was telling the Thessalonians to be less frantic, not less exuberant. Constant restlessness will distract us in our walk with God. A Christian who strives to be at peace with himself and God will be a source of peace to his brothers and sisters. Such quietude constitutes a practical demonstration of love for others. In the face of the stresses and pressures of our daily lives, we should provide an oasis of rest and peace for our friends, families and colleagues.

The second ambition Paul gives is 'to mind your own business'. Paul is saying we should tend to our own obligations instead of being preoccupied with those of others. When our first priority is taking care of our own walk, not in a selfish, self-centred way but in a truly Biblical way, taking the plank out of our own eyes first, we are less likely to become nosy, gossipy busybodies.

This then is the balancing act we must strive for, not to use this ambition as an excuse to abandon the call to disciple others and hold them accountable. We must balance Paul's challenge to mind our own business with our responsibility to be involved with and care for others. Our tendency is to go from one extreme to the other and not find the middle ground.

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The third ambition Paul mentions is 'to work with your hands'. Work is not a curse, something we all need reminding of at times! I know I do when I'm catching the 7.07am train with Helen Collins every morning!! As creator and sustainer of the universe, God is a worker. We are made in God's image and have been given creativity and ability. Work is rather a gift from God. It is not the product of sin and the fall as some believe - God gave Adam and Eve tasks to do in the Garden before the fall. God uses our work to serve others and supply their needs. We should thank God for the work he has given us to do, paid and unpaid, and ask him to bless both us and others through it.

If we strive towards these three godly ambitions, with God's grace, v12 says that our lives will be a testimony to the outside world and we won't be an unnecessary burden to others.

The unbelieving world is watching and we should always be concerned about how our lives look to those outside the body of Christ. What they need and want to see is authenticity - lives that back up our profession with works and a walk consistent with our talk. Let us consider our own walk in the light of such scrutiny and also be ready to encourage and challenge others in their striving towards such godly ambitions.

So, we have seen Paul's four exhortations to the Thessalonians and my hope and prayer is that we have had the chance to consider both how we are doing, individually and as a church, in the light of them, and also to think through whether we are being disciplined and in turn disciplining others in these areas.

Let's ask for God's help in this as we close with a prayer:

Dear Father God, we thank you for the example of the Thessalonian church, who were characterised by Paul as living to please you and loving one another. We ask that we too would be characterised in these ways, both as individuals and as a church body. To that end, please grow a culture of discipling and accountability in our fellowship, that we may all learn from each other and have the opportunity to be spurred on in our faith. Help us to guard against complacency and give us the motivation to excel more and more in our faith, hope and love. For your glory, Amen.