

Week 5: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Hook



Main Point: Christians are to live in purity and holiness, quietly working to care for ourselves and others in our community.

Ask your LifeGroup members to grab a pen and paper. Challenge them to take 90 seconds to write down their answers to this question:

“Whose approval are you trying to win? Why?”

After the 90 seconds are up, invite some responses from your LifeGroup. Write these responses on the board.

Q: Do you notice any patterns in your list of people?

Q: What does your list of people reveal about your priorities?

Q: Why do people so often try to win the approval of others?

Transition: Part of our natural inclination as humans is to win the approval of others. Anyone we are trying to win the approval of is someone we are trying to please. Today, we are going to discover how our highest priority as Christians is to please the Lord.

Week 5: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Book

Main Point: Christians are to live in purity and holiness, quietly working to care for ourselves and others in our community.

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Christians abstain from sexual immorality.

Q: How does a Christian sexual ethic set us apart from the secular world?

Q: Why is our sanctification the will of God?

Chapter 4 starts with a Greek word the ESV translates as “finally,” but it literally means “what remains.” The NIV translates it “as for other matters,” as in what remains of the Thessalonians’ questions or the issues Paul wanted to address.ⁱ This is the transition point in the letter, where Paul will address the rest of these urgent issues the Thessalonians needed to hear about before Paul and his coworkers were able to be with them again in person and “supply what is lacking in [their] faith” (3:10). Paul spent the first three chapters thanking God for the Thessalonians, with narrative/background interspersed. Now he would address specific issues.

Scholars call this the “paraenetic” part of the letter, the moral and ethical teaching or “how you ought to walk and to please God” (4:1). In Paul’s letters, the ethical teaching typically follows doctrinal teaching as an application of that doctrine, but not in the case of 1 Thessalonians. Here the apostle was reminding the recipients of what they had already been taught and what they were already doing (4:1). It is less correction than encouragement to stay on the narrow path, to continue to live in a way that pleased God even “*more and more*” (4:1).ⁱⁱ

The phrase “more and more” in verse 1 describes “sanctification,” found in verse 3. Sanctification (becoming holy) is not a one-time event. It is a lifelong process of becoming more and more like Jesus every day. This is the “will of God” for our lives as Christians (4:3). No matter what He calls us to *do* with our lives, His will is for us to grow to *be* more like Him. God has called us to do things – make disciples, be His witnesses. But His will for us is not about our career or mission; it’s about our character. It’s not about our actions; it’s about our identity. Godly behavior flows out of that godly identity, but our identity is the foundation.

“Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). The word *Christian* means “little Christ.” Those who claim to know Christ should live as He lived. But don’t let the “ought to” throw you. These were not merely demands on the Thessalonians’ behavior; they are descriptions of the character of those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. As F. F. Bruce wrote in his commentary,

The “charges” they gave them in the name of Christ were not external regulations to which they must painstakingly conform; they were part of the outworking of the new life maintained within them by the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sanctification is the process of being changed by the Holy Spirit; it is not our working harder to be better people. These are not just rules to follow; they are descriptions of what a “new creation” person is like – sexually pure, living in brotherly love, hardworking, and minding his or her own affairs.

The Greek word translated “sexual immorality” here is *porneia*, from which we get our English word “pornography.” It means *any* form of illicit sexual activity, not just prostitution, as some scholars try to argue.^{iv} The apostles weren’t calling out any specific behavior that was going on in the Thessalonian church as they did in some letters to other churches. The Thessalonians were already living in purity, so this was a warning, not a rebuke (4:1). Sex is mentioned often in the epistles because the Christian sexual ethic was so vastly different from that of the Greco-Roman world around them, in which it was very common for men to have a wife to bear legitimate heirs and maintain the household, a mistress for sexual and intellectual companionship, as well as slaves to be concubines and prostitutes for casual encounters. Even catamite relationships (men having sexual relationships with young boys) were typical. The Christian sexual ethic was so countercultural that the apostles stressed it often in their letters.^v

Here they describe the Gentile sexual ethic as a “passion of lust” because they “do not know God” (4:5). This is in direct contrast to those who belong to Christ, who have “*crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*” (Galatians 5:24). Christians are to control their own bodies; self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Sensuality, greed, impurity and deceitful desires are part of the old self, not the new (Ephesians 4:17–24). Our bodies, as believers, belong to God to be used for His purposes, not for reckless self-indulgence (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Sexual sin wrongs other people as well as God, and the Lord will avenge it (4:6). The false teachers had been speaking against Paul’s teaching on sexual ethics, saying it was his rule only, not the Lord’s, so the church

could disregard it. Paul retorted that this was God's law, not his, and part of walking in the new self by the power of the Holy Spirit (4:8).^{vi}

We also live in a world in which the Christian sexual ethic is counter-cultural. We, too, need reminders that our bodies belong to the Lord, that sex is not intended just for self-gratification, and that sexual sin hurts other people as well as our relationship with God. We, too, need reminders to walk in self-control, not in the passion of lust. We, too, need reminders that the only way we can do this is through the power of the Holy Spirit, abiding in Christ, and putting on the new self every day. This is as timely a message for us today as it was for the Thessalonians.

Q: In what ways can we encourage each other to remain pure in a sexually charged culture?

Q: What boundaries do we need to put in place for ourselves to help with self-control?

Q: How can we allow the power of the Spirit to crucify our flesh and grow in sanctification?

1 Thessalonians 4:9–10 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Christians love others as themselves by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Q: What did Paul mean when he said we are “taught by God” to love one another?

Q: How have you seen believers show extraordinary brotherly love?

Paul commended the Thessalonians for their brotherly love while also encouraging them to “*do this more and more*” (4:10), just as Paul had said about their pleasing God (4:1). Paul opened the letter with thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ faith, hope and love (1:3) and for their example to all the other believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1:7).

The apostle wrote that the Thessalonians really didn’t need to be told about brotherly love because they had been “*taught by God to love one another.*” (4:9). This is the only occurrence of this exact wording in the New Testament, but a similar phrase is used in John 6:45, which quotes Isaiah 54:13 – a prophecy that, in the new covenant, believers will be taught directly by God. As God promised through Jeremiah, quoted in Hebrews 8:10, “*I will put my law within them and write it on their heart*” (Jeremiah 31:33). Jesus said the world would know we are His disciples by our extraordinary, supernatural love

for one another (John 13:35). This kind of selfless, *agape* love comes only from God, and we can only love other people this way because we know Him (1 John 4:7–19) and are filled with His Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Every human being can love other people on a human level – the kind of love you have for your family and friends, those who you enjoy being around, and those who love you back. But God’s kind of love? That is a love that loves your enemies and prays for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43–48), that forgives an infinite number of times (Matthew 18:21–22), that lays its life down for others, even enemies (Romans 5:8). This kind of love comes *only* from God, “taught” by God through the power of the new covenant when He takes out our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). He makes us a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) and renews us day by day (Colossians 3:10), sanctifying us every day to make us “more and more” like Him (4:1). It is not only divine communication; it is divine *relationship*. He doesn’t just teach us how to love, He enables us to love.^{vii}

The Thessalonians didn’t need Paul to write to them about how to love others because God was empowering them to love others through His Spirit working in their hearts every day. They had been loving others all over Macedonia, showing themselves to be truly filled with the Holy Spirit and growing in sanctification (4:1). And yet, Paul urged them to do it more and more. This isn’t a correction, it’s an encouragement. They are like those friends on the sidelines, cheering you on as you run the race. “You can do it! Keep going, push harder! Keep persevering!” Especially because the Thessalonians were dealing with a lot of persecution, the apostles wanted to keep encouraging them to persevere.

Q: How have you seen God increase your capacity to love others as you have grown in your faith throughout your Christian journey?

Q: In what ways is it still difficult for you to love other people? In what circumstances or with which people do you find it hard to love others?

Q: How are you being encouraged in your spiritual growth in your life? If you feel that you need more encouragement, how can our church community help you?

Q: How can you be an encouragement to others in their spiritual growth?

1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Christians lead a quiet life where they work hard to take care of their own needs so they aren't a burden to anyone.

Q: Why is important for Christians not to be dependent on anyone else to take care of them?

Q: How is this connected with brotherly love? How does it affect our witness?

This urging to live quiet lives, work hard, and provide for themselves was a continuation of the encouragement to live in brotherly love more and more. But it isn't a hyper-independent pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps kind of command. The early Christians were not individualistic; they lived in radical community where they all shared everything in common (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35). If members were *unable* to provide for themselves – if they were sick, disabled, or widowed – the whole community came together and cared for them (Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:3–8). But a person who was perfectly capable of working and didn't was taking advantage of the Christian community, which is not brotherly love.^{viii}

Paul's words here were more of a warning – *if* you don't work and take care of your own affairs, you *will* become a drain on the community and be a bad example to outsiders (4:11–12). Most scholars think Timothy had already seen the potential for this happening when he was in Thessalonica, so Paul warned them here.

Paul wrote that not only would their laziness be a drain on the community; it would also be a bad witness to unbelievers. People wouldn't want to join a group like that (4:12)! But a community where everyone worked hard, shared everything in common, and cared for each other as the original church did was attractive to outsiders. In *The Epistle to Diognetus* (130 AD), we read what others thought of these early Christians.

They display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.... They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed ... they love all men and are persecuted by all.... They are poor yet make many rich.^{ix}

Early Christian author Tertullian (AD 197) wrote that the pagans said about them, "See how they love one another!"^x This is the reputation we can have with outsiders when we live in holiness, purity and brotherly love in Christian community. A Christian community where people genuinely care for one another and live a life so strikingly different from the world – not in self-indulgence, but in sacrifice – is so unusual and so appealing, it will make others look at us and say, "I want to be loved like that!"

Q: Give some examples of beautiful Christian communities such as this that you have seen. Why were they so appealing to you?

Q: Why does the way we live matter to our Christian witness?

Q: In what ways do we see idleness or busybody-ness in our church communities today?

Q: In a typical church, about 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. How can we change those statistics? What impact would it have on our churches, our mission, and the communities around us if everyone in our churches worked for the mission of the church?

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Took

Main Point: Christians are to live in purity and holiness, quietly working to care for ourselves and others in our community.

Q: Why should Christians seek to live a life that is pleasing to God?

Look back at the responses from your LifeGroup to the HOOK section that you wrote on the board.

Q: What are the differences between the ways we please God and the ways we please the people we mentioned in the HOOK section?

Q: Is pleasing the people we mentioned in the HOOK section a bad thing? If not, how can we redeem our intentions to please these other people?

Q: What are two specific ways you can please the Lord this week?

CHALLENGES

THINK: Why is the true Christian lifestyle so counter-cultural? In what ways are you tempted to blend in with the world instead of living as Jesus did? How is God calling you to be salt and light to the world around you, to stand out for Him?

PRAY for yourself to grow in sanctification. Confess any areas where you struggle with any of these issues – lust, brotherly love or laziness. Repent and turn back to Him. Ask God to continue to work in you and ask the Holy Spirit to make you more and more like Jesus. Pray for God to continue to purify your heart and to give you the power to love others selflessly the way He does.

ACT: Choose someone to encourage this week the way the apostles encouraged the Thessalonians ... maybe someone who is struggling and needs some support. Or maybe someone you'd like to thank for the difference he or she has made in your life. Or even persons you think are amazing and you just want to tell them so.

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- ⁱ Robert L. Thomas, *NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1981).
- ⁱⁱ F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).
- ⁱⁱⁱ F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).
- ^{iv} Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
- ^v Roy E Ciampa, Brian S Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Intervarsity Press, May 21, 2020).
- ^{vi} Walter Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972).
- ^{vii} Brooke Foss Wescott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1880).
- ^{viii} F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).
- ^{ix} Mathetes, *Epistle to Diognetus* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867).
- ^x Tertulian, *The Apology of Tertullian* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885).