

Living Holy Lives (1 Thessalonians 4:1–12)



SABBATH—AUGUST 11

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12; Genesis 39:9; Matthew 25:34–46; John 13:34, 35.

MEMORY VERSE: “God chose us to live pure lives. He wants us to be holy” (1 Thessalonians 4:7, NlrV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: Sex is a gift from God. But, as with all gifts, it can be abused.

THE THREE OPENING CHAPTERS OF 1 THESSALONIANS FOCUS (PLACE OUR ATTENTION) MOSTLY ON THE PAST. But, in chapters 4 and 5, Paul turns to the future. There are things that have been missing in the faith of the Thessalonian believers (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Paul wants to help them to correct these problems. The letter begins the first step. But more could be done only after Paul and the Thessalonians could get together again.

Beginning with 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul builds on the friendship he has spoken about in the first three chapters. He also offers useful advice for the Thessalonians' everyday life. The main area of concern (but not the only one) in the verses for this week deals with sexual sin. We are not told what brought on Paul's warning. But he speaks very clearly about the need to avoid sexual sin. Paul is very strong in his language, saying that those who refuse to follow his instruction are, in fact, refusing to follow the Lord's will. A person has only to look at the suffering caused by sexual sin to understand why the Lord would speak so strongly through Paul on this topic.

SUNDAY—AUGUST 12**ABOUNDING (GROWING)
MORE AND MORE
(1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2)**

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1–18. How does chapter 4 explain more fully the different parts of the prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13? What is the relationship between Paul’s prayer and his inspired (God-given) words to the Thessalonians?

Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 holds several important words that explain the message of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–18. The prayer is about “abounding” (being full of) in “holiness” and “love” with the second coming of Jesus in mind. All of these themes (ideas; topics) point to certain verses in chapter 4.

In our verses for today (1 Thessalonians 4:1, 2), Paul picks up on the language of “abounding” (growing) in 1 Thessalonians 3:12. The true meaning of the word is hidden by most modern translations. Modern translations have the praiseworthy goal of making things more understandable in today’s language. But they may hide connections that are clear in the original. In the King James Version, the parallel (connection) between 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1 is clear. Paul invites the Thessalonians in both places to “abound more and more” (NKJV) in their love for one another and for everyone.

Paul began the work of building their Christian framework (main outline) of the Thessalonians while he was with them. But now he is impressed (moved) by the Holy Spirit to fill in the gaps (1 Thessalonians 3:10) and make them understand more clearly. Their goal is to live a life worthy of their calling. The result would be “more and more” of what they were already trying to do.

Paul begins chapter 4 with, “Finally, then” (NKJV). In chapters 4 and 5, he is building on chapters 1 through 3. In these first chapters, Paul’s friendship with the Thessalonians is the basis (foundation) for the useful advice he will now give. They have made a good start. Now he wants them to continue growing in the truths that they have learned from him.

Two examples of Jesus in these verses (1 Thessalonians 4:1, 15) are very interesting. They show that Paul was passing on the teaching of Jesus’ own words. (These words were later written in the four Gospels.) But Paul is offering more than just good advice. Jesus Himself commanded the behaviors (actions) that Paul is encouraging. Paul, as Christ’s servant, is sharing the truths He has learned from Christ.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 4:1. What does it mean to walk in a way that will “please God”? Does the Creator of the universe really care about how we act? How can our actions “please God”? What does your answer suggest about your character (who you are)?

MONDAY—AUGUST 13**GOD’S WILL: HOLINESS
(1 Thessalonians 4:3)**

First Thessalonians 4:3–8 shows one thought. The will of God for each Thessalonian believer is “holiness” or “sanctification”¹ (1 Thessalonians 4:3, 4, 7, ESV). What Paul means by holiness here is explained by the two following verses. Each believer is expected to avoid “sexual” impurity (sin) and to “control” his own body (1 Thessalonians 4:3, 4, NIV). Paul closes this thought with three reasons for holy living (1 Thessalonians 4:6–8): (1) God is the one who gives punishment for these matters. (2) God has called us to holiness. (3) God gives us the Spirit to help us. In today’s lesson and the next two, we will be studying these verses in more detail.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7. How are the two verses connected? What is the basic message of both, and how is that message true of us today?

Verse 3 builds on verse 1. In verse 1, Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how they were to “walk” (NKJV) or “live.” This is a Hebrew idea used to describe daily moral² and ethical³ behavior. In verse 3 Paul uses another Hebrew idea to describe spiritual life and growth: “holiness” or “sanctification.”

1. sanctification—righteous (holy) living.

2. moral—righteous (holy).

3. ethical—referring to rules people use to try to live correctly.

4. grace—God’s gift of mercy that He gives us to take away our sins.

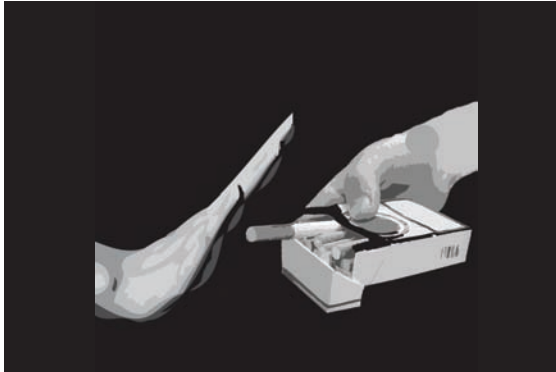
Holiness means “set apart for sacred [holy] use.” But Paul gives the word extra-special meaning in this letter. Holiness is the condition the Thessalonians will be in at the return of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 3:13). But in chapter 4, Paul chooses an idea that points to daily practice rather than the result. It is a noun of action: “sanctifying” (our daily living) more than “sanctification” (the end result). He wants to show that it is the will of God that we practice holy living daily (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

Paul clearly does not support a law-free gospel. There are behavioral requirements for those who are in Christ. In verse 7, the opposite of “holiness” is “uncleanness” (NKJV) or “impurity” (ESV). As Paul goes on to explain in verse 3: “you should avoid sexual immorality [impurity; sin]” (1 Thessalonians 4:3, NIV). The word for “sexual immorality” is *porneia* in Greek. Today this would cover everything from pornography (sexual books and pictures) to prostitution (the use of sex for money), to any sexual activity outside of marriage.

Salvation is by God’s grace⁴ through faith. But the Christian life is to be a growing life, one in which we work daily for the perfection that has been promised us in Christ.

The gift of sexuality is powerful proof of God’s love for us. But this gift has been so abused that it often has become a curse, or a cause of great suffering and sorrow. What

choices can we make that will help to protect us from the damage caused by the abuse of this gift?



It is the will of God that we practice holy living every day of our lives.

TUESDAY—AUGUST 14

NOT LIKE THE GENTILES (NON-JEWS) (1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5. What message do you find in these verses? What do they say to you as a person?

Some of the thinkers we learned about in lesson 3 attacked many of the ways in which people can focus (put their attention) too much on sex. But in Paul's day, Gentile society as a whole had little or no sexual control. According to the well-known pagan (idol-worshipping) speaker Cicero, "If there is anyone who thinks that youth should not have sex outside of marriage, he is no doubt very moral [pure] . . . but his opinion does not agree with the people of this time. It also disagrees with the customs of people in the past. For when was this not a common practice? . . . When was it forbidden?"

—Adapted from Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians, The Anchor Bible*, volume 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pages 235, 236.

In today's world, many are against sexual control of any kind. They feel that verses like 1 Thessalonians 4: 4, 5 speak of some other time and place, not the present. But the world in Bible times was just as sexually impure and loose as our world today. Paul's message was no more acceptable to the people of his time than it is to the people of today.



To "possess our vessels" means to "control our bodies."

Paul's answer to the problem of too much sex is that every man should "possess [control] his vessel" (1 Thessalonians 4:4). The word translated as "possess" normally means "acquire" (get) in the Greek. But the meaning of "acquire his vessel" is not clear. If Paul means "woman," as does Peter in 1 Peter 3:7, he is saying that every man should marry a woman in order to avoid sexual impurity.

But most modern translations understand that the word *vessel* means the man's own body. In that case, the

wording “possess his vessel” should be interpreted (explained) as “control his own body” (NIV).

Either way, Paul clearly is against the moral looseness (indecent behavior) of his own time. Christians are not to behave (do) as the Gentiles do. The rules of popular society are not the rules for us today. Sex is holy. It is set apart for holy marriage between a man and a woman. As Paul goes on to point out in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, sex can never be a common practice among unmarried people. This is because when practiced outside of holy marriage, sex is destructive. Who has not witnessed in the lives of others, or in their own lives, just how destructive this gift can be when abused?



Sex is holy, set apart for holy marriage between a man and a woman.

WEDNESDAY—AUGUST 15

ACCORDING TO GOD’S PLAN (1 Thessalonians 4:6–8)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:6–8. What is Paul saying about sexual impurity?

A man who had been sexually

active outside of marriage said to a pastor: “As a young man, I learned to think of sex and love as one and the same thing. But, when I got married, I discovered that premarital sex [sex before marriage] destroys your body (I got a venereal [from sex] disease) and your mind too. My wife and I are now Christians. But we have had to struggle with the mental and emotional [having strong feelings] problems I brought into our marriage from the past.”

The Bible’s rules are there not because God wants to prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Rather, the rules protect us from the physical and emotional damage caused by sexual impurity. We control ourselves sexually because we care about the influence of our lives on others. Every person is a soul for whom Christ died. No one should be sexually used or abused in any way. To do so is to sin not only against that person but to sin against God too. (Read Genesis 39:9.) Sex is not only about how we treat others but about how we treat Christ in the person of others. (Read also Matthew 25:34–46.)

Sex has an influence on our relationship with God. The Gentiles who do not know God are the ones who have passionate (deep) lust (1 Thessalonians 4:5). It is a lack of knowledge about God that causes the Gentiles’ impure sexual actions. Those who refuse to follow the Bible’s teachings on this subject also do not accept the call of God Himself (1 Thessalonians 4:8).

On the other hand, when we follow

God's plan, sex becomes a beautiful example of the self-sacrificing (giving) love that God poured out on us in Christ. (Read also John 13: 34, 35.) Sex in marriage is a gift of God to be enjoyed according to God's will for us. It powerfully shows the kind of love God has for people. It also shows the kind of closeness that God wants with His people.

We are told in 1 Thessalonians 4:7 to live a "holy life" (NIV). What do you think this means? Is this verse talking about more than just sex? If so, what else might it include?



Every person is a soul for whom Christ died.

THURSDAY—AUGUST 16

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS (1 Thessalonians 4:9–12)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 and 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. What parts of the earlier verses does Paul speak of again in today's verses?

The Greeks had several words for "love." Two of them are found in the

New Testament. *Eros* (not found in the New Testament) is the Greek word that gives us the word *erotic*. It means the sexual side of love. *Agape* is the word most used for love in the New Testament. It speaks of the self-sacrificing side of love. It is often used to describe Christ's love for us as shown at the Cross.

Another Greek word for love, *philos*, is the key word in our verses for today. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what they already know about "brotherly love." The Greek word behind brotherly love is the word from which the city of Philadelphia gets its name. In the Gentile world, *philadelphias* means love for blood relations. But the church stretched this meaning to include love for fellow believers, or one's Christian family of choice. This kind of family love is taught by God. And it is a miracle of God's grace whenever it happens.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12. In your own words, describe Paul's warning to the Thessalonians about business and work in the city setting.

The Thessalonian church seemed to have many lazy troublemakers. Excitement about the second coming of Jesus may have led some members to quit their jobs and become dependent on their Gentile neighbors. But being ready to witness at all times does not mean making trouble or being nosy or lazy on the job or in the neighborhood. For some outsiders, the closest glimpses they will ever get of the church is through the

impressions they get from watching the actions of known Christians in their everyday lives.

Paul's answer to the Thessalonians' problem was to encourage them to be ambitious ("aspire")—not for power, honors, or influence but to live a "quiet life" (1 Thessalonians 4:11). This would mean minding their own business and working with their hands. In the world of Paul's day, manual labor was the main method of self-support. In today's world, Paul would probably say, "Support yourself and your family and save a little extra to help those in real need."

How could we use the words of Paul in our own lives in the modern world?

FRIDAY—AUGUST 17

ADDITIONAL STUDY: "Love is a pure and holy principle [important rule]. But lustful passion will not accept limits. It will not be commanded or controlled by reason. It is blind to destructive results. It will not reason from start to finish."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, volume 1, page 222.

"Those who would not fall into Satan's trap must guard well the pathways to the soul. They must avoid reading, seeing, or hearing that which will suggest impure thoughts. The mind must not be left to think about every subject that the enemy of souls may suggest. The heart must be faithfully supervised [controlled]. If not, evils outside the person will

awaken evils within. And the soul will wander in darkness."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 518.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① In *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 518 (read in Friday's study), Ellen G. White talks about guarding well "the pathways to the soul." How can believers do this? What suggestions does this principle (important rule) have for our choices in entertainment and education?

② In 1 Thessalonians, Paul often uses the wording "more and more" to describe growth in character (who someone is) and Christian behavior. What can churches do to encourage this kind of "more and more"?

③ If a young person asked you to give at least two good reasons why he or she should wait until marriage before having sex, what would you say, and why?

SUMMARY: In the first 12 verses of chapter 4, Paul talks about the two most difficult problems found in most churches, especially city churches. Sexuality is a very private matter. But there is great danger to the church when sexual impurity is not dealt with. Equally important is the kind of church the world sees in the neighborhood and the workplace. Paul's guidelines in these matters are as important today as they were in his time.