

# Wise Counsel from Thessalonians

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## Introduction.

- A. There are many around us in the world today, both in the community of the religious and outside of it, who claim that the Bible is out-of-date. More precisely, they claim that the moral restrictions of the Bible are out-of-date. Nobody has a problem with Jesus; it's just His teachings they don't like. These people say that times have changed since the first century, and that today, we can be much "freer" with our morals without harm.
- B. This is the prevailing message of our culture, yet, strangely enough, nearly every major problem that this country faces today can be traced to a behavior that is condemned in the Bible. Let me ask you a few questions. What would happen to AIDS and the other sexually transmitted diseases if everyone in America gave up promiscuity? What would happen to our crime rates if everyone in America resolved to live an honest life? What would happen in our schools if everyone in America dedicated themselves to following God's plan for the family? Friends, modern-day America does not show that mankind has grown beyond the Bible. It only shows just how much we need it. The Bible is fully as relevant now as it has ever been.
- C. Because this is so, we need to recognize that the Bible is not just nationally relevant, but personally relevant. If we wish to live satisfying lives here and claim eternal life hereafter, as individuals, we need to seek and obey the practical wisdom of Scripture. There are myriads of passages that we can examine to this end, but one that rings particularly true today is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-12. This section of the book written by the apostle Paul to the new Christians in the city of Thessalonica gives both them and us important practical insights into what it takes to please God. Let's turn our attention, then, to wise counsel from Thessalonians.

## I. Abstain from Immorality.

- A. The first instruction that 1 Thessalonians gives us is to abstain from immorality. This is what we see in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. Sometimes, it seems like our culture believes it invented sexual sin, that before 1960, nobody in the world ever thought of it before. Of course, this is plainly not the case. The Gentile world of the time of Christ was filled with sexual immorality of every kind. Adultery, homosexuality, and prostitution were rampant. God's solution to the problem then is still the same today: we must be moral people.
- B. In instructing the Thessalonians on this subject, Paul warns them against the "lustful passion" that marked the sin of the Gentiles, and we need to remember this as well. The root of the problem of sexual sin is not the sin itself; it is the lust that gives birth to the sin. Sometimes, as Christians, we get the idea that it's OK to think, as long as we don't do, but that is absolutely not the position that God's word takes. If we allow evil desire to corrupt our hearts, soon that lustful passion will corrupt our actions too.
- C. We need to recognize, though, that Paul's teaching on purity here is not entirely negative. Christians, especially in times past, have read too much into the Bible's teaching on immorality and leapt to the conclusion that all sex is bad. That is just as much a distortion of Biblical truth as saying that promiscuity is good. Like everything else created by God, sex, when used rightfully, is a good thing. It only becomes evil when men twist and misuse it through lust. Paul describes the proper outlet for desire in 1 Thessalonians 4:4. Though it is worded delicately, this passage is actually an instruction to engage in relations, provided that this is done in sanctification and honor. The Hebrews writer explains how this can be in Hebrews 13:4. Sex is intended for marriage, and within the scope of marriage, it is both sanctified and honorable.
- D. This is something that we need to understand ourselves, and it is something that we need to teach our children. Now, this is a private topic, and no one relishes the thought of having a frank discussion with one's own twelve-year-old child, but it is absolutely necessary. If we do not, if we shy away from this responsibility, we are not protecting them. We are merely allowing someone else to teach them. That someone else may be the guidance counselor at school who will teach them everything about anatomy, but nothing about morality. It may be the trashy singer on MTV, it may be the kids in the locker room, or, God forbid, it may be the boyfriend or girlfriend in the back seat of the car, but someone WILL teach them. What shall we do? Shall we avoid the topic merely because it is unpleasant, and leave our children without allies in their struggle against sin? Or will we do what we must, so that our children will do what they should? It's up to us.

## II. Do Not Defraud One Another.

- A. Paul's most specific comments about immorality, however, concern not our children, but ourselves, when he instructs us not to defraud one another. This is his point in 1 Thessalonians 4:6-8. Paul speaks here of the sin of adultery. Now, adultery is one of those sins that seems beyond the pale, that only really bad people would do, that we ourselves would never do. Now, I certainly hope that is the case, but when I lived in Missouri, I knew Christians who committed adultery, when I lived in Texas, I knew Christians who committed adultery,

and somehow, I don't think Christians in Illinois are immune. If indeed adultery is impossible for us, it is because we have made it impossible, because we have fortified our hearts and our lives against sin.

- B. To do this, we first need to think about what an evil thing adultery is. When we commit adultery, we sin against our spouses by breaking our marriage vows, we sin against God by violating the vow we made before Him and the covenant we made at baptism, we sin against our partner in adultery by tempting them to sin, and, as Paul says, we sin against our partner's spouse by defrauding them of what rightly is theirs alone. It is difficult to think of another sin with as much immediate spiritual impact.
- C. Second, we need to consider the consequences of adultery. Consider what Solomon says in Proverbs 6:27-29. We like to say that if you play with fire, you're going to get burned, and adultery is the worst kind of fire that there is. If you really want to ruin your life and put it on the garbage heap, adultery is a good place to start. It tears husbands and wives apart, it destroys families, it wrecks finances, it disrupts churches, and it incurs the wrath of God. There is no such thing as a harmless little fling. Adultery is deadly.
- D. Clearly, then, adultery is something that we need to keep out of our lives at all costs. We begin this process by being first and foremost dedicated to our spouses. If we need something from a member of the opposite sex, we must fulfill that need in our husbands or our wives, even if that need is platonic. Even something as apparently innocuous as a close friendship with an opposite-sex co-worker or Christian can plant the seeds of adultery, and friendship is where most affairs begin. Let's be wise. Let's not give the devil an opportunity.

### III. Abound in Brotherly Love.

- A. However, even while we keep ourselves pure, we need to remember to abound in brotherly love. This is how Paul instructs us next, in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10. In the original Greek, there are actually two different words for "love" that are used in the same verse. "Brotherly love" comes from the Greek *phileo*, which means to have a warm affection for someone else. The second "love," though, comes from the Greek *agape*, which is the self-sacrificing love exemplified in Christ dying on the cross for us. Paul isn't using these different words by accident. He's telling us that we need to express the affection that we have for our brethren by living in a way that seeks our brethren's good before our own. We need to *phileo* in an *agape* way.
- B. Indeed, we need to see everything that we do as Christians as an expression of love, and we need to use everything we do as an expression of love. Look at Paul's words on the subject in Romans 13:8-10. "Love your neighbor" is the basic command of Christianity, and every other commandment is an application. Every other commandment is a way to love. In fact, if all of us were perfectly wise and perfectly good, God would just be able to tell us "love Me and love each other," and we'd be able to figure out everything else from that. The reason why God didn't, of course, that we aren't perfectly wise and perfectly good, so He has to spell it out for us. Love is everywhere in Christianity, and it needs to be everywhere in our lives too.
- C. In fact, this week, let's each of us challenge ourselves to be especially loving toward one another. Let's each of us take the time to think about a Christian who is not a family member and figure out some way to do something loving for them that we wouldn't normally do. It might be having someone over for Sunday dinner. It might be saying encouraging words to someone about their service to God. It might be meeting some need that you know someone else has. Let's look for an opportunity, use it, and let God's love shine in us.

### IV. Lead a Quiet Life.

- A. Finally, Paul admonishes us to lead a quiet life. We see this instruction in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. There are a number of things that are subparts of this instruction, so let's go through and look at them one by one. First on the list is the command to lead a quiet life itself. The Greek here is amusingly phrased. If we were to translate it literally, it would say something like "seek eagerly to be quiet." It makes me think of my childhood days, when I was renowned for being both talkative and loud. I suspect there were many occasions upon which both my parents and teachers wished that I would seek eagerly to be quiet!
- B. The point for adults is similar. We've all known contentious people, people who were always complaining about something, always stirring up trouble. This verse admonishes us to be quiet people instead, people who are known for their peaceable nature instead of their contentiousness. Similarly, we need to be people who mind our own business, people who aren't always interfering in the lives of others. We've all known busybodies, too, and although Christians should be concerned for others, we should never behave as though we are the lord of other people's lives. Lastly, this verse instructs us to work with our hands. This doesn't mean that all Christians have to be manual laborers; it simply tells us that, insofar as we are able, we should earn an honest living. Look at Paul's comments on the subject in Ephesians 4:28, which make the point quite well. We aren't to steal with our hands or our minds. We're to work with them instead.
- C. Paul then identifies the effects that this lifestyle is to have. By being quiet and minding our own business, we behave properly toward outsiders. It doesn't mean that they won't start trouble with us, but it does mean that we won't start trouble with them. By working with our own hands, we keep ourselves from need and may even be able to store up something with which to help others. That's the life that God expects from us.

**Conclusion.** If you haven't been living in this way, repent and return to the God of heaven today.