

1 Thessalonians 4

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To me, one of the most striking things about the Scripture is how consistently relevant it is. We live in a very different time than did our brethren in the early church. We don't have miraculous spiritual gifts today, we don't struggle with Judaizing false teachers, and we are not constantly persecuted by our fellows or the government.

Even though all of those things are true, we see a great sameness between the spiritual challenges that presented themselves to the early Christians and the spiritual challenges that we face today. For example, most of us would agree that we live in a society that is extremely sexually immoral. The people around us are constantly caught up in a merry-go-round of adultery, fornication, and divorce and remarriage. It destroys them, and it poses a tremendous temptation to us.

This same pattern of sexual sin, though, was every bit as prevalent in the first century. The church in Thessalonica, for instance, was located in a predominantly Gentile port city, and it had to face all the immorality that such a setting implies. In a world where sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and AIDS were unknown, and where the predominant culture was famously wanton and uninhibited, our brethren of 2000 years ago were under even more pressure to engage in the same sort of sexual sin that their friends and neighbors reveled in.

Nor was this all. Even though we benefit from 2000 years of medical advances, we don't do a better job of beating the Grim Reaper than the ancient Greeks and Romans did. We defeat diseases like polio and smallpox, but new diseases like cancer and Alzheimer's continue to fill the cemeteries. It is a certainty that for as long as people are born, they will continue to die, and death poses just as much of a problem for us as it did for the Thessalonians.

When we notice similarities like these, it leads us to appreciate the word even more, and to recognize just how much we have to gain from its study. Let's see what we can learn, then, from 1 Thessalonians 4.

Righteousness and Purity.

Within the chapter, the first of these so-very-relevant instructions that Paul gives to the Thessalonians is to **ABOUND IN RIGHTEOUSNESS**. We find this exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2. Here, Paul deals with one of the most common problems for Christians from any age, the problem of plateauing. We reach a point in our lives where we're satisfied with our level of spiritual achievement. We decide that we're fine the way we are, and we start coasting.

That's an easy trap to fall into, but it's a dangerous one. The coasting life is not the life that Jesus has commanded us to lead. None of us are faithfully fulfilling all of His instructions, so that means that all of us, from the most venerable elder to the rawest new Christian, all of us have work to do. Precisely what that work is varies greatly from person to person, but we all have room to grow. If we're among those who only assemble once a week or so, we can grow more by coming to more services. If we're already here every time the doors are opened, we can look for ways to bring Christ to the rest of our lives by working for Him in the church or reaching out to outsiders. If we're already doing all of those things, we can sink some more effort into doing them better. No matter what our situation is, our Lord's commandment to us is never "Sit tight. You're fine." Instead, it's always, "abound still more."

As part of this overall effort, we need to **ABOUND IN PURITY**. Paul drives this point home in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. According to this text, what makes us holy is not just our sanctification through Jesus, but also the holy choices that we make. We can't claim to be obedient to God if we constantly refuse to be holy.

In vs. 4-5, Paul makes an important distinction between what God wants us to be and what the devil wants us to be. God created us all as sexual creatures, with sexual desires. That's where just about all of us start out. What happens from there is up to us. We can let that sexual desire move us to choose a spouse, and when we come together with that spouse, it is a pure and honorable thing. Sex in marriage isn't dirty. Indeed, it's quite the opposite. It glorifies God.

On the other hand, we can let that sexual impulse drive us to all kinds of illicit encounters, and that kind of joining does nothing to give God the glory. Instead, it represents nothing more than an expression of lustful passion. When we make that evil decision, we reduce ourselves to nothing more than brute beasts, totally controlled by our impulses. We take that which God gave to be a source of joy and companionship and pervert it into a tool of destruction.

This destruction appears both in our relationship with God and in our relationship with others. First, no matter how common they may be in the world outside this auditorium, we must make no mistake. Adultery is a sin. Fornication is a sin. All of those other things that go under the ironic heading of "fooling around", they are sins. When we interact sexually with anyone but a lawful spouse, we transgress God's law, separate ourselves from Him, and invite His wrath.

Sexual sin, though, isn't just transgression. It is also fraud. This is particularly evident in the case of adultery. There's a reason why we call it cheating—because it is. When we commit adultery, we are cheating our spouse and our companion's spouse out of one of the most important rights of marriage. Our spouses have the right to expect that our bodies are for them only. They have the right to expect that our desires are for them only. They have the right to the

security and trust that are so precious in all of our marriages. Adultery robs them of all of those things. The same is true in fornication. When the unmarried sin with each other, they cheat their future spouses. What a terrible, selfish thing it is when Christians choose to engage in so unloving an act! Let's make sure we are never among those who do.

If none of this is enough to deter us from adultery, we must remember that God is the avenger of the wronged spouse. His vengeance often appears first in this life. As Moses remarks in Numbers 32, you can be sure that your sin will find you out. My dad tells the story of a man he went to church with in southern New Jersey. This man decided to embark on an affair. So that he wouldn't be discovered, he took his mistress all the way to New York City to show her a good time. One night, he takes her in to some fancy restaurant, and sitting right there by the door is a couple that he goes to church with back home. There are probably a hundred thousand restaurants in New York City, and they walk into the only one that would let the cat out of the bag. To paraphrase Paul, if God is against you, then who can be for you?

Of course, the only thing worse than being discovered in sexual sin is not being discovered. If we continue in our evil unrepentantly until we die, it will destroy us. John says specifically in Revelation 21 that the sexually immoral will be eternally punished. Sexual sin isn't just playing with fire. It's playing with fire and brimstone.

Love and Hope.

In addition to this solemn warning against impurity, Paul also encourages the Thessalonians to **ABOUND IN LOVE**. His words on this subject appear in 1 Thessalonian 4:9-12. This passage has two main sub-parts to it. In the first, Paul exhorts his audience to express their love for one another through caring for one another. The Thessalonians were already clued in about this, so much so that they were caring for Christians in need throughout their entire province. Paul applauds this even while he encourages them to do better. No matter how good they were, they still had room to grow.

In the same way, all of us have room for growth in the way we care for one another. Thankfully, we live in an affluent society. I'm not aware of any brethren in the congregation here who don't have a roof over their heads or enough to eat. However, that doesn't free us of the obligation to love. Our shut-ins are always with us, and they always appreciate visits, calls, cards, and prayers. Likewise, we need to attend to the spiritual needs of those on the fringe, the forgotten members of our congregation, so that they can feel as warmed and loved as anybody.

That's the first component of love. The second, though, is caring for ourselves. Paul here paints a picture of what our lives should be like as Christians. We live quiet, tranquil lives. We stay out of everyone else's business. We work to provide for ourselves and our families. In short, we're people that our friends and neighbors can respect.

This kind of life is loving for two reasons. First, it keeps us from being a burden to our brethren. They don't have to see all of their hard-earned money going to provide for us in our idle lifestyle, they don't have to worry about our escapades bringing disgrace on the church, and they don't have to contend with all kinds of gossip that we're spreading. We keep our nose clean and make their lives better instead of worse. Second, though, this is the way we need to live if we want to be effective evangelistically. If we want outsiders to respect our message, we have to make sure that they respect us first. We have to be people they can look up to. Who in the world is going to want to study the Bible with us if they think they're already morally better than we are? We need to live Christ, not just preach Him.

Finally, Paul wants to see the Thessalonians, and us as well, **ABOUND IN HOPE**. This appears in the final segment of the chapter, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul here is evidently writing in response to a question that Timothy brought back from the Thessalonians. Apparently, even in the short time since Paul had left them, some of the Thessalonian Christians had passed on, perhaps even as a result of persecution.

In response, Paul describes the hope that they can have for the dead in Christ. Even though it's still hard to lose a loved one, we don't have to mourn as those who have no hope, and there is no worse feeling than hopelessness in the face of death. A few years ago, I preached a funeral for a woman who was not any kind of religious person, and whose family wasn't religious either. Let me tell you, friends, those next of kin were in the most pitiable state imaginable. They quite literally howled with grief, shrieked with grief. If I'd asked them, I'm sure they would have said that their relative was in heaven, but they didn't have the faith to really believe it, and they were utterly wretched as a result.

That's not the way it is for us. Unlike them, we do have a hope. The same God who raised Christ from the dead has promised that He will raise all of His children from the dead, and even in the midst of our mourning, we can find comfort in that promise. Between Christians, there is no permanent parting. If they die in faith, and we live in faith, we can be assured that we will see them again, and that we will spend eternity with them and God in heaven.

Notice, though, that all of this takes place in a simple, straightforward process. Jesus returns in the skies, the dead in Christ are raised from the dead and ascend to meet the Lord, the Christians who are still living are caught up in the clouds with them, and then, after the judgment, we live eternally with the Lord. There aren't any end-of-the-world battles in this narrative. There aren't any thousand-year reigns or anything else like that. Instead, it is a simple reunion of brother with brother, sister with sister, and all of us brought together with our Elder Brother, Jesus. What a comfort it is for all of us to know that when our lives are over, death will only be a short prelude to an even greater joy!