

A Study of 1 Thessalonians



After receiving an encouraging report on the Thessalonian church from Timothy, Paul writes to encourage and exhort the church in areas where they could improve. Up to this point, most of his words have described his love and thanksgiving for these young Christians. Still, he knows that they are “lacking” in some areas.¹ The hope of the Apostle Paul is that his brothers and sisters in Christ in Thessalonica will be able to stand blameless in holiness before God at the Second Coming of Christ.

Living to Please God (4:1-12)

Paul begins this chapter with the word finally indicating a shift to his closing thoughts to the Thessalonians. From this point forward we get to the “meat” of Paul’s teaching and exhortation. The instruction is worded personally and strongly to indicate its importance to Paul. He appeals to them as “brothers” and urges them as those who are “in the Lord Jesus.” This is a strong personal appeal based on their relationship to Paul and their position in Christ.

The first part of the appeal is the general instruction to the Christians to live to please God in the way that they had been taught. This teaching from Paul originated from Christ himself. He tells them to keep doing what they had been taught and are already doing. They should not give up, but live to please God more and more. The idea is that the Thessalonians are living in obedience, but there is always room to grow in love for Christ and obedience to him.

1. Why would the instruction to live to please God be given to people who were already living to please God?
2. Why was it necessary for Paul to say that his teaching came through the Lord Jesus?

In verse 3, Paul begins specific instruction to the Thessalonian Christians and he prefaces this section by saying that this is the will of God for their sanctification. The term “sanctification” in the Bible describes the process of becoming holy. Those things (or people) who are sanctified are “set apart” for the service of God. Sanctification is a life long process for Christians whose desire it is to become more and more like Jesus. Every person who is a Christian should desire to live a life that is holy.



¹ 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

The first instruction that is according to the will of God for the Christian's sanctification is negatively stated. A Christian is to "abstain from sexual immorality." The word "abstain" means to not participate at all or to completely keep oneself from.

The word translated as "sexual immorality"² refers to any sexual sin. This refers to **any** sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as instituted and sanctioned by God. It includes any sexual activity before marriage, with anyone to whom a person is not married, and all homosexual activity.

3. How should we respond to a brother or sister who says, "It's okay because God wants us to be happy," or "we are consenting adults" or "we're not hurting anyone?"

The Will of God

The Will of God indicates that which God desires to happen. There are different aspects to God's Will. His **ultimate** will is certain. For example, God says that he will send Jesus back to earth, the world as we know it will end, and there will be a final judgment. This will happen because God wills that it will happen.

There is also God's **desired** will. It is God's desire that all men should accept and obey him (2 Peter 3:9.) It was God's desired will that the Thessalonians obeyed as Paul instructs them.

We can also speak of God's **permissive** will. God permits man to exercise this free will choices even when they are contrary to God's desired will.

The world of first century Thessalonica was one of great sexual immorality. Sexual activity was a part of some pagan worship and prostitution was legal, accepted, and readily available. It was common for married men to have mistresses as well as a wife.³

4. Does the common practice of a particular sin, its ready availability, or acceptance in society have anything to do with God's acceptance of that sin? How does the answer you gave affect Christians in today's world?

Verse four continues with the instruction against sexual immorality by stating in a positive way: "know how to control" your own body in a way that is holy and honourable. Christians are set apart to God and are to use their bodies in a way that treats sexuality as something profoundly valuable and saved only for the marital relationship.

Paul knows his teachings are counter-cultural. Sexual immorality was open, accepted, and expected. That is why he prefaced his instruction by saying, "This is God's will." This teaching comes from the Lord Jesus. This teaching is for your "sanctification." What Paul taught is counter-cultural, and difficult, but Christians are not to be led by the culture in which they live. Christians are to be led by faithfulness to a God that is holy and calls for his people to live lives that are holy.

5. What is the current view of human sexuality in today's world?

² The Greek word *porneia* is here translated as sexual immorality.

³ Smith, James E. *Teacher's Commentary: The Eschatological Epistles*. Lulu, 2011, p. 57.

Paul tells the Thessalonians they are not to use their bodies “in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” The Gentile sexual behaviour was designed only to please self. These pagans act as they do because they do not know God. A Christian is to be able to control his or her sexual passion.

Verse six needs to be understood in the context of this discussion on sexual immorality. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 7 that the bodies of husbands and wives belong to each other. When a person is sexually active with someone prior to marriage, and does not marry that person, they are robbing any future spouse of the opportunity to marry a virgin and have taken something to which they were not entitled. If a husband or wife is sexually active with someone to whom they are not married, they rob their spouse of something that is exclusively theirs.



6. In verse 6 what is the Lord called and what does this mean?

Three reasons are given to avoid sexual immorality in verses 6 and 7. First, God is an avenger. The punishment he will administer should serve as a warning. Second, the explicit call of God is to holiness not impurity. Third, The one who does not obey the call to sexual purity disregards the teaching of God who gives the Holy Spirit that lives in the life of a Christian. In sexual immorality a person takes the very residence of the Holy Spirit and uses it as an agent of sin.

In verse 9 Paul changes the topic to brotherly love. He has already commended the Thessalonians love for one another. Brotherly love is that found within a family; in this case the family of God. They demonstrated their love throughout not only Thessalonica, but throughout Macedonia.

7. Why does Paul instruct the Thessalonians to love each other when they have already demonstrated this love?

8. What is the meaning of “more and more” in verses 1 and 10?

In verses 11 and 12 Paul provides three practical pieces of advice for living in a world opposed to the faith.

First, “aspire to live quietly.” In a world opposed to the Christian it is prudent to strive to be peaceable and to not draw attention to oneself.

Second, “mind your own affairs.” Do not intrude into personal situations that are none of your business.

Third, “work with your hands.” This instruction is not that a person needs to be a craftsman or any specific type of labourer, but that honest work where a person provides for the needs of his family is to be desired. We will see in following sections of 1 Thessalonians that some thought the Lord’s return was imminent so they did not

see the need to earn a livelihood. Paul refutes this idea and says that work, as opposed to idleness, is the proper lifestyle for the Christian.



The one who follows these practical instructions gains two rewards for his efforts.

First, he is able to “walk properly before outsiders.” Sometimes the Christian is able to earn the respect of non-Christians, but even if that is not possible, they are able to see that he has lived according to his convictions.

Second, he is able to provide for his own needs without having to call upon the help of others. In no way does this negate the Christian teaching to help those in need, but it does teach that a man should work to support himself and his family.

9. Are non-believers influenced by the lifestyle of Christians? If so, how?

10. Describe how Christians should be both independent and interdependent. (See vs. 12)

In the final two chapters of 1 Thessalonians, Paul will provide instruction for the Thessalonians and answer questions they have about their lives of faith. He begins with a teaching on living in order to please God.

A Christian cannot please a holy God without living in a way that is holy in sexual matters. The world of a first century Greek city and the world of modern Australia places few sexual restraints upon the ordinary citizen. Like first century Thessalonica we see the common practice of sexual relationships before and outside of marriage, prostitution, and homosexual practice, and we have added the widespread availability and use of pornography. It is no wonder that human sexuality has lost the type of honour, respect, dignity, and sanctity it deserves.

We are in a counter-cultural battle and the call to be pure is a great challenge. We must remember that this teaching comes directly from God who gives us his Holy Spirit and that disobedience in this teaching is to disregard God himself. This instruction carries a warning from the God who is an avenger.

Along with a holy life, the Christian is to love his brothers and sisters in Christ both in his own congregation as well as around the world. Our desire to please God and our desire to practice holiness should continuously grow more and more.

Though we live in a world opposed to Christian values, we aspire to live quietly, to mind our own affairs, and to work to provide for our needs. By our attitudes and industry we demonstrate to the world that we are counter-cultural people who love God and our fellow man.