

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – Your Sanctification

I. Review

- A. 1 Thess 1:1-3:13 – Paul praises God for the Thessalonians positive response of fear of God, faith in Christ, and example-setting after his preaching ministry there. He reaffirms his pure motives as an apostle of Christ as assures them of his longing, zeal, and love for their church.
- B. 1 Thess 3:11-13 – Paul ends with a glorious benediction (i.e., a special prayer of blessing offered by God’s representative, who asks God to bless his people):

"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." (1 Thess 3:11-13)

II. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – God’s Will for You: Your Sanctification

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: (C-1) that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ (C-2) that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ (C-3) that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, (R-1) because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ (R-2) For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ (R-3) Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thess 4:1-12)

1. Why do you think it is appropriate for Paul to use the term “walk” to describe the Christian life? Where do you walk in a given day? Were the Thessalonians “walking” well? What was Paul’s encouragement to them in light of this?

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Gal 5:16)

"Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (Joh 8:12)

"...keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us." (2 Thess 3:6)

Q. What is sanctification?

- A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness. (Westminster Shorter

2. After his general introduction (vv. 1-2), what aspect of our sanctification does Paul say here “please[s] God”? What is “God’s will” for them (and us)?

“The words for ‘abstaining’ and ‘sanctification’ both include an element of ‘separation’. ...[T]he Thessalonian Christians were to be morally separate, or different (i.e., ‘holy’) from those of their Thessalonian neighbors, in the area of sexual habits. ...The Christian’s actions, whether sexual activity within marriage or abstaining from sexual activity outside of marriage, are to be characterized as holy and honorable.”

- Robert J. Cara, *Thessalonians*, 108.

3. What are the expanded commands Paul gives that are related to sexual purity (C-2, C-3)? Who do we “honor” when we exercise self-control (C-2)? Whom do we “transgress and wrong” when we don’t (C-3)?

4. According to John Chrysostom, what contributes to our struggle for sexual purity besides our corrupt heart? What does he mean by

5. How does v. 5 implicitly offer a tremendous motivator for holiness for struggling Christians?

“We have bodies so that God might be gloried in them. That is why God gave you a body – whether it’s tall or short, pretty or plain, brawny or feeble. This is what Paul said in Philippians 1:20, ‘It is my eager expectation and hope that Christ will . . . be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.’ Our bodies are given to us so that in the way we use them Christ is made to look more valuable to us than anything.”

- John Piner

6. What are the other three reasons (R-1, R-2, R-3) Paul gives for pursuing sexual purity? Does God’s “call...in holiness” abandon us to our devices (see below)?

“O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.” (Ps 99:8)

“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...” (2 Tim 1:8-9)

“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” (1 Thess 5:24)

“How can we who died to sin still live in it?³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin...”

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. (Rom 6:1-4, 6, 11-12)

John Chrysostom [(c. 347-407 AD), *Homily 5 on Thessalonians*] on Sexual Sin:

Bear with me speaking somewhat impure, if I may say so---... For a physician wishing to remove a putrid sore, first thrusts his fingers into the wound, and if he does not first defile his healing hands, he will not be able to cure it. So it is with me. Unless I first defile my mouth, that heals your passions, I shall not be able to heal you... With your [permission], I will tell you the cause [of your lusts]. For youth is not the cause, since then all young men would be dissolute. *But we thrust ourselves into the fire.* For when you go up to the theater, and sit feasting your eyes with the nakedness of women, for the time indeed you are delighted, but afterwards, you have nourished thence a mighty fever. When you see women exhibited as it were in the form of their bodies and spectacles and songs containing nothing else but irregular loves... tell me, how will you be able to continue chaste afterwards, these narratives, these spectacles, these songs occupying your soul, and dreams of this sort henceforth succeeding. For it is the nature of the soul for the most part to raise visions of such things, as it wishes for and desires in the daytime. Therefore when you there both see base actions, and hear baser words, and receive indeed the wounds but do not apply the remedies, how will not the sore naturally be increased? How will not the disease become more intense; and in a much greater degree than in our bodies?

Let us be ashamed, let us be afraid, if the Gentiles, that know not God, are often chaste. Let us turn for shame, when we are worse than they. ... For what is more easy than to walk in the market-place? But from the excess of laziness it has become difficult... What is more easy than to sleep? But we have made even this difficult. ...And in short nothing is difficult, when men are willing; as nothing is easy, when they are unwilling; *for we are masters of all these things.* On this account the Scripture says, 'If you be willing and hear me, you shall eat the good of the land' (Is 1:19). And again, 'If you be unwilling, and hear not, you shall be eaten by the sword' (Is 1:20). So that all depends upon being willing or unwilling. On this account we both are punished and are praised. But may it be ours, being of those who are praised, to obtain the promised blessings, by the grace and lovingkindness [of God].

John Owen [*Works*, VI:30-32] on Mortifying (i.e., killing by the Holy Spirit) Sin:

To constantly fight against sin is a big part of mortification. We need to recognize the enemy we are dealing with and that he is to be destroyed by all means possible. The battle is a hazardous one that deals with issues of eternity. When a man sees his lust as a trivial thing, it is an indication that he is not mortified. We cannot go forward unless we recognize the danger of our own hearts. We need to be intimately acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions in which lust has the victory. This the way men deal with their enemies. They search out their plans, ponder their goal, and consider how and by what means they have prevailed in the past. Then, they can be defeated. This is a most important strategy. If you do not utilize this great strategy, your warfare is very primitive. We need to know how sin uses occasions, opportunities, and temptations to gain advantage. Search its pleas, pretences, reasonings, strategies colours, and excuses. We need to trace this serpent in all of its windings, and to recognize its most secret tricks: 'This is your usual way and course; I know what you aim at.' Even when one thinks that a lust is dead because it is quiet, we must labour to give it new wounds and new blows every day. The soul in this condition has the upper hand. Sin is

under the sword and is dying. Frequent success against any lust strengthens us. When the heart recognizes at any time sin and temptation at work, seducing and forming sinful imaginations to get you to fulfill its lusts, the heart must immediately see it for what it is, bring it to the law of God and love of Christ, condemn it, and follow it to execute it to the uttermost...Mortification is one of the blessings we have in Christ and is given us by his Spirit.

A N T H E M - *Strategies for Fighting Lust*

By John Piper

A - AVOID as much as is possible and reasonable the sights and situations that arouse unfitting desire. I say "possible and reasonable" because some exposure to temptation is inevitable. And I say "unfitting desire" because not all desires for sex, food, and family are bad. We know when they are unfitting and unhelpful and on their way to becoming enslaving. We know our weaknesses and what triggers them. "Avoiding" is a Biblical strategy. "Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness" ([2 Timothy 2:22](#)). "Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" ([Romans 13:14](#)).

N - Say NO to every lustful thought within five seconds. And say it with the authority of Jesus Christ. "In the name of Jesus, NO!" You don't have much more than five seconds. Give it more unopposed time than that, and it will lodge itself with such force as to be almost immovable. Say it out loud if you dare. Be tough and warlike. As John Owen said, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." Strike fast and strike hard. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" ([James 4:7](#)).

T - TURN the mind forcefully toward Christ as a superior satisfaction. Saying "no" will not suffice. You must move from defense to offense. Fight fire with fire. Attack the promises of sin with the promises of Christ. The Bible calls lusts "deceitful desires" ([Ephesians 4:22](#)). They lie. They promise more than they can deliver. The Bible calls them "passions of your former ignorance" ([1 Peter 1:14](#)). Only fools yield. "All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter" ([Proverbs 7:22](#)). Deceit is defeated by truth. Ignorance is defeated by knowledge. It must be glorious truth and beautiful knowledge. This is why I wrote *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*. We must stock our minds with the superior promises and pleasures of Jesus. Then we must turn to them immediately after saying, "NO!"

H - HOLD the promise and the pleasure of Christ firmly in your mind until it pushes the other images out. "Fix your eyes on Jesus" ([Hebrews 3:1](#)). Here is where many fail. They give in too soon. They say, "I tried to push it out, and it didn't work." I ask, "How long did you try?" How hard did you exert your mind? The mind is a muscle. You can flex it with vehemence. Take the kingdom violently ([Matthew 11:12](#)). Be brutal. Hold the promise of Christ before your eyes. Hold it. Hold it! Don't let it go! Keep holding it! How long? As long as it takes. Fight! For Christ's sake, fight till you win! If an electric garage door were about to crush your child you would hold it up with all our might and holler for help, and hold it and hold it and hold it and hold it.

E - ENJOY a superior satisfaction. Cultivate the capacities for pleasure in Christ. One reason lust reigns in so many is that Christ has so little appeal. We default to deceit because we have little delight in Christ. Don't say, "That's just not me." What steps have you taken to waken affection for Jesus? Have you fought for joy? Don't be fatalistic. You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart - more than you treasure sex or sugar. If you have little taste for Jesus, competing pleasures will triumph. Plead with God for the satisfaction you don't have: "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" ([Psalm 90:14](#)). Then look, look, look at the most magnificent Person in the universe until you see him the way he is.

M - MOVE into a useful activity away from idleness and other vulnerable behaviors. Lust grows fast in the garden of leisure. Find a good work to do, and do it with all your might. "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord" (Romans 12:11). "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Abound in work. Get up and do something. Sweep a room. Hammer a nail. Write a letter. Fix a faucet. And do it for Jesus' sake. You were made to manage and create. Christ died to make you "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). Displace deceitful lusts with a passion for good deeds.