

LIVING IN LIGHT OF HIS COMING
Week 3/Live in Holiness
1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

INTRODUCTION

Holy is one of those words we often say or hear in religious circles but what does it mean as it pertains to both God and then to us as His followers?

Last week we looked at Paul's prayer for the church in 1 Thess. 3:11-13. Paul prays their/our hearts would be established unblameable in holiness before God at the coming of the Lord Jesus. His prayer is the perfect lead-in to chapter 4. While the word *holy* is not found in the text today, the truth of holiness saturates the text in the use of the word *sanctification*. Let's begin by further exploring the meaning of *holiness*.

1. Holiness begins with God. God is HOLY. The word *holy* is used 431 times in the Old Testament and another 200 times in different conjugations of the same word. The word *holy* is used 180 times in the New Testament. The word is defined the same in both Hebrew and Greek. *Holiness* is God's absolute purity, His moral hatred of sin, His moral blamelessness. *Holy* means set apart, not a spot of evil, and completely other.
2. God's holiness underscores every other attribute of God's character. For example: God is love, but His love is a holy love. God is full of mercy and grace, but His mercy and grace are holy mercy and holy grace. His power is a holy power. Isaiah 6:1-3 and Revelation 4:8 used the description, *Holy, Holy, Holy* to indicate that God is supremely and completely holy.
3. Ordinary things become Holy when God is present. Exodus 3:5, the account of Moses at the burning bush and the Lord says, "take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground." The ground was just dirt the day before and the bush was just an ordinary bush, but God's presence made the ground and bush a holy place.
4. Anything set apart for God or for God's use is holy. A quick dash through Exodus and Leviticus reminds us that everything that was used in the worship of God within the tabernacle was deemed holy because it was set apart for God and for God's purpose. Daniel 5 is the account of holy vessels from God's temple being misused by a wicked king in Babylon. God causes the Babylonian kingdom to fall that very night. God takes His holiness seriously.

Because God takes His holiness seriously, He takes our holiness seriously as well. He tells us to live Holy lives. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 puts holiness in the context of sexual purity.

I. Live Holy Lives.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God tells His people to *Be Holy*. (Leviticus 11:44, Exodus 19:5-6, 1 Peter 1:15-16). As we approach 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul is repeating instructions he has already given the church previously—during his time with them. But the subject of living holy lives (specifically in the area of sexual purity) is so very important because unholiness looms everywhere around them. And around us as well.

A. **Why is Paul emphasizing sexual purity?** Rome is the world power when the New Testament is written. The Romans conquered the Greeks in 31BC. While the Greeks were a hypersexualized society, the Romans simply added another layer of wickedness to the existing

immorality. Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and the city of Rome became hubs for immoral activity. Greek and Roman mythology—a polytheistic religion—portrayed a myriad of false gods and goddesses who were sexually immoral, fickle, powerful rulers without a shred of holiness. The worship of these false gods and goddesses encouraged sexual perversion as an act of worship, accommodated by temple prostitutes, both male and female. Every ancient city in the Roman empire had a temple to one of these false deities. The temple culture permeated the cities and normalized every kind of sexual permissiveness. One secular historian stated that the ancient world actually did not distinguish between male and female sexual partners. Neither did it distinguish between adults, children, infants, and animals.

Married men were encouraged to find sexual pleasure outside of marriage, either with a mistress, a slave, or a young boy. Slaves had value as property, but no value as human beings. Sexual abuse of slaves was not only common, it was expected. The prevalent thought of the day was that sexual desire must be satisfied by any means. Furthermore, there was no shame in any of it. Sexual immorality was acceptable behavior in the first century Roman empire. Other than Jews and Christians, it was a society with no moral compass.

Lest we think it was the most wicked society to ever exist, God addresses sexual behavior in Leviticus 18-20. Why? Because the Canaanites practiced incest, bestiality, prostitution, and child sacrifice. God's people, the Israelites, were set apart for God—to live holy, pure lives and God gives them the holy standard. Every nation since the dawn of time has been immoral—unless God's standard for purity is followed.

Our societies today are hypersexualized. We have normalized so many things that God has named as sin. The church, however, is to live in holiness. For the first century Gentile who embraced Christianity, sexual purity was a completely new and sometimes baffling command. Two thousand years later, holiness for us requires a constant realignment with God's truth and God's standard.

B. Why is sexual purity/holiness important for every Christian?

1. God's will for us.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "For this is *the will of God for you....*" Since God is holy, He is perfect and pure, His will for us is perfect and pure as well. Sometimes when we see the phrase "God's will" we think about everyday decisions we make, i.e. Which job to take, which school to attend, which person to marry. And yes, we want to listen and do God's will in these areas. But verse 3 is speaking of the overarching will of God for our lives. God's will for us is always defined as that which pleases God and bring us joy. It is God's gracious disposition toward something He has purposed for us. In other words, God's will is always good, and brings joy. His will and His ways are not burdensome, he is not trying to make us society's killjoy, or make us "odd for God". That which He has designed for Christians is gracious, holy, pure, perfect and creates joy. So, what is His overarching will for us? Sanctification!

2. God's work in us.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 says God's will for us is sanctification. Paul uses the word in verse 3, 4, and 7. Simply put, *sanctification* means *set apart, holy, pure*. Go back to our definition of *holiness* in the introduction. Anything set apart by God and for His purpose is holy. WE are set apart unto salvation by God for His purpose—therefore WE ARE HOLY! We have been sanctified (1 Corinthians 1.12)—a past action with ongoing results. At the moment of salvation, God declares

us holy. He sanctifies us, once and for all (Hebrews 10;10). When God sees us, He sees us as pure and holy—He declares us holy—this is our position, our standing before God. Our position will never change. No past baggage, no future sin, no family secret, nothing you have done and nothing that has been to you will change your standing before God. **Please dear one, do not doubt God on this. To doubt your position of holiness is to doubt the holy and perfect character of God.**

Sanctification, however, has ongoing results. *We have been sanctified and we are being sanctified.* We are commanded to live holy lives because we are in fact already declared holy. (1Peter 1:15-16). God has given us His pure and holy law, His moral code for living. While His law sets boundaries on our behavior, specifically our sexual behavior, **God's will brings joy.** Sexuality is a good gift from God, designed to be used within the sanctity of marriage, between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24). But how do you and I live according to God's principles when society lives in opposition to God's principles?

God enables to live as He has commanded us to live by the indwelling of the HOLY SPIRIT—Christ in us, empowering us to live in obedience to God's commands (Ephesians 3:16,). Because God's Spirit lives in our human body, even our body is holy unto God. Our body is the temple where God lives, therefore we are to glorify God with our bodies (1Corinthians 6:19-20). Our bodies become living sacrifices to God (Romans 12;1). We cooperate with the Holy Spirit as the Spirit works within us. Philippians 2;13 says, *God is at work in us, both to will and to do His good pleasure.* Ephesians 4:22-24 says we are responsible (and empowered) for laying aside the old way of living and putting on a new way of living. So, what does sanctification/holiness look like in our sexual behavior?

3. God's work through us. (verse 3-8)

As verse 3 continues, Paul specifically speaks to sexual purity and how we are to live. *"Abstain from sexual impurity (immorality)."* The word *"impurity"* means *harlotry, attaching oneself to a harlot.* But Paul intends for the meaning to be broader than prostitution or being attached to a prostitute. The Greek word is *pornea* (we get the word pornography), which is the indulgence of lust, including anything outside of God's holy design for marriage.

Verse 4 is an interesting verse because the word *vessel* can be translated two different ways. Regardless of which way it is translated, the verse speaks to sexual purity. Most scholars translate the word *vessel* to mean our own bodies (and I believe this is Paul's intent). We are to be in control of our own bodies in holiness and purity (sanctification). We are to possess our own bodies in *honor* which means dignity to the highest degree, esteem, our bodies have value and are precious. But the word *vessel* can also be translated *wife*. If verse 4 is translated *"Posses your own wife in sanctification and honor,"* it gives an elevated and honorable meaning to marriage, totally different from the norm of that day. A wife is to be highly esteemed, valuable and precious, treated with dignity within a pure marriage. Whew! What a transformational view of sexuality—either way the verse is translated.

Verse 5 is the antithesis of verse 4, *"Not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God."* Lustful passion is a strong sexual desire, a longing for what God has forbidden. Remember, in the culture it was a prevailing thought that sexual desire should be satisfied by any means. God's design is filled with honor and esteem, purity and holiness. God's design for sexuality brings great joy.

Verse 6 speaks directly to the church as a community of believers. Christians are not to defraud or transgress another Christian in the area of sexuality. *To transgress means to cross the line, to overreach. To defraud means to covet, to take advantage of, to exercise extreme greediness.* They could not take advantage of another man's wife, children, or slaves. Throughout the New Testament, slaves became believers and thus became a part of the church. They were fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, treated with dignity and honor. Paul is emphatic that each person honors his own body, his own marriage, and honor his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. If they do not exercise great honor with one another, God is the *avenger* in all of these things. The word *avenger* is a strong word meaning *the judge, punishing to an extreme degree.*

Verse 7 reiterates God's call on our lives to live holy and pure lives (sanctified) without any sexual impurity. (Read Romans 13:14, Ephesians 5:1-8, 1 Corinthians 6:9-20)

Verse 8, says if we reject God's standard of holiness/sexual purity, we are not rejecting a preacher's words, but we are rejecting God Himself who has given us His Holy Spirit.

Now take a deep breath.

None of us approach a discussion about sexual purity with perfectly pristine lives. We have all been marred by sexual sin to some degree or by some means. So, let's be encouraged and reminded of a few principles in this ongoing work of sanctification.

- 1. God loves you.** No matter what your past, your choices, or your circumstances; no matter what you have done or what has been done to you; no matter how deep your wounds or grotesque your scars---God loves you. He is the Redeemer—buying back and making new. He can redeem the brokenness, the messiness of your life. He may not restore all you have lost, but He redeems. He makes a roadway in the wilderness and a stream in the desert (Isaiah 43:18-19). You are declared holy and you are loved with His holy love. He has empowered you to live a holy life through the Holy Spirit who resides permanently within you. He can take the ugly ashes of sin and redeem them to give Him glory.
- 2. Now live in your hope.** You may not understand everything about how and why God works when life has been sinful or difficult or messy. Choose to trust His promises. Trust His desire for healing in our lives. Don't recoil from this message of purity. God does not cause us to live in fear or shame—those are the Enemy's ways. God want us to run to Him for healing and wholeness.
- 3.** We are all susceptible to sexual sin, therefore we must **saturate our minds in God's Word**, allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our thinking and consequently our behavior. We respond/cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit as He uses the Word of God/Scripture in our lives.
- 4. Live open and accountable lives.** Anything in our lives that we must hide, lie about, or deceive in order to continue in—rest assured; it is sin. Our behavior is to be consistently pure, whether we are alone or with others. While we (the church) are to hold each other accountable to live holy and pure lives, we ARE NOT called to police one another, but we must speak truth in love, encouraging one another to live holy lives.
- 5.** If any of us have friends or family members who are entangled in sexual sin, **do not underestimate the power of prayer and the Word to take down strongholds** in the lives of those we love. Speak truth and love in a timely and wise manner as God gives opportunity. But

a word of warning: do not lower God's holy standard in order to accommodate the sin in your loved ones' life.

II. Live in Peace (4:9-12)

Paul's transition to verse 9 begins with "love". It is interesting to me that he began the section on sexual purity with agape love (4:12). Love is the soil out of which everything about the Christian life grows.

Verse 9 and 10 use two different words for love. The first is *phileo*, which is brotherly love or kindness. Paul commends them for their brotherly love for other Christians (verse 9a), but he also appeals to them to grow and mature even more in Agapeo—God's love.

Out of this mature (agape)love for each other, Paul entreats them to do three things 1. Live a quiet life 2. Attend to their own business 3. Work with their hands.

To live a quiet like means to live a peaceful, tranquil life. While a Christian may be busy person, we should not be frantic, worried, or chaotic. Neither should a Christian be butting into other people business. First Peter 4:15 calls it a *troublesome meddler—intruding into situations that do not concern us*. Don't go looking for trouble and for goodness sakes, don't be quarrelsome. Instead, work at a job, take care of your own needs and the needs of your family.

Living this way (a peaceful life, attending to our own business, and working to take care of our needs) has an impact and a witness on those who are not Christians.

There was a trend to quit working, sell everything, and wait for Christ to rapture the church. But in doing this, Christians were becoming busybodies and mooching off of others. It was a poor witness to lost people and a burden to other believers. Love for one another will keep them/us from living in a way that harms both our witness and our fellow believers.