

1 Thessalonians 4

“Living our lives today; Carrying the hope of tomorrow”

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Today, we’re continuing with the letter from Paul to the church at Thessalonica. We are in the 4th chapter.

I think it would be prudent to review some main info regarding this letter as we begin.

1. Author: The Apostle Paul with assistance from Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy.
2. Thessalonica is a very young church made up of Gentile believers – who had given up idol worship to follow Christ.
3. Written around A.D. 50-51
4. Likely written on Paul’s second missionary journey when he was around Corinth.
5. Basic tenet of this letter: Persevere in your faith, choose to live holy lives, and always live in the hope of the return of Jesus Christ.

One of the things I like to do when I’m studying a book of the Bible is to understand a basic breakdown of the materials in order for us see the bigger picture. So here is the breakdown of this chapter:

I want to say a hearty thanks to Dr. Mark for selecting me to teach this chapter that begins with the topic of sexual purity – thanks a lot Mark!! Such a comfortable topic for someone to teach.

So continuing to breakdown what we will cover tonight, here are some basic thematic ideas we will look at:

Basic thematic ideas of Chapter 4:

- a. Live as you have been instructed; especially when it comes to sexual purity.
- b. We have been called to live in holiness; we must shed all impurity.
- c. Love is not just individualistic, but corporate. We are called to love one another.
- d. Our most defining hope is in the soon and coming of the Lord.

“Finally brothers and sisters”

This may seem as if Paul is summarizing his letter, but not so! This is the way, I believe, Paul is simply starting to finalize his discourse to the church in Thessalonica. In doing this, his emphases can be more defined and can be somewhat “highlighted”. Right? If you hear a speaker say, “In closing, or I conclude therefore...” it drives the listener to pay attention as the speaker/writer is trying to give a climactic overview of the previous materials. So Paul is giving clue here that he is about to drive home the main thesis of his letter. And one of the first issues he addresses having said that? He is calling for them to remember distinctly the instruction on Christ-centered living. The words are “ask” and “urge”. “We ask and urge you...” This may seem a bit trivial, but Paul uses a signature grammatical tool here, what I would call a graduated imperative. To simply ask is one thing. But to ask AND thereafter URGE makes this not a direct command, but very close. He simply graduates his ask to an “urgency” and it carries an important edict. It leaves the reader/listener a rather polite but direct imperative – not being overly demanding yet ordering the necessary emphasis needed. We find a similar “graduated Imperative” in the Gospel of John 21:15-17, where Jesus appears on the shore of the sea of Galilee. This was an amazing encounter. Jesus cooks His disciples breakfast but then, turns to Peter and asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He asks him 3 times. Why would He do that? The original language here is paramount. “Love” here is the Greek word, “Phileo”. Its where we get the word, “Philadelphia” – and of course Philadelphia is called, “The City of Brotherly Love”. So Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you love me like a brother, Peter. And Peter says yes you know I do. The His imperative, “Feed my lambs.” The second time, Jesus asks him the same question – but really not. Here He uses a derivative of Phileo, but with a future tense. It is a way of emphasizing an ongoing nature of the verb. So He’s asking something in line with, Peter do you love me like a brother forever? He of course says yes, you know that I love you. Then again another imperative, “Tend my sheep”. And then a third time, Simon do you love me? Here we find the word for love, Agape, which is really very different from brotherly love – it means, Peter will you love me enough to lay your very life down for me? And after Peter’s affirmative, Jesus gives yet another imperative,

Feed my sheep. Its not the content of the imperative so much as it’s the manner in which He asks Simon Peter to devotedly love Him enough to do what He is asking: FEED, TEND, FEED. See the graduated imperative used here is much the same way Paul used it in 1 Thessalonians. You could even see the imperative of Jesus as asking not just to tend His sheep (the 2nd imperative) but to FEED – a twice mentioned directive in Scripture is like setting a neon billboard up for all to see!

Question: Have you ever felt God giving you a graduated imperative in your life?

Think of, as an example, how you share your faith. It likely starts with the character of who you are and how others then perceive you and your kindness, gentleness – all the fruits of the Spirit from Gal. 5. Then, you converse with someone who has seen your “inner self” and in that conversation you gently mention your church or a church function. The it graduates further as they ask if you are a Christian or not Now you can share your faith more openly as you have earned their trust enough to be a witness to the faith. A graduated imperative – and one I hope you’ll take to heart; there is far too much “bad Evangelism” around, don’t you think? (Tell the story of Heather on campus)

Or perhaps it’s the influence of Online materials. It has become a very dangerous, very tempting to continually be drawn towards influences that can rob you of joy, purity and even faith. Roman 12:1-2 says, “Therefore , I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to OFFER your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND.” (Emphasis mine). Just know that Paul is trying to communicate for all of the people of Thessalonica that God is an ASKING and URGING kind of God. Pay Attention!

What then is the big ask/urge?

1. Remember what you learned from us. Who is “us”? See the beginning of Chapter 1: Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy.

The word, “remember” strikes me hard. You want to know why? Because our human condition is seemingly always in need of reminder! We truly have short memories. I made up a word, here, I say we are amnesiacs. We suffer from amnesia – especially on the long-time, life-time.

Look through the history of the people of Israel and you will find a direct understanding of what I mean. A couple examples is all we need to get my point.

In Exodus 32: The people have been given their freedom from the slavery they held in Egypt, rescued from Pharaoh’s pursuing army by the parting of the Red Sea, fed with Manna, given water through a rock, given victory over Amalek when they battled a Rephidim. What did they do when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai (to receive the 10 commandments no less) and was gone and the people grew impatient (I would say amnesia set in) and they decided to make an idol of gold and defile God by worshipping what turned out to be a golden calf. Amnesiacs!!

Or how about in the Book of Judges (2:11-19) after Joshua has lead them faithfully into the promised land, the people start a familiar cycle: First they commit sin (usually by turning to idols for their worship) then they become oppressed by invasion of another country, they

then cry out to God – and God gives them deliverance only to find the same people soon falling into the cycle again and again – Amnesiacs! As King Mufasa of the Lion King famously said to his son Simba... “REMEMBER!!” OK I can’t normally do James Earl Jones...but because I have a slight cold....

Verse 3: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like that of the pagans, who do not know God;”

First, let’s delve into this word, Sanctification. We would be wise here, I think, to posture our dear founding father, John Wesley and talk about John Wesley’s soteriology of GRACE.

John Wesley’s Soteriology of Grace

- Prevenient Grace
- Justifying Grace
- Sanctifying Grace
- Entire Sanctification

It goes without saying that today’s understanding of human sexuality is, without a doubt, severed from its original Divine intention. God designed our human sexuality and intended it as a gift to us, not to be exploited for selfish gratification. Here are several Scriptures we learn this from:

- Genesis 1:27-28 – humanity created male and female, blessed and be fruitful and multiply.
- Genesis 2:24-25 – Man leaves his parents is united to his wife, they become one flesh.
- Song of Solomon – the entire book celebrates marital love, marital intimacy and our innate sexual desires for one another.
- Hebrews 13:4 – Marriage should be honored by all; the marriage bed kept pure.

- 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 – Husbands and wives should fulfill marital intimacy as part of MUTUAL love and commitment.

Yet, somehow we have forgotten the original intent of sexuality (Amnesiacs!!) Our culture has distorted the true intention of sexuality, I believe, from the way I think God intended.

And God warns us about sexual sin:

- Exodus 20:14 – “You shall not commit adultery (commandment #7)
- Leviticus 18:6-23 – listings of prohibitions on incest, adultery, homosexuality, and even bestiality (If you by chance don’t know what THAT is, please ask Dr. Mark to explain it to you!!!)
- Proverbs 6:25-29 – warnings against adultery and sexual lust.
- Matthew 5:27-28 – Jesus deepens the commandment here – lust itself is adultery of the heart.

This is all encapsulated in the notion for Paul that he “urges” us to live to PLEASE God.

First, he is letting us know we please God when we are able to live sexually pure. Verses 1-7, ending with,

“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”

- Question: Do we REALLY know what it means to lead a HOLY life?

Consider this: Scripture identifies some guide-lines as to what might best describe “holiness”.

I. Holiness requires that we deal with our sinful selves.

- a. Romans 12:1-2
- b. 2 Corinthians 6:17 – be set apart and live differently than the culture
- c. 2 Cor. 7:1 – be cleansed from everything that pollutes the body and the spirit.

II. Holiness is often best described as willfully obeying God’s Word.

- a. Psalm 119:9 – Keeping God’s commands leads to a pure life.
- b. John 17:17 – A call for us to be sanctified and to know God’s word as truth.
- c. James 1:22 – don’t just read or listen – DO!

III. Holiness is loving each other and loving God above all else.

a. Matthew 22:37-39 – Love God with all your heart, mind and soul & love your neighbor.

b. Love.

c. 1 John 4:7-8 – God is love therefore if you love you are borne of God.

To summarize: Holiness and holy living is about allowing yourself to be set apart for the ensuing purposes of God. It is a tangible will to avoid the sinful desires of the flesh and the mind. The Spirit of God is our aid and we put our faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and we actively pursue an understanding of God's Word.

A Corporate life of Love

First of all, have you ever wondered, why do I need to be in church or be involved with church?

(Tell the story: of the hot coal fizzling out)

You should note, there is nothing in New Testament Theology that identifies the Christian walk of faith OUTSIDE of COMMUNITY.

I'm not going to stand here and tell you the communal life in every church is ideal, is pain-free, is not difficult sometimes and even aggravating. It is – and I don't need to tell you about that. But what I do wish to reflect upon is our current need to re-energize ourselves in the pressing urgent need to save the very soul of the Church in America! We have become what I can best describe as “theologically flaccid”. We want the “feelgood” sentimentality of the love of Jesus Christ rather than experiencing the accountability needed to truly live out that very love. We need to regain the Wesleyan Heritage of HOW to live the life of faith. Because the honest truth of the matter is the HOW of faith is rarely easy. It can be grueling, it can cause deep introspection and honest evaluation of our mind and our souls. Jesus said, “Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Matthew 10:34-36. Does that sound “feel-good” to you? Jesus also said, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” Now, be aware, Jesus is NOT advocating violence. The sword is a metaphor for division. Division from what? So glad you asked. A division when you have people who are loyal to Christ experience those who openly reject the true understanding theologically of God's Word. That division, as we've seen throughout the

ages and especially in the last month with Charlie Kirk, can get you killed. And we are fast approaching the age where we need to ask ourselves, do I just want to be a part of the church that gives me warmth, joy, peace, love and acceptance. Let me help you here, the answer is ABSOLUTELY! I want that and you want that as well. But now ask the more important question, Am I willing to go deep into the understanding of God's redemptive work in the world that can cause me to be uncomfortable – but allows me to be obedient to Jesus Christ? Before you answer, we would do well to remember Jesus' words on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Personal illustration: Ask yourselves this question, "When all is said and done, when you are standing before God almighty, what do you hope will be the conversation you will have?" For me, I can answer that with no reservation. I simply want to hear the words, "well done, good and faithful servant". Period. I want no crown or accolades. If I can hear those words, I will be overjoyed. How about you?

Now the remainder of this chapter, Paul delves into a very important bit of material about our future. And throughout the ages this question is often the first a non-believer might ask, "What happens when you die?"

Verse 13: "But we do not want you to be uniformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have died." This is another notion of a divine graduated declaration – death then life! This is a powerful declaration, please don't miss this, because Jesus died and rose – those who trust in His resurrection will yourselves be resurrected. This is the promise of heaven, dear friends!! This gives us an eternal HOPE. And THAT is no little thing!!

And watch how he describes this occurring:

"For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command (Imperative!!), with the archangel's call and the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so will be with the Lord forever." 1 Thes. 4:16-17

This is of course recognizable to us as the concept of the "rapture". This term rapture, (from the Greek harpazo) simply means "caught -up" and is one of the clearest indications of what will happen to us when Jesus makes His final return. Rapture, this word, does NOT appear in holy scripture, you might be surprised to know. The passage here in 1 Thes. Is

considered by most to be the clearest depiction of the Rapture in the NT. But the concept is mentioned in several other places in NT Literature.

- 1 Cor. 15:51-52 “Behold! I will tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.”
- John 14:2-3 “In my Father’s house are many rooms...I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”
- Matthew 24:30-31 “Then will appear in heaven a sign of the Son of Man...And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, one end of heaven to the other.”
- Philippians 3:20-21 “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body...”
- Revelation 7:9-10 – John describes a great multitude from every nation before the throne, often understood as the gathering of the saints.

Now, hear me. There are TONS of ideas about HOW and WHEN end time occurrences will happen! And before you load your questions about if I am pre-trib, or amillennial, and the like, I need you to know that Dr. Mark will be discussing those theories and unpacking them for you next week!! So if you are interested in eschatological teachings, please make sure you are here next week!!

Personal thoughts/ closing

In summation, this part of this incredible letter really touches on a concept near and dear to me; the concept of pleasing God. God has given me so much and He continues to bless, edify, comfort, strengthen, and bless my life every day. I don’t think there is a higher joy than knowing you are desiring to please God. Here Paul takes the issue of sexuality; something the pagans of the time were grossly abusing, as a means to underscore that issue as living out a life pleasing to God. That is NO accident folks. Think deeply on this. Do you live in such a way that celebrates the gift of sexuality or are you caught up in something that erodes its Divine purpose?

Community – We are seeing a very sad statistic emerging today among churches: DECLINE. People seem to have lost the understanding of hot coals keeping the flames burning! If you have been caught up in this kind of thinking, promise me you will come see me and talk. Come see Jamie and talk. But don’t just disappear. Community is Vital to this

church and Jesus designed it! Declaring what it means to follow Christ and how to live out a Christian walk of faith is HUGE. And for me, well, I want to do that WITH you!

Sometimes, in our suffering and confusion, we lose focus on what will be the greatest event – the return of Jesus Christ. WE MUST FOCUS ON THAT HOPE and capture the thoughts that erode our hope.

I pray that the Lord will continue to bless and keep you through-out the week. Let us pray....