

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Jeffery Brett

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## **Studies in 1 Thessalonians: Living in a way that pleases God: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12**

When Paul and his companions first went to Thessalonica, as recorded in Acts 17:1-9, one of the things which those that opposed Paul said was, "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (Acts 17:6). They were in fact admitting that the gospel which Paul preached had had a dramatic affect on peoples' lives. They saw people now living in a completely different way from that which they used to do. This shows that when we profess to have believed the gospel and to have trusted the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, then there should be a change in our lives which other people can see. The reason for this is that we are now living to please God, rather than pleasing ourselves.

### **Christianity is practical**

Christianity is of little value unless it is practical. There is no error more dishonouring to God or damaging to men than to divorce Christian doctrine and Christian behaviour. The Bible always holds these two things together and warns us against those who would separate them. In Romans 6:1 the question is asked, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" The Apostle Paul uses very strong language in condemning this suggestion, and writes, "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:2).

The idea that the believer can carry on with his old way of life is rejected completely. The truth of God is not only given to inform, but to sanctify, that is, to set us apart for God. This truth teaches us "How we ought to walk and to please God" (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

### **Obedience to God's word**

Sadly today a great deal of the Bible is set aside as not being relevant. It is argued that Paul's writings were only applicable to the day in which Paul lived. In its place is taught what the majority feel is right because, it is claimed, the standard which the Bible teaches is impossible to keep, and so the word of God is set aside and the ideas of men are put in its place. In contrast to all this, we see that the Thessalonians accepted the teaching of Paul as God's word: "When ye received the word of God, which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Obedience to God's word is the only sure way of blessing. But today the divine inspiration of the scriptures (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17) is very often not believed.

The effect of this is a lowering of moral standards, and all the ensuing social problems that go with it. This is proved every day all around us. Things which years ago, when generally there was a fear of God in the leaders of this nation, were counted as wrong and sinful, are now excused and treated as normal living.

This was not what Paul had taught these young converts at Thessalonica, as is clear from 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. We will read them: "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that everyone of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: that no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as also we have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us His Holy Spirit. But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing" (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12).

### **Holy lives**

Even though Paul had only been with them for three weeks at the most (Acts 17:2), and they had only just been converted to Christianity, he insists that a manner of life which was pleasing to God should be their aim (1 Thessalonians 4:1). How inconsistent it is, if we say we are God's children, if we do not act as He does. Even we try to bring up our own children to value those things which we value and to avoid those things which we feel are wrong. How much more so with God. As God is holy, so His children should endeavour to live holy lives. As God is love, so likewise we should show love to all. How can we as believers present God to other people if we are not like God in our ways and character?

### Examples

Paul had not only taught the Thessalonians, but he had been an example to them. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5 he refers to, "What manner of men we were among you for your sake." What he preached was backed up by the sort of person he was. So the Holy Spirit used him effectively in turning men to Christ. This was so evident at Thessalonica that those who believed, themselves became, "Ensamplers to all them that believe in Macedonia" (1 Thessalonians 1:7). When we remember that Macedonia was about half the area of Greece, this was no small achievement. We read also "... in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything" (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Their transformed lives, which sprang from their new found faith in Christ, spoke loudly. It was true then, as it is true today, that what you do shouts so loud that others cannot hear what you say.

### Plain speaking from the Bible

Because of the awful way that the Greeks lived, Paul thought it necessary to speak plainly about certain things. We probably have little idea of the moral horrors of the heathen world at Thessalonica in those days. The situation at Corinth, another leading city in Greece at that time, was just as bad. In fact, the Greeks had coined a special word, "to Corinthianise" to describe the vilest form of sexual immorality.

Greek habits and literature, Greek statesmen and their philosophers, all encouraged the evil. In fact their religion encouraged the defilement, by consecrating what their fallen nature, and ours, is prone to. This evil surrounded the young believers at Thessalonica and Paul knew how easily it could have ensnared them again. And it is just the same with us today: all our civilisation and its education has not altered our fallen nature at all, and never will. Only the Gospel of Christ can do this.

The world today is not much different in some respects to that in which these early believers lived. So Paul writes about fornication (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). It was rampant then. It is rampant today, but people think there is no harm in it. God thinks there is a great deal of harm in it. The Bible clearly teaches that it is sinful and wrong in the sight of God.

In Romans 1:24-32, the word of God plainly states what is unclean and evil in His sight, and warns us about the consequences of doing these things. Paul writes of "Uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves" (Romans 1:24).

In Romans 1:27-28, he writes of men, "leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error. ... [As a result] God gave them over to a reprobate mind..." This means a mind that is void of understanding, unable to tell the difference between right and wrong. This is what the Bible says about people whom today we call 'gay'.

Paul does not make excuses for such persons. Instead he shows clearly that these are the sort of things which come from people who are under the power of sin. But the Christian has been set free from this. The new life which we have received from God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, give the believer the power to say 'no' to sin, and 'yes' to that which pleases God. The model for our living must always be the Lord Jesus who said in John 8:29, "I do always those things that please Him [i.e. God]."

Fornication is having intercourse with a person of the opposite sex, outside of marriage. The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, "That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour." This refers to the sanctity of divinely instituted marriage, and recognises the rights of each partner. It is contrasted with, "the lust of concupiscence [which means to fix one's desire upon another in a passionate way] even as the Gentiles which know not God" (1 Thessalonians 4:5). If we do know God in a real way, through faith in the Lord Jesus, then we should be able to control wrong sexual desires.

Paul then writes about going beyond what is right and defrauding his brother. Christianity brought people together in a free and happy way which had never been known before. But this could have brought them into a freedom that went beyond right relationships. It is plain that adultery is wrong in the sight of God, for it is one of the commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). It should therefore not be passed over lightly amongst Christians, who profess to know God. We

are then warned if we ignore these commandments we are despising God, "Who hath also given unto us His Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 4:8). Paul wrote to the Corinthians on this same subject in 1 Corinthians 6:18-19, "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you."

### **A way back...**

We have been speaking very plainly on some very serious matters. But then the Bible speaks plainly and we should not try to water down its content. We must emphasise that while God hates sin, of whatever kind, He loves the sinner. There is always a way back to Him for the repentant sinner. Trusting Christ as our Saviour means that we can know not only the forgiveness of sins which He offers, but also that we receive a new divine life - His life. The indwelling Holy Spirit is the power for this life. Apart from this new life, the standards of Christian behaviour which we have been speaking about, would be impossible.

### **Love**

How much better to turn to the subject of love. Paul delights to speak of the way these young believers loved each other. Their love too was shown not only amongst themselves but to all the other believers in Macedonia. But he wanted it to increase more and more. It is so easy to be taken up with one another's faults and failings. This very quickly sows seeds of bitterness and anger in our hearts. We are exhorted to increase in our love for each other. We can only do this as taught of God. How wonderfully God has shown His love for us, in that He gave His well beloved Son for us! (see John 3:16, Ephesians 2:4). Likewise the Lord Jesus showed that same love when He willingly gave Himself to die for us on the cross of Calvary.

So the Lord Jesus tells His disciples in John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you." John in 1 John 4:11, writes "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."

### **Paul's example**

Paul had been an example of this when he was with them. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7 he writes, "We were gentle among you, even as a nursing mother cherisheth her own children." How dearly a mother looks after a new born child and holds it to herself to keep it warm. This is exactly how Paul treated these new born believers. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 tells us how much he loved them and to what extent this love would go to - "So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us." He even worked night and day as a tent maker, while he was with them so that he should not be a burden to them. Paul was so like His Master, the Lord Jesus, who could say in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." And again in Luke 22:27, "I am among you as he that serveth."

### **Love is practical**

Love is a very practical thing. The Apostle John in speaking of God's love in 1 John 3:16 says, "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us." God's love moved Him to give His well beloved Son for undeserving people, such as ourselves. But this becomes the standard of love that should be seen in the Christian. For he goes on to say, "And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). In 1 John 3:17 he points out how inconsistent it would be for one who had, "this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion", by asking the question, "How dwelleth the love of God in him?" The love that has been shown towards us in God's unspeakable gift (see 2 Corinthians 9:15), should now be seen active amongst those who say they love God.

### **Our responsibilities**

Finally in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul writes of the Christian's responsibility to act in a proper way, "Study to be quiet." 'Study' here is the word from which we get our English word 'ambitious'. Our ambition should not be to get to the top as is so often the case in the world, but to be calm. One who is not easily upset, or influenced by all the emotional things that compose life today.

Think of the Lord Jesus, asleep in a storm tossed boat on Lake Galilee. His disciples feared for their lives and woke Him up (Mark 4:35-41). In that quiet spirit which was always His, He could sleep in the full knowledge that His Father would care for Him. "To do your own business, and to work with your own hands" (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Simple, but straight forward commandments that we all will do well to observe. We live in a society where it is often very easy to obtain things without working. This should not be so with the Christian. We have not only a responsibility towards men but also towards God. Of course there will always be those with special needs who need to be provided for.

“That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing” (1 Thessalonians 4:12). The believer on the Lord Jesus Christ should at all times be seen to be acting honestly, even by those who do not believe. As Paul says in writing to Titus in Titus 2:10, “Not purloining, but showing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things.” May we, in our day, be able also to adorn that wonderful doctrine of God our Saviour by our Christ-like behaviour. What a privilege, and what a responsibility, God holds out to us today.

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