

# *Truth for Today*

## *The Bible Explained*

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## 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians Chapter 4:1-12

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

There are three words I really hate. Pure brilliant white! Grrrr! I mean they just spell a world of trouble. I think that the people who work in the production of paint must have an evil streak. You see, and you may have had this experience too, either the ceilings are still quite good and so it is almost impossible to tell where you have done and where you have missed until a more critical eye than mine takes stock, or the ceilings are really faded, and you find that they were barely white after all, and are going to need two coats, and it calls into question several other ceilings in various other rooms. No curling up on the sofa with a good book for me!

Of course, in the real world, purity is a good thing. Nobody would want to eat a meal that had been prepared by hands that had just been tinkering in an old car engine. If I take a paracetamol for a headache, I don't want to find out it had been mixed with something to settle my stomach, as they were running short of pain relief chemicals. If I buy my wife a gold necklace, I don't want to discover it is 95% copper. You see purity matters, and yet we do live in a very impure world. On a personal level, purity is almost viewed as a negative thing. However, this is nothing new. It was true in the first century, as Paul wrote to the new Christians in Thessalonica. It is still true in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.

Today, we continue our series on the first letter to the Thessalonians, by considering the first twelve verses of chapter 4. So, let us start by reading them together:

“Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.”

Paul introduces us to this section of his letter with a ‘finally.’ That is not to say that he is almost done, but rather that this is to be the last major theme of the book. What he is about to say really

mattered to Paul, and so he urges and exhorts them. I like the picture of the athlete in these two words. The coach, with his stopwatch, at the side of the track urges the runner to pick up the pace. The pacesetter, having already run the same race, exhorts the athlete to do the same. Paul was not telling the Thessalonian believers to do something that he had not already done himself. They were to abound more and more in all that he had spoken to them about already. There is no sense of having arrived in the Christian pathway. No matter how well they were doing, and he has had much to commend in them, he still wants more. This cuts right across any sense that we might develop of having done enough for Christ and wanting to settle down for a little 'me' time. There is always room for growth and improvement this side of heaven.

This spiritual progression is based foursquare upon the commandments that they had already received. It is generally agreed that Paul had only been in Thessalonica for a short period of time. However, in that short time they had taken in a lot of teaching. They had a real appetite for the word of God. What a challenge to us as to how well we have progressed in our understanding of His word. Are we still spiritual babies or have we made it our ambition in life to dig deep into His word to gain a fuller appreciation of God? This will not happen by accident but can only arise out of a conscious decision to set aside time for Bible study. It is also something that is unlikely to happen overnight. We would not feed a six-week-old baby a sirloin steak with all the trimmings. There is appropriate food for every stage in life – whether physical or spiritual. So, we should not become disheartened if, when we make a start on serious Bible study, we find it hard going. It will not all go in on the first reading. Our spiritual understanding is built up little by little, thought by thought and will take a lifetime of deliberate choice.

Have you ever wished that you knew what God's will for your life was? Well, here in chapter 4:3 we get one answer! Incidentally, we get another answer in the next chapter also, in verse 18. There are at least two other answers given in the epistles (see Ephesians 6:6 and 1 Peter 2:15). Of course, we may want guidance in a particular circumstance. For example, whom I should marry, which career to pursue, whether to start a particular form of service. We long for a spiritual sat-nav to tell us which turn to make at every junction. However, that is not the way that God works. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit and learning to listen to His voice is a part of our spiritual maturing process. However, we can be sure that if we are fulfilling His will in the general terms in which it is revealed in His word, then we will find the necessary guidance we need for every specific circumstance. So, what does Paul say is God's will for the lives of his readers, for my life? It is that we might be sanctified.

This is one of the great themes of the New Testament. The English versions of the Bible translate the same Greek word in three different ways. When we read about 'holy', 'saint' or 'sanctify' or any of their derivatives like 'holiness' or 'sanctification' it is all the same in Greek. Every believer on the Lord Jesus is called to be a saint of God – to be holy. We often focus on the love of God, yet we do not read that God is love, love, love. But we do read that God is holy, holy, holy and this highlights how important it is that we take this seriously. It is no accident that God's will for His children is that we be like Him. The underlying thought is that we are 'set apart' just for Him.

Not so long ago I was doing a lot of work from home. This necessitated a lot of time on our laptop, which meant that my wife couldn't do what she wanted to do on it. Eventually, we got a second laptop so that she could have one just for her use. That is the way that God wants us to be. He doesn't want to have to get in the queue and wait His turn to get our attention. He wants to have exclusive access to our affection, our time, our resources. This is what lies at the heart of sanctification and is a real challenge to the 'me first' society in which we live. God is a jealous God!

Our holiness is derived from God Himself. Because we belong to a holy God, we are holy. That is why New Testament writers refer to believers as holy, irrespective of their behaviour. In one sense, God views us as sanctified people already and nothing can change that (Heb. 3:1; Phil.

1:1). However, we know from experience that we do not always live up to what God has made us and so in our daily lives we are being sanctified (John 17:17; Eph. 5:25 -26). We are to live out what we are. It is not until we are with Him and made like Him that we will be completely holy! This awaits His appearing (Eph.5:27; 1 John 3:2). God's will for us, past, present and future is that we are totally His – holy and set apart for Him. He doesn't want me half pleasing Him, half pleasing myself. He doesn't want three quarters of my commitment, whilst I commit to other causes. He wants me lock, stock and barrel. That is what it means to be a saint, to be sanctified. It is a pretty tall order and not for the faint-hearted.

Now God is not some eccentric collector. You know the sort who collects obscure and rare things to lock them away so that nobody else can have them or enjoy them. No, He wants our sanctification because He knows that this is best for us. He knows this because He is our Creator – it is the way that He made us. The only way to live a truly fulfilled life to the full is to follow His instructions and to pursue holiness. It might just be a man thing but I hate reading the instructions – whether they be the car manual or a flat pack furniture leaflet. My motto is let me loose and give it a go! However, if I were to read the instructions, my car might last longer with better fuel efficiency or my furniture might go together more solidly. Those instructions really do matter. Of course, the more I drive or put together a flat pack, the more practical experience I get so that it helps next time around but I really do still need to take some time checking what the manufacturer says before I make a start.

It is vital that we appreciate this point before we continue in this chapter. Maybe, it is just me but I find life unsatisfactory at times. If you do not, then I would suggest going to make a cup of tea for the rest of this broadcast. I am pretty sure that the reason I find it unsatisfactory is that I don't always listen to what God says – it is the manufacturer's instructions again! I think that I can manage to sort my life out on my own. I believe that I can make my own choices and take responsibility for my own decisions even when they do not fall into line with what God says. It is no wonder when it all goes badly wrong and I am left feeling as if something is missing. Too much of my time is spent in the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment but if I am pursuing the wrong thing then I can be certain that it is not going to bring what I truly search for.

Specifically, in terms of our sanctification, Paul is going to speak about sexual purity for the next five verses. The Christian is to abstain from sexual immorality. It is said of the Victorians that they talked a lot about death and not very much about sex. Today, on the other hand, we speak a lot about sex and not very much about death. Both they and we need to find a balance. Unfortunately, too often, Christians have acted as if we are a single-issue protest group and this is not right. I do not have any right to tell you what is right and wrong. I am responsible to God for the way that I behave. You are responsible to God for the way that you behave.

God, as our maker, has said that His best for Mankind, His creation, is “one man and one woman for life, and that sexual intimacy is only permissible within this marriage bond.” Any choices that we make that depart from this blueprint is falling short of His glorious best. Though not the theme of 1 Thessalonians, the reason that God has set out this pattern is that our human relationships are created to illustrate heavenly relationships. The love between a man and a woman illustrates the love that Christ has for the church. There is one Christ and one Church, and His love for us is permanent and exclusive. It is no wonder that He takes a dim view of marital unfaithfulness. It gives the impression that He is unfaithful – and that is blasphemous.

Therefore, Paul's next instruction is that everyone is to possess his own vessel. By this he means that we are to be self-controlled and in charge of our emotions and actions. The plea that 'I just couldn't help myself' will not wash with God. Until God gives me a spouse, then I am to remain celibate and single, and if He does bring us together, then it is for life and to the exclusion of all others. This is the only way that the heavenly reality can be faithfully displayed. Now you may think that this does not sound very romantic. I would have to disagree from experience. There is

nothing better than thinking of romantic ways to say 'I love you', not in an effort to win favour or to gain brownie points because these don't need to be gained, but to express what is felt inside. You might think that the monogamous life is too restrictive and limiting. Again, I would disagree. It is a life of freedom. I know that my wife will never leave me, nor I her, because we take our promises to God seriously. So, when I go out to work, she need never worry I may play away – that is freedom. As I see the wrinkles deepening and my figure fading, I don't need to worry about a younger model. That is freedom! It is also the ultimate reason to invest in a relationship. If I know that I am going to be with my partner for the rest of my life then, unless I am willing to settle for utter boredom, and I am not, then I have the incentive to think of ways of keeping the spark alive and investing in putting my partner's interests ahead of mine. In a relationship of no permanence, then this would be a recipe for being taken for a ride and ending up hurt. Sound familiar?

I remember hearing a great description of the difference between lust and love. It runs: "Love can wait to give but lust can't wait to take." Too often today the two are hopelessly confused. People enter into a relationship that falls short of what God intends and they call it love, when in reality all they do is take from it. Paul admits that this is what the unbelieving Gentiles of his day practised. Here the contrast is between those who are God's people and those who are not. Those who claim to be God's people are to be people who love and control themselves, rather than those who enter into a relationship based only on what they feel is right for them.

The next few verses bring home to us the seriousness with which every Christian ought to take this instruction to holy living and marital faithfulness. If I sleep with someone outside of the marriage bond, then I am committing fraud. I am not only taking advantage of another individual, which is serious enough, but I am risking divine vengeance, which will be forthcoming. Let us be really clear here. As a believer, I cannot lose my salvation. Nor are we talking about lightning bolts from the skies. But we can be sure that there will be a solemn answering for all sin, sexual or otherwise, and it is to a three times holy God that we will have to answer. The fact that He does love us will make that answering all the harder. Our utter failure to live up to the calling that we have is not a matter to take lightly. Imagine arriving in our eternal home and having nothing to offer God because we have lived a life of disobedience to His word. There will be no opportunity to make good our loss.

In case we think that this is all a bit old school, that we live in a more enlightened society where so much more is now considered normal, acceptable, I would say two things. Firstly, we are historically misguided. Those who read Paul's letter in the first century would have found it as counter cultural as we do today. Secondly, and more importantly, as verse 8 indicates, to reject this kind of living is not to reject human instruction, but a rejection of God Himself. Not just His word, but His person! I might try to fool myself into thinking that I am not doing anything wrong. I might justify my actions as arising out of love and that can never be a bad thing. I might even try to use the Bible to show that what I am doing is acceptable. We sometimes make our excuses sound very plausible. But God has clearly said that He views those who do not follow His word as rejecting Him!

Before we move on, I recognise the hardness of these words. I would just say that to any who might be considering a path outside of the ideal that God has laid down – "one man, one woman for life, and sexual intimacy only within this marriage bond" – think again. It may be heart-breaking, it will be hard, but obedience to His word is always best. The Christian path is often hard, but with the indwelling Holy Spirit, it is the best life for mankind. To those who have already started on such a life outside of God's best, then there does need to be repentance. There is always forgiveness with God, and should be with us too. We may well have to live with the consequences of choices that we have made, and accept those responsibilities. With proper pastoral care and support there is always a way back to God and to a life that pleases Him. But please, do not think that these things do not matter. Verse 8 really does show that they do!

The next two verses consider the theme of brotherly love more generally. They are a logical progression from what has already been considered. We are to display a genuine godly love within our personal relationships. We are to display a more general love to every fellow believer. The Christian community is to be one of acceptance and welcome, where we can give and receive the mutual love of those who have, for themselves, experienced the love of God. Paul does not feel that he needs to specifically teach them further on this. They already knew this and were putting into practice what they knew. It does go to show that those who were still young in the faith were already living out the reality of genuine Christian obedience. Sometimes we do not expect enough of ourselves or young believers. We can expect a readiness to live out what has already been learnt.

There is again an exhortation to increase in the practical expression of what has been learnt. Some say that all living things grow, and that if it is not growing it must be dead. That might not be strictly true but it does indicate an important spiritual truth. No matter where we are on the spiritual pathway we can always grow, always do better. Let us never think that we have ticked a truth off the list and can now move on to some other point.

Our section draws to a close with a simple statement of spiritual ambition. We live in an age when we are encouraged to dream big and have grand ambitions in life. Paul says that the ambition for the believer should be to live a quiet life and mind our own business. What a better world it would be if we all did this. God may lead me into the public arena and to positions of prominence, but my ambition should be to just get on with what He has given me to do competently and without fuss. I do not unduly go poking into what others are doing, but focus on getting done what He has called me to do. That is not to say I do not take a prayerful interest in others. It does mean that I take every effort to put my own life in order. It also means that I work diligently for a living. In a “something for nothing” culture, God would have His children exemplify what it is to be hard and diligent workers because that is who God is. He worked unsupervised for six days in creation and all that He did was very good. He still works today. He expects the same from us.

The aim is that we have a positive testimony to a lost world of the better things that are in Christ. Being a Christian really is the best kind of life. Clearly from our considerations today, the Christian life is a challenge, and can run very much against the cultural norms of the day, but in striving to be quiet, in striving to obey, in striving to deny ourselves we will find that we have in fact lived the very best of lives, a life that will earn the commendation, “Well done! Good and faithful servant.”

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on 1Thessalonians 4:1-12 Talk number 1207.

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