

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

When Timothy arrived in Corinth with good news about the Church at Thessalonica, Paul was greatly encouraged and was spurred on in his preaching labours. It also spurred him on with his prayers for the Thessalonians. He, Silas and Timothy earnestly prayed that the Thessalonians “would increase and abound in love to one another and to all men” and that the Lord would “establish their hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints”. Accompanying his prayer for holiness came the exhortation to holiness set for today’s epistle reading. We shall attempt to feel the force of the exhortation by dividing it into three commands.

Firstly Christians should always be advancing in holiness (1Thess 4:1-3a)

From time to time we hear Christians say, “What is God’s will for my life?” Usually they mean what career should I follow or should I remain single or get married or which church shall I join or something similar. Those issues are right to bring before God and to seek his guidance. However the big question about God’s will for my life is plainly answered by the Apostle.

God’s will for us is to be holy. It is to be like Christ. It is to imitate God. Whatever the details, the big picture, the overriding plan, the large goal is our sanctification.

Paul and Silas had preached and taught this while in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living and true God. This they did with much joy despite the affliction and opposition they encountered. Their faith, love and hope were demonstrated by good works. They received the gospel with power, with the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. They had so imitated the apostles and the Lord Jesus that they became an example not only to all the believers in Greece but all believers everywhere. The apostles had observed with pleasure how these new Christians had been obeying God. Now they had heard from Timothy how they were continuing in the Way. They, however, were not to stop at this. Now Paul, Silas and Timothy were urging them to increase and abound in this godly living. In fact they were urgent in their appeal, “beseeching and exhorting” them to do so.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

This command to be always advancing in holiness is the call to all Christians whether it be to Thessalonians in the first century or Australians in the 21st century. Our calling is to be holy and blameless before God.

Secondly Christians should always be aiming at sexual purity (1 Thess 4:3-5).

Like all human whims, some sins have their turn at being fashionable. In the first one hundred and twenty years of the Republic of Rome, there had not been one single divorce, but now under the Empire divorce was a matter of caprice. Seneca could say, “Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married”. In Greece from where Paul was writing, immorality was rife. Demosthenes had written, “We keep prostitutes for pleasure, we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body, we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of the home”. William Barclay observes, “So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame whatsoever in extra—marital relationships”. Christians in first century Thessalonica were surrounded by immorality.

In this context Christians were to abound in holiness, especially sexual purity. The Christian man is to honour his wife and treat her well. It is in fact a sign of his knowing God. This is in stark contrast to the heathen who are driven by their self-centredness and ill-disciplined desires and passions.

How timely is this exhortation to Western Christians in our sex-saturated culture? And as if we hadn't had enough shame with our heterosexual sins we have gone further into the realm of “exchanging natural relations with unnatural” and seeking legislative approval of “dishonourable passions”. But further we in the institutional church have been guilty and brought shame upon ourselves and even more tragically upon the God to whom we claim allegiance.

Now especially is the time for us to hear and heed the apostolic command. This is the will of God “that each one of us know how to control our own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God.”

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Thirdly Christians should always be avoiding God's vengeance (1 Thess. 4: 6)

One of the many lovely blessings God bestows upon Christians is the fellowship they enjoy with other Christians. Because they honour Christ they are a community who work hard at respecting and esteeming their leaders, at admonishing the idle, at encouraging the fainthearted, at helping the weak, at seeking to do good to one another and to all. They urge each other to prayer, to rejoicing and to gratitude to God in all circumstances. They seek the work of God's Spirit among them, they listen to the preaching and they try to discern what is good so they can do that and abstain from evil.

Such a rich fellowship is wonderful however Satan is always eager to destroy the good from God. One of his strategies is to make the fellowship so good that wrong intimacies can be developed between a man and a woman. Unhealthy relationships can be developed and marriages can be weakened or destroyed.

Paul, ever alert to the designs of the Devil, warns the Thessalonians against this trap with the severest of warnings. He, of all people, knew that to persecute or wrong a Christian was a dangerous thing to do. When Paul was travelling on the road to Damascus the risen Lord confronted Paul with, "why do you persecute me" when he had been persecuting Christians. In the same way the brother or sister in Christ who offended by sexual sin was not only defrauding another brother or sister of their rights but inviting the Lord to take vengeance on them on behalf of the Christian defrauded.

Christians must still be alert to the Devil's schemes. Still they must guard themselves, especially against sexual sins when good fellowship is being experienced. If they do not they come under God's anger.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Conclusion

As Paul concludes his exhortation to holiness, and especially sexual purity, he reminds the church that this is what God has called us to. It is not something that is optional. It is our calling. He then seeks to be even more emphatic by asserting that his words are not just an opinion he holds. This is a word from God who gives not just any Spirit to us but the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 4:7-8)