

A DEEPENING OBEDIENCE

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

Danny Hall

As I was studying 1 Thessalonians and thinking about the ways it applies to us, a new ad campaign for the city of Las Vegas jumped out at me. Las Vegas was known for years as “Sin City,” and then to broaden its appeal, they cleaned up its image and went through a season of trying to attract families, building amusement parks, and so on. But apparently they think they’ve lost a little bit of their edge, because their latest campaign is returning to the old “Sin City” theme. A whole slew of ads in the print media, on radio, and on television are all selling the idea of a blowout time in Las Vegas—gamble, drink, hook up with other men or women. Their new slogan is “Whatever happens here stays here.” You know, just leave your world behind, go to Las Vegas and have a grand old time, and don’t tell any stories when you go back.

We live in a culture that tells us there are all kinds of ways we can escape from the monotony of life and indulge ourselves in order to feel rejuvenated and refreshed. That kind of enticement is always out there. We live in a very sensually oriented world.

But if we think that early twenty-first century America is something new, nothing could be farther from the truth. This has been the nature of the world since its beginning. There has always been an enticement to live apart from God, to follow paths that are contrary to what God would want for us, to drink at the fountain of these distractions and find fulfillment.

The apostle Paul wrote the words we’re going to study in this message to a group of people who were learning to live out their faith in a world not very different from ours. First-century Thessalonica was cosmopolitan and worldly. It was on a major trade route from Rome eastward to its provinces, and it was an eclectic city, with people from all over the empire living there. It was characterized by pagan worship in which the spirituality of the local religions was very much tied to sexual immorality with temple prostitutes. The Thessalonians lived in a very sensually oriented and materialistic world, as we do. They had the same kind of enticements.

They were young believers, a relatively new church, and they were on fire for the Lord, living out their faith even in the face of enormous opposition and persecution. In the passage we’re going to study, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, Paul turns his attention to helping them deal with some of the issues of the heart that they’re going to battle with.

In each of the seven messages in this series we’re highlighting one characteristic of the Thessalonian church that Paul either applauds them for or encourages them toward, which we can be motivated to apply to our own church as we seek God’s heart. We’ll discover the fourth characteristic as we look at 4:1-12.

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and

defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

In this passage the apostle gives them a call to further spiritual growth and then describes some arenas where this growth needs to take place, where the battle is being fought. There are two arenas that he speaks of explicitly and a third one that he implies. But he first gives them a goal.

Our goal: pleasing God

Verse 1: “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God....” The goal of their spiritual life is to walk in such a way as to please God. Now, the word “walk” literally means to walk around. It is used metaphorically throughout the New Testament to describe your lifestyle, the way you live day by day. Paul says you are to walk a certain way so that you will please God.

I wonder how many of us have pleasing God as the central motivation in the way we order our lives. We make a myriad of decisions day by day about how we are going to conduct ourselves, everything from how we are going to relate to our spouse or our kids or our roommates when we get up in the morning, how we are going to relate to people in our work situation, and what we are going to do that day, to the macro decisions in life like whether we are going to buy this house, or this car, whether we are going to marry this person, whether we are going to go on this vacation. Now, I am not saying that we need to ask things like which color of socks would please God. But we do need to consider how much of the way we go about living our life is actually motivated by a deep desire in our hearts to please God. Most of the time it seems our decisions are made to expedite our own personal goals. I choose this career path because it will be the most fulfilling, make the most money, or whatever. I want a relationship with this person because he or she is the most pleasing to me and makes me feel good about myself. I choose a path based mostly on things related to my own needs, my own goals, and my own wants.

The Thessalonians were normal human beings like us, and they fought the same kinds of things we do. So Paul is reminding them that as an organizing principle of their life and of their discipleship in Christ, in order to be all that God wants them to be and enjoy all the fullness that he desires, they need to begin with this basic goal of pleasing God.

Second, he points to the fact of the authority behind that. This is not just something he is making up. Verse 2: “For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” Farther on in verses 7-8 he says, “For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.” This isn’t just pop psychology, Paul says, or a great way to order your lives to be happy. This is the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. So if we are going to grow spiritually, Paul reminds us that not only is our goal to please God, but we live under the sovereign authority of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. Spiritual growth flows out of the goal to please him in acknowledgment of his lordship.

Finally, this call to spiritual growth is a call to *continue* in spiritual growth. Notice some of the strong words he uses: “request” and “exhort” in verse 1, and “urge” in verse 10. After congratulating them for their spiritual progress, he says he exhorts and urges them to excel all the more. These people were already walking in a way that pleased God. They were already loving one another fully. They had achieved a remarkable level of spiritual maturity in a relatively short time as they lived out their faith. But Paul exhorts them, “Don’t stop with that. Excel all the more.” He understood that there was a danger of becoming complacent, plateauing in their spiritual lives, losing that sense of desiring more and more to know God and please him.

That danger exists for all of us. When God has changed our lives and we have begun to grow spiritually, at some point we can very easily say, “Whew! I’ve come a long way, and I’m so thankful to God,” and then just get relaxed in the good things God has done. We can lose our edge in spiritual progress. That can happen for a lot of different reasons. One of the reasons I think we plateau spiritually is that we give in to the temptation to compartmentalize our spiritual lives. We live in a world in which spirituality is rampant, and one of the enticements is the idea that you can have a spiritual experience that won’t make any demands on the way you live. How often do we fall into that trap? We get very comfortable with the activities of spiritual life: going to church, reading the Scriptures, singing the songs. We pull our spirituality out and make it front and center on occasion, but it is no longer the determining factor of how we live our lives. Paul understood that this was deadly, so he wanted these young believers in Christ not to rest on how far they had come, but to seek the heart of God all the more, knowing him more deeply and obeying him more fully so they could be ever more transformed into what God intended them to be.

Now Paul goes on to describe some arenas of growth, two explicit and one implied. This is what we are battling as we seek to grow in the Lord. The first arena of growth is the battle for purity of life in verses 3-8.

Sexual purity

Notice how he describes it. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification....” Sanctification means being set apart from your sinfulness for the glory of God. Paul immediately defines sanctification this way: “That you abstain from sexual immorality....” But he is not saying that the totality of sanctification is related to sexual purity. He is elevating this issue here because he understands what an intense arena of battle this is. Our sanctification is constantly under attack in this particular area of our lives, and he wants these people to pay attention to it. As I said, we live in a world where a city can offer on public airways in a light and attractive way, “Come and blow off all your morals, and whatever happens will stay here.” In the same way Paul lived in a world that was sensually oriented, enticing people to find fulfillment and satisfaction and release in things that were improper.

Now, he gives the Thessalonians a “what,” a “how,” and a “why” in this area of sexual purity. First, the “what”: abstain from sexual immorality. Period. The word “immorality” here is a broad word that covers the whole gamut of illicit sexual behavior, from our thought lives to our practices. Paul simply says, “Stop doing it.” That’s a pretty strong command. He recognizes the level of temptation, but he just says, “Folks, if you’re going to live a life pleasing to God, it’s an area you’re going to battle, for here is God’s command: abstain from it.”

Next he gives us “how” in verses 4-5: “That each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God....” The meaning of the phrase “possess his own vessel” has been debated for centuries. I went back to my commentaries

and tried to trace the history of the interpretation of this phrase, and I found that there are two main ideas. The church fathers down through the reformation era and the modern era have come down in different places. Just to be sure, I did what I always do: I went back and read all the sermons preached at PBC on the subject to see if I was okay. There are two sermon series on 1 Thessalonians on the PBC website, one by Ray Stedman and one by Steve Zeisler. I was gratified to find that they also came down on different sides of this. I came down on Steve's side in the end.

One of the ways people understand the word "vessel" is as our own body. The idea is that we possess our own body in a way that is honoring or sanctifying, which would imply that we have self-control. The other line of interpretation sees the word "vessel" as our spouse. A person learns to possess or acquire his spouse in all honor and sanctification. It's too technical to go into all of it here, but I favor that second interpretation. In short, I think Paul is saying that the "how" of dealing with sexual immorality is to celebrate the goodness that God intended for sexuality. There is a wrong way and a right way to satisfy our sexual needs. The wrong way is to get involved in all kinds of sensuality and immorality. The right way is to follow God's path, which is for a man and a woman given to one another in marriage to have a healthy, beautiful, fruitful sexual relationship. Some people don't like this interpretation, because it sounds demeaning to speak of possessing one's spouse. But Paul doesn't mean it that way. He is talking about a mutual ownership or acquisition between husband and wife in the context of a holy relationship that is pleasing to God. He says it is to happen in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion (even within a marriage relationship, sex can be abused).

Now, the issues of sexuality and the gamut of implications are myriad and complex and I do not want to suggest for a moment that we've got it all figured out now. This subject deserves its own series of seminars. Dealing with the intricacies of living this truth out is a lifelong process. But we do know that Paul is reminding us that as we seek spiritual growth and we battle in this very key area of purity, the "how" of dealing with the "what" is to celebrate true, good, healthy, God-designed sexuality as opposed to the aberrations with which the world entices us.

This past week I took Monday off, and my son Christopher and I went up into the hills and hiked. We had about a six-hour nonstop conversation (and if you know either one of us very well, you know the word "nonstop" applies). We talked about everything, although we did make a rule that when we got out on the hiking trail, we would not talk about baseball, lest we get lost in that mutual love. At one point in the conversation we were talking about relationships. I asked Christopher, "Now that you're in college and on your own, how did the instruction you received in your high school years at the [Christian] school and at church prepare you for all this?"

He thought for a moment and then said, "You know, all the way through we were told as young people that chastity equaled virginity. We were pounded over and over again with the instruction, 'Don't have sex. Don't have sex. Don't have sex.' But I've come to realize that chastity isn't just virginity, it is purity. There is a goal that's larger than technically not having sex. No one talked honestly and openly about the larger issue of purity, of desiring something positive rather than focusing on 'Don't, don't, don't.'"

That was amazingly insightful, and it was gratifying to me to see my son grow up in his understanding and perspective on that. And it is so true that when we deal with the subject of sexuality in the church, we are much better at railing the "don'ts" than celebrating what purity in sexuality as God designed it to be is all about.

I think Paul is calling the Thessalonians to understand that in this arena of battle, there is something wonderfully healthy that God has created, and when we live it out, we will please God more and more, rather than having our spiritual lives torn down through all the ways we might be enticed away from it.

Third, Paul gives us the “why” in verse 6: “And that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.” Paul is saying that there are consequences. When we get outside of God’s bounds in our sexuality, there is damage. “Transgress” means to go too far. He is saying, “Don’t defraud, or deceive, your brothers and sisters in Christ by the way you live out your life.” He understands the reality that when we get outside God’s bounds, people are hurt. How many of us can look back into our own past and not see a bit of damage where we’ve gotten it wrong and followed our own passions, our own agendas, away from God’s way? Now, the wonderful truth is that God is merciful. He restores, forgives, and even rekindles a healthy view of sex when we’ve had a bad one.

I am reminded of the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). David, king of Israel, “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22), put himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, fell into a lustful moment and coveted Bathsheba, had an illicit affair with her, and impregnated her. And look at the carnage that came after that. Now, he lived in a time when a king could do what he wanted, and David let himself lapse into that. He said, “What I want is her!” and all of a sudden his world was upside-down, and it ended in the murder of her husband and in his own shame. When we choose to live by our own passions and lust and not celebrate the goodness of God within the bounds that God gave us, we are setting ourselves up for destruction and disaster.

Paul goes on now to identify a second arena of spiritual growth that is very important in our lives.

Excelling in love

Verse 9: “Now as to the love of the brethren [the community of faith], you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another....” The second arena of spiritual growth is our love for one another within the family of God. Notice he says that a loving heart, particularly toward the brethren, is part of our renewed character. When we come to Christ and have our lives changed, God puts his love into our hearts. It’s the natural outworking of who we are in Christ to love one another in the family of God. So whenever we act unlovingly toward one another, we are actually acting out of character as children of God. The Thessalonians were doing a great job of loving everybody around them.

“But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.” Paul recognizes once again the tendency to move away from what we know to be true, and what is even part of us, and get caught up in our own selfishness and forget to love one another.

This love is expressed in sacrifice for one another. He echoes the words of Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse (see Discovery Papers 4729-4740). John 15:12-13: “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” In sacrificial love we are willing to extend ourselves in order to meet the needs of one another, to welcome in new people, to encourage one another.

I wonder how much we have thought about that lately. I asked myself, “Do I consciously think of how to get better at loving my brothers and sisters in Christ, how to be creative in that, what the needs around me are, what words of encouragement I can give?” I don’t ask myself those questions nearly often enough. We probably all tend to very easily get caught up in our own lives, and then genuine needs come across our radar screen more like intrusions than opportunities. You know what that feels like. Yet it is true that there are many wonderful expressions of loving each other deeply in this body. Paul says, even when you get there, keep growing in it, because the way we as the body function and care for each

other is an important arena of life. This is our foundation of security in the Lord as we come together as the people of God to live out our faith.

Paul implies a third arena of growth.

Glorifying God in everyday things

Verses 11-12: “And...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.” Here I think he is calling us to continue to grow spiritually and please God in the normal, everyday things of life. (In 2 Thessalonians 3 there is a similar and more direct teaching.) It seems that what happened was that in their excitement about the wonderful, glorious promise of Christ’s coming, at least some people in the church decided that this meant they could just drop out of life. They quit their jobs and became idle busybodies as they were looking for the Lord to come back. They ended up becoming dependent on other people because they weren’t earning a living anymore. Paul is saying, “That’s not what waiting for the Lord is all about.” In the everyday business of life, working with your hands, the opportunities are there to glorify God and please God as well. God calls us to continually ask how we can please him in these mundane things as we wait for the Lord’s return.

One of my favorite verses about the Lord’s return is found in 1 John 2:28: “Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.” What are you going to do to be prepared for Christ’s coming? Abide in him. It’s not about dropping out of everyday life. It’s not even about hoping we’re in church, or witnessing to someone, when Jesus comes back. It’s about keeping that vital relationship with him going. So if you are at work or playing a game or sitting down to dinner with your family when Christ comes back, you won’t be ashamed, if you are just abiding in him.

Finally, Paul says the result of spiritual growth in our relational world, in the realm of the church, and in the way we live our lives in the everyday things is that outsiders will see our proper behavior.

Let me suggest some ways we can apply this Scripture. First of all, we cannot separate our spiritual life from the way we live. It just doesn’t work. That’s not what following Christ is all about. We can’t push Jesus off to the side and then pull him back in on Sunday mornings or whenever it feels good, or perhaps when we desperately need him because our life is going down the tube. No, following Christ means our whole life.

Second, we have been given the resources we need to live this life. Verse 8 speaks of “the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.” In 5:24 at the end of the book he is going to say, “Faithful is He who calls you, and He will also bring it to pass.” God does not call us to anything that he does not resource us to do and be. We may think trying to live a holy life in our sexuality, or in the community of faith, or whatever, is overwhelming. Well, yes, it is, except that the Holy Spirit has been given to us. Part of our new life in Christ is that we have been fully and completely resourced with what we need to grow in him and to live out obedient lives to his glory. The Holy Spirit lives in us.

So the fourth characteristic of a healthy, growing church is that it has an ever-deepening obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. There is some logic behind the order of these characteristics we have discovered so far. First, you are vitally connected to God. Then you are nurtured and enriched by his word. Then living out your faith in the battle of life helps grow you up. And finally you live in these cycles of ever-deepening obedience to Christ. That’s what it means to be a healthy believer and a healthy church. This is what God calls us to, and as I have said in each message, this is good news! We can do this. God has

given us all that we need: a relationship with him, his very word, the Holy Spirit within us, and life together in the body of Christ. We can become what God wants us to be. The challenge to us is to keep growing, to want to excel all the more.

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