

Series: The Ultimate Challenge
Today: The Ultimate Call to a Pure Life
Text: I Thessalonians 4

A sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

For the last three weeks we have been examining Paul's instructions to the young church at Thessalonica. It has been our attempt to understand what relevance a letter written in the first century, about 20 years after the death of Jesus, might have for the 21st century church. Today we are in Chapter 4 of I Thessalonians.

For those of you who have been away, let me briefly set the stage for you. Paul had visited Thessalonica as a part of his early missionary journey to the non-Jews in Macedonia which we now know as Northern Greece. He had spent some time with them and helped them to understand that faith in the saving grace of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ had restored them to a right relationship with God.

He had been very successful in that effort. The Gentiles in Thessalonica responded powerfully to his message, and a church had been established among a people who had previously worshipped many Gods. This was a group of people who had no Bible other than what we know as the Hebrew Bible—The Old Testament. There were not catechisms for them to memorize. There was no history for them to follow. They had to make it up as they went along, and Paul was pleased with how well they had responded in the initial stages of their faith journey. When he left, he had intended to return a few months later to help them grow as a church, but he had been prevented from returning, and so he sent his young assistant, Timothy to check in on their progress.

When Timothy returned with the good news that the young church had not only survived but was doing quite well, Paul was elated. Most of what we have heard in the first three chapters has been words of encouragement. Now, before he closes his letter, he turns to words of instruction.

There is one portion of one verse in chapter 4 which helps us understand the advice Paul is giving. It is at the beginning of verse 3: *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification.”*

The will of God is our sanctification. That is a scary thought for those of us who know our weaknesses, isn't it? I am reminded of a conversation with a mother and her five-year-old daughter. The little girl had disobeyed her mother and had been sent to her room. After a few minutes, the mom, being a good mother, went in to talk with her about what she had done. Teary-eyed, she asked, "Mommy, why do we do wrong things?"

The mother replied, "Sometimes the devil tells us to do something wrong and we listen to him when we should be listening to God instead."

To which the little girl sobbed a reply, "Mommy, I try to listen to God, but sometimes I think God doesn't talk loud enough!"

All of us can identify with that little girl, can't we? We want to do what is right. We want to obey the will of God, but sometimes the allure of our culture drowns out the voice of God in us and we do the wrong thing.

Paul is urging the Thessalonians to recognize that it is God's will that we be sanctified through the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it would be helpful to understand what the word means before we focus on his specific instructions which still have meaning for the time and place in which we find ourselves.

The root word for sanctification in the Greek is *hagios*. It is the word we translate as “*holy*.” To be sanctified is to be holy. It is a call to holiness. It is a call to a life of purity, but perhaps not as you might think of holy.

Paul was a Jew, and he derived his theological concepts from the Jewish faith. The root word for *holy* in Hebrew means “*to be set apart*.” An object used in worship in the Temple was holy because it had been set apart for a special purpose. Priests in the Temple were “*holy men*” because they had been set apart for a special role in the life of the community.

At our 11:00 a.m. service this morning we will baptize a baby. We will use good Lancaster County water drawn from the tap which is not in and of itself “*holy*.” It becomes holy when the faith of the believer meets the symbol of God’s grace in the washing away of sin. It is a holy experience because we have set it apart. When we gather here on communion Sundays, as we will next week, we will use bread from a local bakery and grape juice purchased at Costco. These things are not “*holy*” in and of themselves, but they will be set apart for a specific purpose to enrich the faith of all who believe that the grace of God was most clearly expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: his body broken for us and his blood shed for us.

Paul is urging the Thessalonians to see their lives as “*holy*,” that is in their common, everyday interactions they are to see themselves as set apart to become the means of grace for one another and for the world. Then he becomes very specific. He urges the Thessalonians to see themselves as set apart: In their Understanding of their Sexuality, and in their Understanding of the Second Coming of Christ.

In their Understanding of their Sexuality

It may seem strange that Paul begins his specific advice to the Thessalonians on how they should live sanctified lives with a treatise on sexuality. However, if you put yourself in the context of the times in which they lived, it was a very important place to begin.

Throughout the Roman Empire divorce had become epidemic. Seneca wrote: Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. In Greece, sexual immorality was a matter of course. Demosthenes had written: *“We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for day-to-day needs of the body; and we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”* So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame in extramarital relationships (Barclay, DSB, p. 231).

It was to men and women who lived in a society where sexual relations had become cheapened that Paul wrote the paragraph he did about their sexuality. He urges them to have a higher view of sex. It wasn't because he saw sex as evil, but because he saw it as a gift from God that he urged them not to cheapen that special relationship between two people through promiscuity.

The world in which we live is not all that different, is it? The availability of explicit sexual material is no more than a mouse click away on the internet. The divorce rate still hovers around 50% of all marriages ending in failure. Yet we remain silent about what is healthy sexuality and what is unhealthy.

I have been a Christian for nearly 45 years, and I have been a pastor for 37 years. In all those years I cannot remember a time when I was bold enough to talk about sex in a

sermon until last year when we were dealing with what it would mean for us to deal with one of our members convicted of the possession of child pornography. Out of that conversation has come a blessing that this church has instituted a curriculum in our church school where children and youth can talk about their sexuality in the context of Christian values and beliefs.

Paul urges the Thessalonians to set their sexual activity in the context of sanctification; to see it as gift from God; something set apart for the deepening of a bond between two people; and not to cheapen it. Sex is good. It is a gift from God. If you and the person you love most in the world are not sexual, you may need some help because you were created for that kind of a relationship. If someone you love is misusing the gift God has given them, he or she may need some help. But let's not deny that sex is God's gift for the deepening of a relationship, and let's use it accordingly.

In their Understanding of the Second Coming of Christ

The other area of behavior that Paul urged the Thessalonians to set apart was in regard to the Second Coming of Christ. When Paul first visited Thessalonica, he believed that Jesus was coming soon; very soon. Twenty years has passed, and Christ has yet to return.

Yet the Thessalonians were behaving as if the second coming were just around the corner. They had quit their jobs and were waiting in small groups for the clap of thunder and the descending of the chariot driven by Jesus himself to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. They weren't paying attention to the day-to-day concerns like work and their relationships with others. And to top it all off, they were having incessant arguments about the fate of those who died before Jesus comes again.

In modern day parlance, Paul says: *“Get a life, people! Go to work, take care of your relationships, mind your own business and let God worry about the future. Live everyday as if it is the last day you will have on this earth, but if Jesus doesn’t come again today, live life fully and enjoy it and trust God with the future.”*

Presbyterians don’t talk much about the second coming of Christ. It is not because we don’t believe it is going to happen. We do. We just see it as God’s business. Our business is to live each day as if Christ is coming; to choose each activity and take care of every relationship as if Christ is present with us. With Paul we believe that the time is coming when God will establish God’s reign on the earth clearly and dramatically. Until that time comes, it is our responsibility to live as though we are “sanctified” or set apart. Our lives are to reflect our faith, and our faith is to determine our everyday actions.

However, don’t be surprised if you give this a try that some people may not understand. Maybe you’ve heard the story about the fellow who accompanied his friend home for dinner and was impressed by the way he entered his house, asked his wife how her day went, and told her she looked pretty. They embraced, and she served dinner. After they ate, the husband complimented his wife on the meal and thanked her for it. When the two fellows were alone, the visitor asked, "Why do you treat your wife so well?"

"Because it makes our marriage happier, and you just never know when the Lord may show up and ask what you are doing." replied the host. Impressed, the visitor decided to adopt the idea.

Arriving home, he embraced his wife and said, "You look wonderful!" For good measure he added, "Sweetheart, I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

His wife burst into tears. Bewildered, he asked her, "What in the world's the matter?" She wept, "What a day! Billy got in a fight at school. The refrigerator quit and spoiled the groceries. And now you've come home drunk!"

In his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton wrote fifteen lines that have become known as "the Merton Prayer": My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Source: Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 79

Conclusion

Paul wrote this to the Thessalonians: "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*" It means viewing our lives as set apart for the things which will please God. May it be so for all of us as we live in this time between the resurrection and the day when Christ comes again.

