

Called To Holiness

1Thessalonians 4:1-8

One of the many things that I admire about Jesus is how He handles difficult people in difficult situations.

We see that when the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman guilty of adultery to Jesus as He taught a large group of people in the Temple courts.

They put her in the middle of the crowd and confront Him with a question hoping to find a reason to accuse Him of wrong doing.

They said, “*Now in the Law [that’s God’s Word], Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?*”

Talk about a tense moment.

They are trying to exploit His compassion and get Him to deny the Word of God so they can kill Him.

He could have lit into them on several fronts, but instead He “bent down”, the bible says, “...and wrote with his finger on the ground.”

While the Bible is silent on exactly why He takes that approach, one thing we can say for certain is that it has nothing to do with His uncertainty about what to do.

Like impatient children they keep asking Him what should be done.

Eventually, according to His sovereign will, He stands and gives them this answer, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

He then bends down and continues to write on the ground.

Feeling the weight of conviction over his words those who were ready to put her to death walked away one by one until only the woman remained before Jesus.

It is fascinating that she does not run away for her life, but stands before Jesus.

Once again He stands and He speaks to the woman.

He says, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one Lord.”

When the scribes and Pharisees addressed Him they called Him “teacher”, but she calls Him “Lord”.

Somehow she recognizes that He has authority over her and she is right.

He has the right pronounce judgement over her, but instead of condemnation He says, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.*”

That is amazing grace. That same grace is offered by God to everyone to trusts in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of their sins.

That is what the Bible says in Romans 8:1, it says,
“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

[I am so thankful for the grace of God because there is no hope for anyone outside of that because we are all sinners like the woman brought before Jesus. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone to the glory of God alone forever. With that grace, however, there comes a call upon our lives. Jesus places this call on the woman, after showing her grace He says to her, “...go, and from now on sin no more.” That brothers and sisters is a call to holiness and everyone who is saved by grace alone has that call upon their lives. We are reminded of that in our text this morning **1Thessalonians 4:1-8**. In these verses Paul shows these believers that to be saved by grace also means to be called to holiness. There are two important lessons on how to pursue this call and there is a warning about failing to do so. We see the first how in verses 1-2 which teach us that...]

Point #1 – Christians are called to constantly apply God’s Word to their lives. (Verses 1-2)

Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commands” (John 14:15). Of course we fall short of that and are in constant need of grace, but the same grace that has forgiven us of all our sin on account of Jesus enables us to strive for obedience.

I want you to notice the tone of affection and exhortation that is in the first part of verse one.

[End at ‘Lord Jesus’]

As many times before he calls these believers ‘brothers’, no doubt he is also thinking of his sisters in Christ as well.

He rightly sees those in Christ as children of God.

They are bound together by something much deeper than blood, they are bound together by the Holy Spirit.

Out of that deep affection he says, ‘we ask and urge you’.

The word ‘ask’ is a plea of friendship. He is going to ask what he is about to ask because he really cares about these people and wants what is best for them.

The word ‘urge’ is much more authoritative. As an apostle of Christ he has an obligation to command them to do what Jesus has commanded.

So there is a tenderness and a firmness to what he is going to say here.

Here is what he asks of them in **verses 1-2**.

Without a doubt Paul preached the grace of God in Christ wherever he went.

No matter who you are and no matter what you have done, you can come to the cross and be forgiven.

We come just as we are. I love that, but we must never preach a gospel that says come just as you are and stay that way.

Coming to the cross is life changing and that is what Paul preached as we went from place to place.

He taught people how we should live in order to ‘please God’.

He faithfully gave them Christ’s instructions on living, what they need to do is apply it.

How are they to do that? It says, “...do so more and more.”

That sounds like something they need to constantly keep doing and in increasing measure.

[Quick show of hands, how many kids here this morning know how to skate? I want you to think about the first time you stepped on the ice. How did it go? Did you have someone to help you and to teach you? No how many of you have skated lots and lots? Are you better now than you were when you first stepped on the ice? Why? Because you practiced what you learned and you improved. Here is a really important question, can you still be a better skater? Did you know that even the best skaters in the world constantly practice to maintain and improve their skills?]

It is the same thing in the Christian life.

When we first start out, we stumble and fall and it might even seem like there is little improvement for a while.

We have the same set of instructions that Paul gave the Thessalonians.

In fact, we have a much more complete set than they did. We have the finished Word of God in the Bible.

Many of us know substantial parts of the Bible, how are we doing at application?

I want to encourage us to ask three basic questions every time we read our bibles or listen to true Bible based preaching.

What am I learning about God? What am I learning about people? And, how can I apply this to my life?

[If we persist in learning and applying God’s word over the course of time things improve. When should we stop that? Never, it is something we need to do every day. We must cast aside laziness and indifference. We must never say, “It’s good enough”. Let us rather strive to apply God’s word because we love Jesus. That lays the ground work for this second lesson. Paul has a particular concern for these believers, but the lesson he teaches applies generally to the call to holiness. Here is the second lesson that...]

Point #2 – Christians are called to self-control. (Verses 3-5)

Every Christian has the ability to say no to evil desires through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in them?

So the call is to pursue a life that is pleasing to God by applying His word to our lives more and more and he tells us why that is so important in the **first part of verse 3** [stop @ sanctification].

Many people wonder about God's will in terms of what kind of job to get, where to live, who to marry, etc.

Those things are important, but those choices in life are small in comparison to the pursuit of a holy life.

Wherever we live and whatever we do, God's will for our lives is 'sanctification.'

That word is closely related to the word 'holy' and when it is used in the bible there are usually two things in view.

To be sanctified means to be set apart as belonging to God.

That is true of all genuine Christians. We belong to God, we have been purchased by the blood of Jesus, and we are His.

Sanctification also means to become more like the LORD Jesus in our thoughts, actions, and feelings.

It is the process of turning away from the things that God hates and doing more of the things that God loves.

That is God's will for our lives.

That is true of every area of life, but one area particularly is mentioned here (Verses 3-5).

Very much like our own time, the culture of that day was filled with immorality.

The word that is translated here as immorality includes every kind of amorous desire or action that is outside God's design for marriage.

Today you will find so called teachers, pastors, and theologians that dismiss what the Bible says about these matters to justify all kinds of immorality.

They will tell you how Jesus never addresses these matters, they will tell you that the bible doesn't talk much about it, they will tell you that God's Word doesn't really mean what it plainly means.

All those things are simply untrue. The consistent witness of the Bible from cover to cover affirms God's pattern of one man married to one woman to the exclusion of all others.

Anything other than that is sin and falls into the category of immorality.

Paul says do not participate in that.

That means any form of it.

That is accomplished by having control over our bodies.

Brothers and sisters, it is simply atheistic to say, “I could not help myself!”

That is what someone who does not know God says according to verse 5.

The world will tell you that you are at the mercy of your desires.

That is a lie, we can rule over the things we want.

As human beings we can deny ourselves and as Christians the Holy Spirit has given us new hearts with new desires so that we want to exercise our ability to say no to our natural desire for immoral things and to say yes to what is right and good in God’s sight.

To say otherwise is to think and act like someone who does not know God.

There are no exceptions here, he says “this is the will of God...that *each one* of you know how to control his body.”

I know full well this is a difficult thing, but to think otherwise is to deny the power of God at work in His people.

[I have heard the issue of intimacy reserved for marriage compared to a fire. Fire in its proper place like a fireplace is very good. Fire that escapes the fireplace and burns the house down is very bad.]

Self-control keeps the fire in the fire place and that is why God gives it to His people as a fruit of the Spirit and He calls us to exercise it.

That is helpful for battling against all sin.

We are not slaves to ungodly desires.

We do not have to say everything thought pops into our head.

We do not have to give into anger.

We do not have to indulge our desire to gossip.

We do not have to let our mind wander during worship.

[We can exercise self-control and more than that we must exercise self-control. The will of God is more than something He thinks would be nice to do, it is something that He commands us to follow. As Paul continues on here he shows us why this is such a big deal. He shows us this third lesson about being called to holiness, that...]

Point #3 – Ignoring God’s call to holiness is harmful and invites judgement. (Verse 6-8)

Being born again means having a changed heart. Saying you are a Christian and living like an unbeliever not only brings the damaging effects of sin, but also denies the power of the gospel and goodness of God's ways.

Verse 6 continues on what fulfilling the will of God in our sanctification looks like.

The idea of the word 'transgress' is to ignore a limit or boundary for the purpose of taking something that does not belong to you.

To go beyond those clear boundaries that the LORD has established in the covenant of marriage is to 'wrong' your 'brother'.

The way Paul typically uses the word 'brother' strongly suggests he is referring to all fellow believers here.

Every sin brings some kind of hurt to our fellow believer and humanity generally to varying degrees.

The particular sin in view here is incredibly destructive, which is why we are reminded here in verse six of the judgement of the LORD.

Why does God take this so seriously?

In order to understand that, we have to have the theology of marriage clearly in our minds.

In the very beginning of the Bible we are taught that God made human beings in "His image making them male and female" (Genesis 1:26-27).

First He made a man and called him Adam and then He made the woman and called her Eve.

The reason God made Eve is because He saw that it was not good for "man to be alone."

That had nothing to do with Adam being lonely. It has to do with his insufficiency to bear God's image as an isolated individual.

When God brings Adam and Eve together in marriage what does He say? He says, "The two will become one flesh"

You have two people equal in being, yet distinct in personhood being joined as one.

Why does He do that? Because humanity bears the image of the Trinity.

Equality in being and substance, three distinct persons, and absolute unity.

Adam could not do that by himself, no other creature could fit the bill and neither could another man so God created a woman and brought them together.

Not only that, we learn in the New Testament that marriage is a picture of the Gospel.

Husbands are to model and represent Christ in their marriage and wives are to model and represent the church in their marriage.

Christ is faithful in serving and loving the church to the point of death and He is completely devoted to His bride.

Intimacy outside of the covenant of marriage shows contempt for the relationship of Christ and His bride the church.

Can you see why this is so serious?

Can you see why Christ is described as an 'avenger' when people wrong one another in this area?

This kind of sin shows utter contempt for the glory of God and His gospel.

That is the point he is driving home in **verses 7-8**.

If this were a matter of a man's opinion, if this was Paul just saying, "This is the way I think things should be" it would be no big deal to ignore what he writes here and in other places in the Bible.

There are many who think that way, but this is something far more than the opinion of a man, this is a man commissioned by Christ to speak on His behalf.

If we ignore this we are doing much more than rejecting a man, we are rejecting God Himself.

That is impossible for someone whom God has given the Holy Spirit.

The only conclusion we can come to is that if we reject what God says about marriage and morality we do not have the Holy Spirit and unless we turn from that towards the cross we are going to be condemned forever by Christ instead of saved by Him.

Can you feel the weight of that?

If you can then you must pay attention to God's calling.

He has a calling on the lives of every one of His people. The call is to holiness.

Two essential aspects to that call are the ongoing application of His word and the exercising of self-control.

If we do those things we will make progress to the glory of God which will be a blessing in our lives and be a blessing to the church as a whole.

If we ignore that we will hurt the church and be walking towards our own eternal destruction.

I pray we would choose the better option. I pray we would answer the call to holiness.