GOD’S WILL, YOUR SANCTIFICATION

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Key Verse: 4:3

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.”

Thank God for giving us an opportunity to study 1 Thessalonians. Until now we have studied up to chapter 3. Chapter 1 is Paul’s commendation for the church in his thanksgiving to God, for their work of faith, labour of love and endurance of hope: the gospel worked powerfully turning them to God from idols to serve the living and true God. They became imitators of the gospel servants and of the Lord and so a model for all the believers. They endured severe sufferings in the gospel of Christ Jesus, waiting for the Son from heaven to rescue us from the coming wrath. In chapter 2, Paul defended himself for the sake of God’s flock of sheep in the church. He came to them with pure motives as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. And while staying with them he was gentle like a mother caring for her little children, and a father exhorting, encouraging, and charging them to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into his kingdom and glory. In this chapter, he again thanked God that when they received the word of God, they accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in those who believe. As a result they became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus, on top of being imitators of their gospel servants and of the Lord, which meant they were all in line with the sufferings of Christ. Paul confessed that Paul and his gospel coworkers and the Thessalonian church members were separated from each other, but the separation was only in person, but in thought, and they were his hope, his joy or his glory and crown, for they would be presented to the Lord Jesus when he comes. In chapter 3, Paul said that he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith, sharing his fear that the tempter might have tempted them and his efforts mighty have been useless. And he expressed his great joy when he received from Timothy good news about their faith and love and shared his praying heart that night and day he and his gospel coworkers pray most earnestly that they might see the Thessalonians and supply what is lacking in their faith, also praying for their increasing and overflowing love and steadfast hope for the Lord Jesus’ coming with all his holy ones.

Chapters 1-3 are a long introduction of 1 Thessalonians and chapters 4 and 5 are the main part of this letter, though comparatively short, condensed. Now Paul says in 4:1, “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.” This indicates that he had already given them instructions about lives of believers. His initial instruction had been more thorough and complete. What he shares in this passage is a review with highlights for emphasis. Here his instructions are based on a general principle of how to live to please God. And then Paul renews the important practical instructions concerning sanctification abstaining from sexual immorality, increasing brotherly love and quiet life. In this study, may we learn the essential Christian life.

**First, to please God (1).** Again, verse 1 says, “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.” Before reviewing his instructions and exhortations, Paul lays down the basic principle of Christian living; it is to please God. The Thessalonians were living such a beautiful life of pleasing God. Paul exhorts them to do this more and more. Christian life is to do more and more or less and less, in other words, increasing or decreasing. “You do more and more” is in other translations “you man excel still more.” What Paul is concerned about is their spiritual growth. One godly parents always said to their son, “You can do better.”

We may try to master the basic principle of Christian living to please God embedded in our hearts and minds. Fundamentally, to please God or glorify God is God’s creation purpose. Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” The first question of the shorter Westminster catechism is what is the chief end of man. It is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The author of Hebrews stated in Hebrews 11 the lives of Abel and Enoch and then wrote, 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” And then he mentioned Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, etc. They all pleased God through their lives of faith, holding to the promise of God till death, staying in the Promised land coming back and being buried in the land of God’s promise and making Exodus to the promised land by faith.

We also remember Caleb and Joshua that when the whole community of Israel was grumbling and wailing after hearing the bad report about land of Canaan, “If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us” (Num 14:8). When they set their hearts on pleasing God, they had no fear in their hearts but could be confident in the faith that God would keep his word of promise given to them.

As we studied in 1 Thessalonians, Paul said in his defence against false accusations, “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts” (1:4). And he said in Galatians 1:10, “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” He also said in 2 Timothy 2:3-4, “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.” Even Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

Of our Lord Jesus is the best example for the life that pleases God. He said in John 8:29 “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what please him.” He wanted to please God and glorify him even through the cross. He prayed in John 17:1, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that you Son may glorify you.” We should know that the inner motive and purpose to please God is the guiding principle for our Christian lives. When we strive to please God in all we do, he will be with us and please us providing all we need overflowingly and satisfying our desires, and he will lead us in the best way of life.

**Second, God’s will, your sanctification (2-8).** Now verse 2 says, “For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” While he was with the Thessalonians, Paul had given them instructions. He stressed that he had given them by the authority of the Lord Jesus. The instructions were serious ones. Now Paul is building on his past teaching as written at the end verse 6, “as we have already told you and (solemnly) warned you.”

Verse 3 says, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified:” The description, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified” is a strong statement. In ESV, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” When we think of God’s will, it is something big, like in the Lord’s prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on, earth as it is in heaven.” But here we see that our sanctification is God’s will. In Acts 26:17-18, when Paul testified to Jesus before King Agrippa, he said of what the Lord said to him, “…I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” It indicates that there will be no place for those who are not sanctified. Sanctification is essential. Paul also said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:32, “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Our eternal inheritance (Heb 9:15) belongs to those who are sanctified.

Then Paul said specifically in verse 3-6a, “that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.” As we thought of, Paul had already solemnly warned them concerning sexual sin. Yet, it’s not something to be told and warned once and never again. For desire is strong, temptation is compelling, and society is corrupt. This is a passionate plea on the part of Paul to the Thessalonians and all other believers to maintain purity in the sexual area of their lives.

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth. Both Corinth and Thessalonica were infamous for sexual immorality. They worshiped Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and sexuality, whom the Romans referred to as “Venus.” In Corinth, more than 1,000 women dedicated their lives to the goddess as temple prostitutes. Thessalonica was particularly associated with the worship of the Cabiri, which promoted gross immorality in the name of religion.

Then and now, when people do not know God, they tend to live immoral lives. God is the source of a healthy moral compass. Godlessness leads to immorality. As godlessness has increased in our land, so has sexual immorality. Sexual obsession and perversion are now rampant. We live in a sex-crazed culture that literally worships immorality and exalts it and mocks faithfulness. It comes to us through all the media forms of music and movies and television and now, of course, the internet. We are not only a society that is literally drowning in a sea of sexual evil, but we seem to be enjoying it. It seems to be highly approved. As a nation, we don’t really care about the sexual sin of our leader, we don’t care about anybody’s sexual sin because we think that is a private matter that has nothing to do with anybody but them. Our country feels very comfortable with a womanizer, an adulterer, an unfaithful man. And that’s a sad commentary on how effective the onslaught of sexual evil has been in our society. Not only is sexual sin tolerated in any form by any one with anyone else, any time and any place, but it is promoted and advocated through every means available to man. It’s apparent to all of us that the sexual revolution which began in the 1960s has led us to the place where there are no absolutes, no standards, and no rules for sexual behavior.

Yet, the Bible is very clear concerning the sin of sexual immorality. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders…will inherit the kingdom of God.” Paul said continually in that chapter, “‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (6:13). Here what is Paul talking about? How does he get from food to immorality? An American magazine publisher (Hugh Hefner) who died recently said, “sex is a function of the body, a drive which man shares with animals like eating.” It means the body is simply biological and that’s exactly what they said in Paul’s day – food for the body, and the body for food. Sex for the body and the body for sex, it’s just another part of normal life. Here Paul says, “God will destroy them both. The body is not for sexual immorality, the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body.”

Paul continued to say in this chapter, “…Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and untie them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in the body?...Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:15-18). To believers, sexually immoral sin is unthinkable; it is uniting Christ with a prostitute as sinning against one’s own body which belongs to Christ. Fornication and adultery are an absolute no. God wants young people to keep purity before marriage. The church cannot live like the world. All forms of sexual gratification may be engaged in in the society, but not in the church of Jesus Christ. Believers in Christ should avoid sexual immorality. They should abstain from it. Practically they should avoid any such place and flee from pornography and any such internet site even the site suddenly pops up. We should protect ourselves and our children and our family and our church.

Then Paul says in verse 4, “that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.” How important our struggle to avoid sexual immorality is! Furthermore, we should learn to control our own body in a way that is holy and honourable. One who does not control his body cannot but be controlled by it. Galatians 5:16 says, “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Paul also said in Romans 8:13, “For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” A Psalmist said in 119:8, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” We need to guard our hearts and minds by holding to God’s word and letting the word of Christ richly dwell in us richly. And we are to cling to the cross of Jesus. Paul says in Galatians 5:24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature/flesh with its passions and desires.” Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness…” and 1 John 1:7 says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” And positively and actively we are to serve the Lord and do the work of God offering the parts of body as instruments of righteousness (Ro 6:13).

Then in verse 6, “and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.”

It means, “Don’t take advantage of someone else for your own sexual fulfillment.”

Then verse 6b says, “The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.” Here specifically the Lord’s punishment is mentioned for sexual sin. “The Lord will punish men” is in most other translations, “The Lord is an avenger” He avenges all sexual sins. The Lord’s vengeance in his wrath is dreadful. AIDS and some other venereal disease are a part of it. It is also written in Colossians 3:5-6, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires…because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” Hebrews 13:4 says, “God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” And the sexually immoral are on the list of those who will be thrown in the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Rev 21:8) and they are outside the city of Jerusalem (Rev 22:15).

Then verses 7 and 8 say, “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not rejects man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” We are to obey regarding the sin of immorality because of God’s vengeance, we are to obey because of God’s calling. And we are to obey because of God’s Spirit.

**Third, the life of love and quietness (9-12).** In verses 9 and 10, “Now about your brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” To be sanctified and live a holy life is very personal before God. This comes first as Christian living. The next thing Paul mentions is brotherly love, love for others. It is to practice God’s love to my fellow Christians. It is notable that holiness comes first before loving. The Thessalonians were doing well in this area. Yet, Paul urged them to do so more and more. He wanted them to continue to grow in the life of love.

In verses 11 and 12, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” The life of sanctification and the life of love are to go together with the life of quietness waiting for the Lord’s coming. Being zealous for the Lord and his coming does not necessarily have to be loud. One can be zealous and strive eagerly to be quiet. A quiet life is certainly related to the life of prayer. It is true that without prayer our life becomes noisy and pointless. So Paul continues here, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life to mind your own business.” Surely it does not mean a selfish and self-centred life. It is very easy to meddle in others’ affairs pointlessly, thinking that’s love and get into a lot of trouble. Paul continues, “Make it your ambition to lead a quite life to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.” They were so anticipating the coming of Christ they were ignoring their normal life duties.  It's not that the church today is so anxious for the coming of Christ that we're ignoring our worldly responsibility. It is that the church is so indifferent to the coming of Christ it is consumed with its worldly activity.  It's absolutely the reverse.  Both are wrong. Paul finally says, “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” What a beautiful life, a daily life of quietness and labour in good influence! It is the life of salt and light, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:13-14, “You are the salt of the earth…You are the light of the world.”

May we live a life that pleases God through the life of holiness, the life of love and the life of quietness. Particularly, we may deeply take these words, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality” in our hearts with no compromise with this sin which is rampant in our society.