**Living to please God** 17/9/23 dkm

Read: John 8:42-59, 1Thessalonians 4

Text: 1Thessalonians 4:1-8

Psalms: 93, 94:1-9, 67, 134a

Paul penned this letter to the Thessalonians after receiving news from Timothy that they were continuing in the faith, and in love, as they waited for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. They had turned to God from idols after hearing the gospel from Paul, the gospel that came in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul rejoiced in their conversion but not for a moment did he think his ministry was finished. I have met men who preach, baptise, and then leave. Paul left after 3 weeks but not by choice. The first half of this letter was taken up with Paul giving thanks to God for these believers, telling them how much he loved them, and explaining why he had not returned. Chapter 3, ending as it does with a benediction, could have been the end of his letter; but Paul was only half way through.

In most of his letters Paul begins with doctrine or teaching and ends with duty or practice, telling us how to apply the teaching in our lives. This letter is the same, although the first part is personal rather than doctrinal. Paul had apparently taught these new believers a lot of doctrine in the short time he was with them: ‘You know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus’ (4:2). This fourth chapter begins with the word, ‘Finally’, even though he is only half way through his letter; it could be translated, ‘Furthermore’. The apostle is moving on to the application of knowledge to life, to growing in love and holiness and becoming more like Jesus, the holy Son of God.

The day we believed was the beginning not the end of our journey. Yes, we were justified by grace through faith and became children of God. But children normally grow up into adults; we do not remain infants. In the same way we ‘should no longer be children’ or infants in the spiritual sense (Eph 4:14). The Christian life can be pictured as a child growing up, or it can be pictured as a journey or walk, as Paul explains here in verse 1 and in many other places (2:12, Eph 2:10, 4:1, Rom 6:4, Gal 5:16). Our main subheadings for this passage are, ‘Walk to please God’, and, ‘Will of God is your sanctification’. With regard to sanctification, the apostle focuses on sexual morality.

**1. Walk to please God**

Are you in the habit of taking a walk each day? Adults are told to take so many steps each day to stay healthy. We had a dog that tapped on the door wanting a walk each morning. Now we just have each other, and today my wife went out early so I am sitting in my study! I have never hired a personal trainer but many have. The trainer gets you out in the park with others, urging you to achieve certain gaols, and shouting if you slack off. Paul was like the personal trainer of these ‘brethren’ in Thessalonica, urging them and exhorting them in the Lord Jesus (4:1). Do you need urging, and maybe a bit of shouting, to stay healthy in your spiritual life?

Some people work out on a treadmill in the gym but I like walking in the park. Even better, I like a hike in the hills with the goal of reaching the peak. We have to work out and keep fit, but in the Christian life we are not on a treadmill; we are on a path that leads us into the presence of God. To enter the presence of God we have to be holy, so this path is one of growing in holiness (3:13, Heb 12:14). Yes, we are made holy when we believe and receive the Holy Spirit, but we also grow in holiness as the Holy Spirit works in us. Our justification is by grace, and our sanctification is by grace (Shorter Catechism Q 33 and 35).

Paul wanted to see the Thessalonians ‘abounding more and more’ but does not exactly say how (4:1). Back in verse 12 of the previous chapter he spoke of ‘abounding in love to one another and to all’. The two love commands are central to the Christian life, to our walking worthy of our calling in Jesus Christ (Eph 4:1, 2). Paul taught these commands which Jesus gave as a summary of the Ten Commandments (Mat 22:37, 39). These are the basic rules for life, as we will see shortly. Jesus said, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word’ or my commands (John 14:23). So if you love Jesus you will obey his commands, and if you don’t love Jesus don’t pretend to be a Christian!

Paul preached the gospel of Christ and the commands of Christ. He didn’t make up commands to give these believers or us. He ‘gave commandments through the Lord Jesus’; in other words, he passed on commandments given him by his Lord (4:2). Paul knew the commandments given in the OT and learned how Christ reinforced these under the New Covenant: ‘You have heard it was said… but I say to you’ (Mat 5:21, 22). Paul was not saved by keeping the commandments any more than the rich young ruler, or you are, but the commandments given through Jesus Christ are the basis for our walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh (Gal 5:16).

We are to walk in the way that pleases God. As a child we do things to please our father. We love hearing our father say, ‘Well done son’. But we are also tempted to do things to please ourselves. And as we grow up we start wanting to please other people. The ‘thumbs up’ emoji of Facebook has become ‘life’ for so many people. ‘Personal affirmation’, otherwise called ‘flattery’, is taught and enjoyed wherever you go. Often we try to please others but get no ‘thumbs up’ in return; we might even get a devastating ‘thumbs down’. Who are you trying to please today? You may say, ‘I please myself’, but this involves other people and their praise; life without other people is lonely, not pleasing or fulfilling. What if such praise does not come your way? Maybe you are living with the burden of hurtful words or actions, or simply the lack of response from those you are trying to please.

Living to please God gets us off this terrible treadmill. God’s love towards us is not dependent on what we do or say. He set his love upon us, electing us in Jesus Christ (1:4). Our human father gave us biological life and he loves us; we try to please him, even if some fathers are hard to please. God loves us with an everlasting love and he is not hard to please. Sure, he has given us commands to obey but these are not a burden; they are for our good. Moreover, he has given us the Holy Spirit to help us obey his commands. Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, lived to please God (John 8:29), so as his adopted sons and daughters we should be doing the same.

When you become a God-pleaser rather than a man-pleaser, you will be set free from a life of striving to please other people. Even if you say you please yourself you are a man-pleaser, leading a life of guaranteed dissatisfaction. Living to please God guarantees satisfaction, joy and hope- just ask the apostle Paul and the believers at Thessalonica. To please God we must obey his holy and just and good commands (Rom 7:12). In the following verses Paul deals with some commands that the Thessalonians probably found a challenge.

**2. Will of God your sanctification and sexual purity**

As Christians, we know that God knows our future, and we want him to reveal this to us. We ask what his will is regarding which career to follow, which person to marry, where to live, and so on. We want to be walking in the will of God. But what we read here in verse 3 takes a somewhat different view of God’s will for us: ‘the will of God is your sanctification’. God’s will for all his children is that they be growing in holiness, becoming holy as he is holy. We can do this in almost any career, with any believer we marry, and in any place.

Sanctification is a process or a walk, as Paul says here. We do not walk alone. The path is narrow but the Lord is with us as our guide; he is with us by his Spirit and his word. God knows our weakness, which is why he has given us these helps. As believers we have been called, been justified, and are being sanctified. ‘God did not call us to uncleanness but in holiness’ (4:7). Walking to please God means walking in faith, in love, and in holiness. Is this how you are walking before God and other people?

If you think sanctification is just a big theological word, listen to what Paul says it involves: ‘That you abstain from sexual immorality’ (4:3). Got your attention now! Your sex life is fundamental to your holiness! God does not demand total abstinence or celibacy for you to be holy, but he demands abstinence from sex outside marriage. God made us sexual beings, and made for the enjoyment of sex within a recognised, ‘till death do us part’, heterosexual marriage. When sin entered the world sex became a weapon in Satan’s arsenal. Freud rightly identified human drives for food and for sex, but only ever thought of fulfilling these desires, not of controlling them. Growing in holiness or godliness means controlling the desires of the flesh, especially abstaining from sexual immorality. Why is this so important? Paul tells us why.

Before going on we note that the believers in Thessalonica lived in a society not unlike ours, a very sexualised society. Greco-Roman society gave free reign to satisfying the lusts of the flesh. Sex was like a god! Indeed sex, as in temple prostitution, was involved in their worship of gods like Aphrodite. These new believers at Thessalonica had turned to God from idol worship. They may have turned from lives of prostitution, adultery, and/or homosexuality (1Cor 6:9). They probably had transgender and cross dressers also. These believers had been told not to live like pagans or Gentiles who do not know God (4:5). They were told to take their moral standards from God not from the society. Clearly, Paul’s teaching is for the church today. What then is his teaching with regard to sexual immorality?

Firstly, you must practice self-control. This is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). We are not animals controlled by instincts, as Freud and Darwin tried to tell us. We may have bodies like animals but we are made in the image of God with the ability to think, to make personal decisions, to control our bodies, and to relate to God. We can and must ‘possess our own vessel’ as Paul writes in verse 4; there is some uncertainty about the meaning of this word ‘vessel’ but it is pretty clear Paul is referring to the physical body. As a ‘vessel’ we receive the Holy Spirit when we believe (4:8, 1Cor 6:19).

Secondly, you must consider other people, including the person with whom you have committed adultery- being ‘consensual’ has nothing to do it! There will be other people who are hurt, taken advantage of, and indeed defrauded (4:6). Having an ‘affair’ with your neighbour’s wife is not showing love towards your neighbour. No matter who the person you are having sex with, if she is not your wife it is illicit sex, and you are harming the present or future husband or wife. ‘So sexual sin, besides being an offence against holiness and honour, is an act of fraud against a brother in taking what is rightly his’. Pre-marital sexual relations are included in sexual immorality. If there is no commitment there is the potential to defraud a brother, not to mention sinning against God by failing to practice self-control until taking marriage vows.

Thirdly, Paul refers to the Lord as ‘the avenger of all such’, all who wrong their neighbour in this way (4:6). ‘Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge' (Heb 13:5) - ‘avenger’ means one who satisfies justice. Paul had warned them about God’s justice coming on judgment day, if not before. Judgment was seen across that ancient society, as it is in our society, because God’s commands are being disobeyed. Let these words of Scripture be heard today, and remembered whenever temptation to sex outside marriage comes your way. If you have succumbed to this temptation then repent and find forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ (1Cor 6:11).

Paul’s fourth and final argument against sexual immorality is a return to his call for purity and holiness because God has given us his Holy Spirit. ‘Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Holiness involves our bodies; we belong to the Lord as a whole person. God affirms and guarantees that we belong to him by giving us his Holy Spirit- his **Holy** Spirit (4:8). With the Holy Spirit dwelling in our person, we dare not unite ourselves with a prostitute, or anyone who is not our wife or husband (1Cor 6:15, 19).

Laws and standards of sexual morality may have changed in our increasingly pagan and sexualised society, but God’s law has not changed. You must choose between walking to please God, and walking to please yourself and the pagans around you. Rejecting man or having man reject you may hurt, but rejecting God has eternal consequences.