

WEDNESDAY

Bible Study

The Marks Of A Model Church

‘Living To Please God’ - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

6 November 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction Most commentators and theologians would agree that one of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary Christianity is our neglect of Christian ethics and morals both in our teaching and practice. The Church is often seen to be preaching the Gospel but not living the Gospel. Little by little we have been acclimatised to accepting the values and practices of this world. There's an urgent need, as pluralistic and liberal (and post-modern) values increase, to not only understand more fully what the Bible has to say on moral issues, but to be men and women who live the Gospel as well as preach the Gospel.

Over the past few weeks we've been looking at Paul's model for enabling new believers to grow into mature Christians and how this involves a submission to the teachings of God's Word. But it seems as though Paul has reached a watershed in his letter in ch1-3, Paul has been looking back to his visit and the events, which followed but here, in ch4, he turns his thoughts to the present and addresses the issues of Christian behaviour and morality. I'd be fooling myself, and you, if I thought this talk was going to be easy listening. It isn't. But, let me just say that not I'm standing here in judgment on anyone. I'm fully aware that I am a flawed human being saved by God's grace, in need of forgiveness for my own wrongdoings. But I do believe in the authority of God's word, which acts as a blueprint/handbook for our Christian lives and it's that which we're going to be looking at this afternoon.

Throughout this letter, Paul has continually used the analogy of a child with being a young Christian. The beginnings of a Christian life can be compared to a walk because a walk suggests that we are making progress (Philippians 3:13-16; Hebrews 6:1). And in 4:1-13, Paul, I believe, describes three ways that a Christian should walk:

1) Walk in Holiness vs 1-8 The moral climate in the Roman Empire wasn't a particularly healthy one. Immorality was a way of life and, thanks to slavery; people had the leisure time to indulge in all the latest pleasures. The Christian message of holy living was new to that culture, and it wasn't easy for these young Thessalonian Christians to fight the temptations around them. In 3:13, Paul prayed that their holiness would be strengthened, and he gives five reasons why they should walk in holiness:

a) They were to Please God, vs1. But how do we walk/live to please God? We find the answer in Psalm 119:9: How can a young man keep his way pure? *By living according to your word.* All of us want to please the people we love the most, don't we? That's why a wife will surprise her husband by cooking his favourite meal, a husband will plan a special evening out which he knows his wife will enjoy, or a child will pick a bouquet of dandelions to give to mum and dad. In a similar way, pleasing God ought to be the major motive of the Christian life. It was, after all, Jesus' motive in life too: *For I always do what pleases Him (the Father)*, John 8:29. But pleasing God means much more than simply doing God's will. Jonah is a prime example. He obeyed God and did what he was commanded to do, but his heart wasn't in it.

He sat outside the city of Nineveh being angry with everybody, including God and, whilst God blessed Jonah's words, He couldn't bless Jonah. An interesting thought, isn't it? Our obedience should be: ... *doing the will of God* ... Ephesians 6:6. How do we know what pleases our Heavenly Father? It's through reading His Word, prayer and worship that we get to know His heart, and this opens up to His will to us.

b) They were to Obey God, vs2-3. Paul always taught God's commands regarding personal purity and in vs3, he explains that sexual immorality doesn't please God. In fact, Paul devoted a great deal of column inches to the theme of sexual purity simply because it was a critical problem in the church/society of that day. *It's also a critical problem in the church/society today.* Marriage vows are no longer considered sacred. Sex outside marriage and pornography are accepted practices for many Christians. God's purpose for our lives, vs3, is our sanctification (that is, to be made holy) that we might live lives of purity in mind and body.

In addition to this, the issue of human sexuality is one of the most divisive issues in the Church of England today. I distinctly remember Archbishop George Carey's farewell speech to the Anglican Consultative Council in Hong Kong in 2002 (CEN 19/09/02) when he highlighted his concern that a potential split over the issues of human sexuality was his greatest worry about the future of the Church. Not the ordination of women; finance; dwindling attendances but sexuality. He said: *My concern is that (we are) steadily being undermined by those (Bishops and Dioceses) taking unilateral action in matters to do with sexuality; and as a result, is steadily driving us towards serious fragmentation* ... And his prophetic words have been found to be painfully true. There's no doubt that a lack of leadership and Biblical guidance has created the vacuum in which the CoFE exists – though that isn't true of 80 million Anglicans worldwide!

c) There were to Glorify God, vs4-6a: If we say we know God, and we live in knowledge not ignorance, then our actions and lifestyle (should) show us to be distinctively different from the world. God's plan, vs4, is: *that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable.* It's worth remembering here that Paul was writing to all Christians, not just the married ones. Paul suggests that the Christian who commits sexual sin is not only sinning against his own body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), he is robbing God of the glory He should receive through a believer's way of life. This explains why God gives such demanding requirements for spiritual leadership in the church (1 Timothy 3).

d) They would escape God's judgement, vs6b: A church member criticized her pastor because he was preaching against sin in Christians. 'After all' she said, 'Sin in the life of a believer is different from sin in the lives of unsaved people.' 'Yes' replied the pastor, 'It's worse!' God is no respecter of persons; he deals with His children when they sin (Colossians 3:23-25). While it's true that the Christian is not under condemnation (John 5:24; Romans 8:1) it is also true that he/she is not free from the consequences of sin or from the consequences of our actions (Galatians 6:7-8). God doesn't bale us out if we make errors of judgement; we accept the consequences – which can often be very painful. When King David committed adultery with Bathsheba he tried to cover his sin, but God dealt with him severely (read Psalms 32 and 51 to see what he lost during those months). David reaped what he sowed and, though God forgave him, God couldn't change the consequences. Our Communion service this morning reminded us that Christ died for all - and that he forgives all of our sin but he also expects us to do, whatever it takes, to stop sinning!

e) They were to live Holy lives, vs7-8: Paul writes vs7: *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.* We may be chosen by God, but it's not an excuse for sin but an encouragement to holiness. But holiness can be a 'turn off' can't it? When I was young, the people I viewed as being holy seemed to be the most miserable people I'd ever met. You've seen them in churches, haven't you? With their stern, serious faces! I grew up not liking 'holy' people. They were grim, dull and lifeless and looked as though they'd been soaked in embalming fluid. They frowned on anything that was fun or enjoyable. But that is not holiness. I prefer the word *wholeness*. The OT speaks about 'the beauty of holiness' (1 Chronicles 16:29; 2 Chronicles 20:21; Psalm 29:2; 96:9) the inner attractiveness that is apparent when someone begins to function inwardly as he or she was intended.

This suggests that God desires inwardly beautiful people and not outwardly beautiful people like those we see on television and in our magazines. God is more interested in producing admirable; trustworthy; strong; loving; compassionate people - these are the qualities which make for inner beauty. That is what God calls *wholeness*, and that is his will for us. Isn't it exciting that God wants to make us a whole person and wants each one of us to fulfil our potential as human beings?

One of the reasons why people don't like Christianity is because, in their eyes, *it tells them what they can and can't do*. As soon as people hear a 'do not' they instinctively react as if their freedom is being taken away from them. But it's worth remembering that there are two sorts of commands. Some are for the benefit of the person issuing the orders: 'Paula, get me a cup of tea', and other commands are for our good: 'Switch off the electric supply before opening the case'. God's commands on sex are of the second kind; they have been given because He has our best interests at heart.

But how do we live a clean life? It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes our body the temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). To begin with, He creates holy desires within us so that we have an appetite for God's pure Word (1 Peter 2:1-3) and not the polluted garbage of the flesh (Romans 13:12-14). He also teaches us the Word and helps us to recall God's promises in times of temptation (John 14:26; Ephesians 6:17). Furthermore, it is by walking in the Spirit that we get victory over the lusts of the flesh and empowers us to walk in holiness and not be distracted by the world. The Fruit of the Spirit overcomes the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-26).

2) Walk in Harmony vs 9-10 The transition from holiness to love is not a difficult one. Paul made this transition in his prayer in 3:11-13. Just as God's love is a holy love so our love for God and for one another ought to motivate us to holy living. The more we live like God the more we will love one another. There are four basic words for 'love' in the Greek language.

Eros refers to physical love and the English word erotic derives from it.

Storge refers to family love. The love of parents for their children.

Phileo is used for friendship, or love of friends or relatives

Agape refers to God's love. The purest, deepest kind of love

Faith, hope and love were the distinctive characteristics of the Thessalonian Christians from the beginning, 1:3. Timothy had reported the good news of their love, 3:6, so Paul wasn't asking them to acquire something they didn't already possess. He was encouraging them to seek more of what they already had and that applies as much to us, today, as it did to them.

3) Walk in Honesty vs 11-12 Christians not only have an obligation to love one another but also to be credible in their witness to the world. And so Paul goes on, in vs 11-12, to specify three down-to-earth ways of showing brotherly love, a love, which enriches the family of the church.

a) Make it your ambition. To lead a quiet life. Taking the time to be quiet, being still before God, drawing on the deep wells of the spiritual resources he provides, cultivating a calm manner.

b) Mind your own business. To be busy is one thing, to be busybodies is quite another? How many Christians are guilty of interfering in other people's business instead of getting on with their own lives? Often, no doubt, with the best intentions but sometimes with disastrous results nonetheless: resulting in confidences being betrayed and problems caused by unhelpful, uninformed, gossip.

c) Work with your own hands. Don't trade in on the good will of others thinking, 'Oh, I will be all right, I don't have to work, the church will look after me.' No, says Paul, a lazy and idle Christian is a contradiction in terms. So here we have a great biblical balance don't we. On the one hand we are not to be caught up in a ceaseless round of activity, on the other we are not to be idle: we are to work. And the aim and result of all of this? '*So that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.*' A church like an Acts 2 church, provides for each other and so impresses a greedy selfish world which will invariably ask: what power can produce this? The answer of course is the Gospel.

Conclusion In 4:1-12, Paul gives us a Christian perspective on the areas of marriage and work. Both are creation gifts, instituted by God in Genesis 2 and both are parts of human experience. Two aspects of this are worth highlighting. Firstly, the call to unselfishness. We are to please God, vs1, and to love one another, vs9. Christian morality, therefore, is not primarily about rules and regulations, but relationships. Children quickly learn what pleases or displeases their parents. Husband and wife understand each other so well they know instinctively what to do and what to avoid. Similarly, we are to develop a spiritual sensitivity towards God, through his Word and Spirit.

Secondly, Paul issues a call to growth. We are to please God more and more, vs1 and we are to love one another more and more vs10. How do we please our heavenly Father? By living/walking in a way that pleases him. We are to walk in holiness, being obedient to what the Bible has to say in matters of sexual purity and integrity. We are to walk in harmony with one another. We are to walk in honesty and be people of creditability. Of course, we could never live/walk in this way in our own strength. It is the Holy Spirit who works in our lives to accomplish this: *For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*, Philippians 2:10.

And finally, 1 Thessalonians 3:13: *May God strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of God our Father ... Amen.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: *If a fellow Christian was to ask you for advice on how they could make their life more pleasing to God, what is the one thing, above all others, you would suggest they should do?*

2: *What clues does this passage give us, vs3-8, as to how Paul (the apostle) would define sexual immorality? What reason does Paul give for avoiding sexual immorality? Are there any others you could add to this?*

3: *Is it always right to blame God for the difficulties we face in our lives? If our decision-making excludes God's wisdom, is it wrong that we should suffer the consequences of our actions?*

4: *In vs9-10, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their love. What could a group of people with such a reputation do for each other even more? How can these ideas be applied to ACP?*