

Study 5: 1st Thessalonians Chapter 4

Introduction

Chapter 4 marks a change in the letter, as Paul starts to focus on some doctrinal issues. Timothy has reported back with news from Thessalonica, and Paul starts to address some things that were issues in the church there, and to answer some questions that they had.

Body of the Study

Beginning of the end

Holy living – Sexual immorality

Holy living – defrauding of brethren

Concerning brotherly love

Responsibilities for ourselves

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Instructions regarding the Second Coming

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *If you knew that Christ was coming at 10:16 PM tomorrow night, what would you do differently to make sure that you were ready? How did such a belief affect the lives of the Thessalonians?*
- *What changes do you need to make in your life to make sure that you are ready?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 5 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 5: Chapter 4

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Beginning of the end

Paul begins the chapter with *Finally*. This is a key that he is now starting to close out the letter. However in some letters, he makes the remark on several occasions (such as Philippians 3:1 and 4:8). Up until this time, Paul is being *retrospective*, in looking *back* to the time when he was with the Thessalonian brethren, but he now look *forward*. This marks a change in the letter, as he now starts to focus on some doctrinal issues.

He gives them an exhortation – an encouragement to continue to grow in the Lord. Remember that most of them have only been christians for a few months. “...we urge and exhort you...that you should abound more and more...” (1:4:1 NKJV). The encouragement comes from Paul, Silas and Timothy by way of example – the example that they set whilst they worked amongst them – “...just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God...” (1:4:1 NKJV). But it also comes by way of instruction from “...the Lord Jesus...”. Even when Paul was there, the things that he instructed the Thessalonians in were not his own teaching, but the things that he had been instructed from the Lord to teach “...for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus...” (1:4:4 NKJV).

Holy living – Sexual immorality

As in most of his letters, Paul gives some specific instructions as to how the christian ought to live in the world. We need to keep in mind that Thessalonica had a Greek cultural background with Roman rule. It was a prosperous city, in a strategic location (at the crossroads of the Roman roads) and a port city with much trade. In such circumstances, immorality would have been rife, and entrained in the culture. The brethren were new in the faith. Many of them would have previously been involved in the immoral practices, and probably some of them still were. They needed instruction on how they ought to behave as christians.

Paul begins the instruction by reminding them of the fact that they had been *sanctified*. This word means to be *set apart* – especially to be set apart from the world, and the worldly immoral practices. The same root word is also translated as *made saints*, and to *be holy*. So, when we become christians, we are made saints, and are sanctified by God, being set apart (separately identified) by Him as His children, and made holy in His sight. Our earthly actions and behaviour needs to reflect what God has done, and we must separate ourselves from the actions of worldly behaviour “...It is God's will that you should be sanctified...” (1:4:3 NIV).

The first example that Paul gives is to abstain from sexual immorality. Such immorality would have been rife in the culture. One reputable Greek citizen of Athens wrote in the fourth century that “We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes.”¹ Such a background, together with temple prostitution would have pervaded the culture of the first century in the area. Such behaviour is not acceptable for christians who have undergone *the new birth*, and left behind *the old man* of sin. Sexual relations outside of marriage are not acceptable to God, and as christians we are called to “...abstain from sexual immorality...” (1:4:3). Our modern humanistic society has tried to con us into believing that sex outside of marriage is OK,

¹ Demosthenes, quoted in Bruce FF “Word Biblical Commentary, 1&2 Thessalonians” ISBN0-8499-0244-4, p.97

as long as we take precautions. We are bombarded with such propositions in our newspapers, on the TV, at the movies, in books, and on the internet. As we look around our society, we see a radical move to the acceptance of such things over the last 30 years. Today, people living together outside of marriage is accepted as normal, with probably around 50% of the population doing so (based on my observations). [These may be regarded by the participants, and legally, as *common law marriage*, however such a marriage cannot start out that way, and must (of necessity) start out as exactly the type of sexual immorality that Paul is describing here].

God's law is clear "...*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality...*" (1:4:3 NIV). Paul explains this further for us, that in order to keep ourselves set apart we need to exercise self control "...*that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable...*" (1:4:4 NIV). There is a textual "twist" in the translation of the word *body* (or *vessel* in some versions), as discussed in the NIV Bible Commentary. Paul probably has both ideas in mind:

The positive side of holiness requires one to "learn to control his own body" (or "learn to live with his own wife"; cf. NIV note). The choice between these two options surrounds the word "body" (lit., "vessel"; GK G5007). It is highly probable that this word does mean "wife" (cf. 1Pe 3:7 for a somewhat parallel use). If so, the word translated "control" (GK G3227) means "acquire" or even "keep on acquiring" (i.e., "live with" in the sense of cultivating a wife's favor; cf. 1Co 7:2-5). A wholesome marriage was thus Paul's antidote for "sexual immorality." "Holy and honorable" describes the way to maintain the right kind of marriage, holiness being due God (4:3; cf. 3:13) and honor due the wife. (NIVBC)

The behaviour of christians is to be in direct contrast to that of the world, and Paul point out this contrast "...*not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God...*" (1:4:5 NKJV)

Holy living – defrauding of brethren

Taking advantage of a brother in Christ is another violation of holy living. Paul particularly has in mind reference to the situation he has just discussed – that of sexual immorality, since he explicitly states "...*that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him...*" (1:4:6 NIV).

To have relations with a woman outside marriage is not just a trespass against God's law. It also defrauds some fellow Christian who eventually will take, or has taken, this woman as his own wife--an especially heinous sin because the one robbed is a spiritual relative of the robber. Paul does not allude to the other simultaneous injustice, which is obvious--namely, that the woman herself is an object of cruel abuse in such a situation. This too is especially repulsive in a Christian setting. (NIVBC)

Paul reminds the brethren that God is an all-knowing God who will set the injustices right. He will ensure that justice will be done "...*the Lord is the avenger of all such...*" (1:4:6 NKJV). This should not be something new to the Thessalonians, since Paul had already "...*forewarned you and testified...*" such to them (1:4:6 NKJV). Paul makes a subtle reference here to an underlying theme of the letter – that of the coming judgement of God, at the Second Coming.

As a witness to the way God wants us to live, the Holy Spirit has been given. Some at Thessalonica would undoubtedly have received the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of Paul's hands, and they would have also observed the gift in Timothy. The evidence that this teaching came from God (and not a human teaching invented by Paul, or Silas, or Timothy is evidenced for "...he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit..." (1:4:8 NKJV).

Concerning brotherly love

Whilst brotherly love was not a problem in Thessalonica, Paul writes to ensure that it remains that way! "...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..." (1:4:9-10 NIV). What Paul wants to ensure is that they continue to grow together in love for each other "...Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more..." (1:4:10 NIV). The Thessalonians were not just involved with the affairs of their own congregation, but they were interacting with other brethren *throughout Macedonia*. This is not surprising, when we consider the contagious effect of the spread of christianity from Thessalonica in the short time since Paul had left (1:1:8-9).

Responsibilities for ourselves

Some people are always busy. Their lives are a whirlwind, and they are always looking to get others to help them out. Life goes from crises to crises. This is not the way God wants us to live our lives "...aspire to lead a quiet life..." (1:4:11). Paul uses the description *aspire* – it is not always possible, as there are influences outside of our control. He is heading towards and hinting at a problem in the Thessalonian church, that some of the members had stopped work and were loafing and expecting to be supported by the rest of the brethren.

We can almost here the kind of reasoning and moaning that they are giving as they "blackmail" some of the brethren into helping and supporting them. Such a position is contrary to holy christian living.

Further, Paul reminds them not to be busybodies "...to mind your own business..." (1:4:11). Apparently some of them were quite active in involving themselves in other people's affairs, as he explicitly reproves them again in 2:3:11.

Some of the Thessalonians were taking advantage of others by not supporting themselves. Paul (providentially) demonstrated that a christian ought to work to support himself whilst he was amongst them (1:2:9). He now tells them "...to work with your own hands, as we commanded you..." (1:4:11 NKJV).

Responsibilities towards outsiders

The contrast in behaviour between christians and those outside the church ought to be obvious. Christians have been sanctified and set apart by God. It is not acceptable to continue to practice the things that we left behind when we became christians. If those outside of the church see us *professing* to be christians, but continuing to *practice* the things of the world, then they will rightly say that we are hypocrites. They will rightly have no regard for us, and will turn away from God. In contrast, when people see us putting into practice in our lives the things that we say, then they will know that we are true to the things that we say (Aussies have a term for this: "we are Fair Dinkum about it").

Further, we should show proper respect towards those outside the church. As Paul appeared before several rulers (The Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa), he always treated them with proper respect. If we do not, then we rightly leave ourselves open for criticism. Paul says that we are to "...walk properly toward those who are outside..." (1:4:12 NKJV).

Instructions regarding the Second Coming

Apparently, when Timothy came back from Thessalonica he reported some of the concerns that the brethren had. Paul addresses one of their main concerns, and we can piece together the question by the way in which Paul answers it. The question is:

What happens to us if we die before the Lord returns? Will we miss out on heaven?

His response is that we need to know and understand these things. If we think that we will miss out, then what is the point of being a christian? We would be just like "...others who have no hope..." (1:4:13 NKJV). It all comes down to a fundamental belief in the resurrection. In fact,

Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then Jesus was just a man, and there is no hope for us, because there is nothing beyond the grave. But if Jesus was resurrected, then He is who He claimed to be – the Son of God and the Messiah.

The prime evidence for belief in the resurrection is the resurrection of Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians (about 2 years after the Thessalonian letter) of the 500 witnesses who saw the resurrected Christ – and that many of them were still alive to testify of the fact (1 Cor 15: 6). Our faith in Christ necessitates faith in the resurrection – or Jesus was a fraud! So, Paul says “... *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him...*” (1:4:14 NIV). Those who die in the Lord (“are asleep in Him”) are assured of their place in heaven, because of the certainty of the resurrection of the Lord.

In making the comparison, Paul points out that some people will be alive and remain when the Lord returns, and will not have died. It is noteworthy that he uses the personal pronouns here *we* “... *we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord...*” (1:4:15). This shows that Paul thought that the Second Coming of the Lord could have occurred in his own life time. This is in stark contrast to many today who are predicting (and claiming scriptural authority for) the end of the world in the near future (ie around the end of the second millennium = 2000 AD).

So, the question is, “*How will it all work? – What will happen when the Lord returns?*”

Paul answers the question clearly and plainly:

- The Lord Himself will descend (It won't be an angel coming, but the Lord. This is exactly what the angel told the apostles at Jesus ascension (Acts 1:11)).
- He will come with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God (It will be a surprise – people will not be expecting it (Mt 24:42-44)).
- The dead in Christ shall rise first (Those who are alive will witness the resurrection. In fact those who have died will not be left behind, but will have the first place!)
- Those who are alive will be caught up into the clouds to meet them in the air (We might not all die, but we will all change (1 Cor 15:50-53) We will shed our physical bodies and put on incorruptible (spiritual) bodies).
- Then we will always be with the Lord.

The discussion on the Second Coming will continue in the next chapter.