

Christian Holiness: Living It Out

Good morning Pleasant Hill! How was your week? I had a good week. Micki went back to work on Monday. Thankfully no one else in our home tested positive for covid. Caleb and Bre were pretty concerned because Theo's due date is February 18th. They completely stayed away from us and wore masks in our home anytime they were out of the basement because Caleb wanted to make sure he stayed healthy so he could be with Bre when Theo is born. He's due one month from tomorrow which realistically means it could be any day now. Please keep praying for them. Pray that God keeps them healthy and that Theo is born without any complications.

Also, most of you know by now, please be in prayer for Paul, JoAnn, Andrew and Jared. All of them have tested positive for covid as well. Thankfully Erin and the girls have not tested positive for the virus. Vicki hired Service Master to come and sanitize our church this week. We'll continue doing that for as long as it takes to ensure our church is safe to continue gathering on Sunday mornings.

Alright, if you have your Bible, and I hope you do, go ahead and turn to the book of **1 Thessalonians**. Today we'll study **chapter 4 verses 1 through 12**. We're halfway through our study in **1 Thessalonians**. While you're flipping to **1 Thessalonians chapter 4** I want to take a moment to briefly recap what we've covered in **chapters 1 to 3**.

Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica to encourage them to continue living a life for Jesus that demonstrated love for one another. His heart was broken because they had to leave the church before he was ready to go. He was forced out of Thessalonica due to extreme persecution. He worried about them because they were so new to the faith. He was afraid the enemy would come and convince them to abandon their faith. In his letter he told them that he was amazed to hear that not only had they kept the faith but they had been sharing what they'd been giving with their community and the communities that surrounded them.

He was blown away at their faithfulness. These were people who had lived pagan lives who were still surrounded by the same culture that they were living in and yet they were growing in the Lord. He said they'd become imitators of him and their church had become imitators of the church in Judea.

Last week when we read **1 Thessalonians 2:17** to **chapter 3 verse 13** Paul implored them to stay connected. He wanted them to know, although they were apart, staying connected was important. I challenged us to stay connected even through covid. Many of you have reached out to me to let me know how you're staying connected and even expressed a desire to be a part of staying connected.

That leads us to our passage today. We'll read **1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 to 12**. I hope you've had a chance to find it. If not, any text I read will be on the screens behind me. **1 Thessalonians 4 verses 1 to 12** read, "**1** Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3** For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4** that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, **5** not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6** that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. **7** For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8** Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, **10** for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, **11** and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, **12** so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."

May God bless the reading of His Holy Word. Will you pray with me? Amen.

My title for today's sermon is "Christian Holiness: Living It Out". What do you think of when you hear the word holiness? What comes to your mind when you think about the word holy? We read in scripture that only God is holy, and yet we're called to live holy lives. Is that even possible with sinful, fallen creation? To be holy means that there is no trace of evil or sin in our character.

I want to focus on this for a few moments because the entire passage that we're about to dig into hinges on understanding holiness and living holy lives. If only God is holy, then how can He expect us to live holy lives? If the world around us is fallen, if we're born into sin and even after salvation we're still sinners covered in the blood of Jesus and forgiven yet still we sin, if we're living with other sinners, then how are we ever supposed to live a life that's holy? **Isn't God's requirement to be holy as I am holy impossible?**

I mean we read in **Leviticus 11:44** God says, "*For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.*". Peter echoes what he read in **Lamentations** in **1 Peter 1:16** as he called Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia to live holy lives. But how do we live holy lives when we're trapped in this broken, fallen world? How do I stop sinning? How do I stop **desiring** to sin? How do I control what my nature drives me towards? Have you ever felt that way before?

Paul is calling on the church in Thessalonica to live holy lives. Holy means set apart. Holiness does not involve withdrawing from the world of work so much as participating in that world in a new and different way. He's not calling them to perfection because only God is perfect and sinless. Paul is calling on the church to live lives that sets them apart from the culture they live in.

Look with me at **1 Thessalonians 4 verses 1 to 3a**. "*1 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to*

walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.", let's pause here for a moment.

The word "walk" is important to focus on. Paul is urging them to walk to please God. Walking is important. It indicates a journey, not a destination. Walking is progressive by nature. Walking takes you from here to there and from there to a new place. Pleasing God involves a daily journey, a daily walk with Him.

I know that pastor Mike loves to hike. He has a group of friends who get together yearly and they hike together. I imagine during the hike they talk and catch up on their lives. There's something about walking together that creates an intimacy with one another that allows you to grow close to them. I imagine that there are times that one outpaces the other depending on the terrain. There are probably times that they use each other to cross obstacles, helping one another. They probably even encourage one another to keep going when they get tired. They know that eventually, if they stay the course and keep walking they will one day reach their destination and meet their goal.

That's the imagery Paul is giving to the church in Thessalonica. He's encouraging them to keep walking with God. Everyday get up and start walking again with God. It's easy to get lazy. It's easy to be content where you are.

Can you remember times in your life when you were closer to God than you are now? It's easy to get content and want to stay at the mountain top with God, but God keeps moving. If we stop we're left behind. A walk is a daily drive towards staying with God. A mountain top isn't a good thing when the Lord has led us to the valley. I would rather be in the depth of the valley walking with God than at the mountain top remembering when I walked with God. Amen?

When we strive to walk with God as Paul is imploring the church at Thessalonica to do requires us to live according to God's word every single day; minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. Paul sees them walking with the Lord. He knows how

easy it is to get content. That's why he writes, "*just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.*". He tells them that he is pleased with their walk. He can see good things in them. He can see that they love the Lord and they want to walk with Him. He encourages them to keep doing what you're doing and do it more and more. Walking with the Lord is a progressive thing. If you ever find yourself not walking with Him daily, I can promise you one thing, you're not living a holy life.

Paul goes on to say in **verse 2**, "*2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*". If you're a believer, if you're a follower of Jesus, it's the will of God that you be **sanctified**. Sanctification is the day by day process that we are changed to be more like Jesus. Our sanctification is not complete until the day of our glorification when we meet Jesus in heaven.

Sanctification is the process that changes your heart to have the heart of God. Sanctification is what drives you to be doers the Word and not just hearers the word. There is no sanctification in hearing the word of God. There is no sanctification in reading the word of God. Hearing and reading mean nothing unless the Holy Spirit drives us to change our hearts to desire to do the things of God. That's why those who are not believers can hear the Word of God and read the Word of God and mock it and never change.

The work of sanctification only comes from the Holy Spirit intervening in our hearts and driving us to live holy lives by walking with God day by day. You will never be sanctified if you refuse to walk with God. Sanctification requires us to progress in our lives, move forward in our lives towards holiness. Paul didn't want the church in Thessalonica to feel like they'd arrived. He didn't want them to feel like they had this Christian life thing mastered. It's a daily walk towards holiness with God.

Wherever you are in your walk with Jesus, let me assure you, unless you're standing face to face with Him right now, you have not arrived. There is still more you can do to surrender and follow Him. You can still walk closer to Him than you

are walking right now. Continue to walk. Don't get complacent. And if you know you've stopped walking with Him daily, what are you waiting for? Get up and get moving. God will help you get back on track. Amen?

Paul goes on to exhort them in very specific ways to live holy lives, which he says they are already doing in the second half of **verse 3 through verse 8**. Let's take a closer look at that now. *"that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you."*

As believers we have to abstain from sexual immorality. That's a broad brush isn't it. It's really a touchy subject, especially in our society. Before we can define what it means to us and how we apply this instruction from Paul we really need to see what it meant to the church in Thessalonica.

The church in Thessalonica lived in a Roman culture. The culture embraced multiple gods. Most of the pagan worship of the city revolved around indulging in carnal lusts. The temples were dedicated to worshipping false gods through sexual ceremonies involving sex with young boys and orgies to satisfy the gods. Paul was writing to them, instructing them to abstain from those practices. Stay away from those things and stand apart from your culture by controlling your own bodies.

Paul was telling them that culture does not define sexuality, God defines sexuality. God designed sex to be between one man and one woman in the bonds of marriage for life. Any other forms of sexual relationships are abhorrent to God and sinful. Getting caught up in passions of lust is not an excuse for indulging in sexual deviants.

In our world I hear people say, "God doesn't care who I sleep with". I also hear, "Why would an all powerful, all knowing God care what I do in my bedroom?". I hear people say, "Love is love. God made me who I am so why would he have created me with the desires I have if He didn't embrace me for it?". I've also heard married people say, "I didn't intend to fall for someone else. My attraction was so strong that I fell for her/him and I couldn't deny the urges I have for her/him".

Let me say this plainly so everyone listening online or in person can hear this. God does not honor sexual immorality. Any sexual relationship that is outside of one man, one woman in the bonds of marriage for life is sinful. **How you feel about that statement doesn't have any bearing on the truth contained within it.** Indulging in pornography, extra marital affairs, sexting, living together, pre-marital sex, and even indulging in a fantasy life in your mind that embraces and is titillated by the things that are not of God are sinful.

I know that's a truly unpopular stance to take in the world we live in. In fact, in some countries of the world I could be fined and even imprisoned for hate speech for saying what the Word of God says. But it matters. It matters so much that Paul wrote about it to new Christians in Thessalonica.

Look, I'm not saying that those sexual urges aren't natural. I'm not saying that people who say they can't help themselves while indulging in sexual immorality aren't feeling real desires. But Paul implores the early church in **verses 4 and 5**, *"that each one of you know how to **control** his own body in holiness and honor, **5** not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God"*.

Controlling your body in holiness and honor is impossible unless you are walking with God daily. Controlling your mind is impossible unless you are walking with God daily. All of our desires come from our hearts. Our hearts are who we are at the end of the day. That's why Jesus says in **Matthew 15:19 and 20**, *"**19** For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. **20** These are what defile a person."*

Our hearts will never be able to be made new without walking with God every single day. So if you're struggling with sexual sin let me encourage you, walk with God and He will overcome it with you. Praying after the fact doesn't change the heart that drove you to it in the first place. Reading God's Word, meditating on it daily, thinking about things above and not things below, seeking to do the will of God will change your heart. You cannot walk with God daily and not have a changed heart. You cannot have a changed heart and still desire sexual immorality. They go hand in hand.

It's a disciplining of our members, parts of our body, that creates control over them. I imagine many of us see things that we want when we go shopping. Things that are pleasing to the eye but we can't afford, yet we've disciplined our minds to know that taking what doesn't belong to us will destroy us. We'll be arrested and imprisoned and we'll have to pay fines. We've disciplined that part of our mind. Those things would bring us pleasure and we overcome that desire for pleasure because we know it's destructive to us. We need to realize that the same thing is true when we indulge in sexual immorality.

Paul writes, "**6** that no one transgress and wrongs his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. **7** For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8** Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you."

Paul cautions the believers in Thessalonica that by participating in sexual immorality they are pushing those they participate with away from the Lord. When we refuse to change our hearts and discipline our mind and body our sin drives others from the Lord. Paul is warning them that God will hold them responsible for that. We too need to be aware that our actions have eternal consequences and God holds us responsible for them.

When we refuse to bring our sexual desires under control, Paul warns that the Lord is the avenger in all these things. We've been given the Holy Spirit and as such when we are convicted by our thoughts and actions we are grieving the Holy Spirit who resides within us.

Holiness is tied to our walk with Jesus. What you do with your body matters to God. The more you achieve discipline over the members of your body, the closer you will walk with Jesus. Paul knew that to be true. He wanted the church in Thessalonica to know it's true and live it. And so we should live it as well.

Paul was tying our desire to walk with God and living a holy life to our love for God. If we love God, we will desire the things of God. If we love God we will desire to use the things we've been given by God the way that He intended for them to be used. If we love God then we will gain control over our bodies and desires by leaning on the Holy Spirit for strength and instruction.

Let's wrap up our time together by looking at **verses 9 to 12**. *"9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."*

There are two themes that run deeply through this passage of scripture, a love for God and a love for our neighbor. We've talked in depth about showing our love for God by controlling our desires and abstaining from sexual immorality.

Paul shifts his focus to loving our neighbors. He writes, *"9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia"*.

He again begins by exhorting them for what they are doing well. He encourages them by telling them that he really doesn't have to write to them about loving one another because they're already doing a great job of that. He shares with them that he knows they are showing love for one another and even to those who are living throughout Macedonia. Remember, Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia. They weren't just loving other Christians in their city, they were reaching out to make sure believers throughout their entire area were taken care of and loved.

Church, that's amazing. That's when you know you have a healthy church. You know you have a healthy church when you become outward focused and not inward focused. You have a healthy church when you are known for your love because you reach out to others and care for them.

We need to make sure that we stay outward focused even in times of trouble and trials. We need to reach out to other churches to make sure they are cared for. Paul saw that the church in Thessalonica was doing very well living the gospel for everyone to see even when they themselves were facing extreme persecution for the name of Jesus.

It's so easy to become inwardly focused during hard times. Over the past year we've shut almost everything down. We've continued to partner with Milford Miami Ministry to make sure people are fed, we had Trunk or Treat that showed love to the kids of our area, we've given to missions and our legacy missionaries, but I have to wonder should we be doing more?

People are still dying. People still need the gospel. I'm going to ask you to pray with me as we consider what we should do in 2021 to do as the church in Thessalonica did even during persecution. I know you love people. I know you love Jesus. Let's rethink what outreach looks like together so we can continue to love our neighbors.

Beginning in the second half of **verse 10** Paul writes, *"But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."*

Paul urges them to continue to love their brothers in Jesus in other parts of Macedonia more and more. It's easy to look at where you are and think that you're doing well. Just as our personal walk with Jesus and progress day by day and continues to be sanctified until the day we meet Jesus face to face and we're glorified, the same is true for the church.

When Paul writes that he urges the church to care for those in Macedonia and in their city more and more; he's writing to encourage them to not only continue to do what they're already doing but look for more and more ways to show brotherly love towards them. Just as the love of God grows deeper and deeper and greater and greater towards us as sinners as we grow closer to Him, so too should our love for those around us grow as we grow closer to them. If we are doing the same things in our community to show them the love of God in 5 years from now then I have to wonder if we're walking with God or just resting on the mountain top.

In **verses 11 and 12** when Paul writes, *"11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."* he's instructing them how to live in community with one another.

Christian brotherhood is family life. If you've been a part of the family of God for any length of time you'll know the truth in that statement. No one knows you like family. No one knows how to get under your skin like family. When Paul encourages them to live quietly, he's encouraging them to live a lifestyle that desires peace with everyone. By living a quiet life as a Christian you're not inciting quarrels and divisions that the enemy can use to divide the unity in the body.

That's why he follows up the command to live quietly with the command to mind your own affairs. The gospel matters most. **The gospel is most powerful when it's delivered by people who love one another.** If you are sharing the gospel with me and I see a divided people who quarrel with one another that becomes a barrier to the gospel. Church, we need to love one another if we want the gospel to go out with power.

Paul concludes this part of his letter by instructing them "*to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.*". In Thessalonica, like so many religions today, there were those who would stand outside the temples and ask for money to share their faith. Paul didn't want the church in Thessalonica to be caught up in that. He wanted them to work so the gospel that they received freely wasn't tied to anyone giving money to receive it.

Anytime we tie anything to the gospel we're guilty of adding to the gospel. We received it freely and as such we share it freely. Church, we need to do all that we can do to love and give freely what we've been given.

We need to walk daily with Jesus. We need to stop standing on the mountaintop remembering when we walked with Jesus wishing he'd come back up there with us. He's moved on. He's in the valley, wouldn't you rather be with Him there than remembering when you used to walk with him on the mountain top?

If you've been living in sexual sin, allowing your mind or your body to embrace sinful behaviors let me encourage you by telling you that God loves you. You are not trapped forever, even though it feels like it. There is freedom found in Christ. Reach out to Him and live free. It's a process. It's going to be hard to discipline your mind and your body from things they've grown accustomed to doing. Cry out to God and He will set you free. Walk with Jesus and you will grow close to Him.

We're going to begin our time of response. We offer this time as a time to respond to what the Holy Spirit is leading you to do. We believe that any time the Word of God is read and proclaimed it demands a response. Sometimes that response is no. Sometimes we respond by praying and asking God to search our hearts and forgive us where we fail. Sometimes you come to the altar and simply pour out your heart before God. Sometimes our response is to simply praise God by singing or crying out to Him for his grace and mercy.

Regardless of what you do in the next few moments, you're responding to God. So in a moment, I'll pray for you and over you and Diana will begin to play quietly while you respond in prayer. When you've responded to the Holy Spirit I want to invite you to partake of the elements as we remember Jesus's death and anxiously anticipate His second coming. We do this by taking of the bread and the cup. We remember Jesus' body that was crushed for our sins. We remember Jesus' blood that was spilled as payment for our sins.

You're welcome to participate in communion with us if you are a part of the family of God, regardless if you are a member of Pleasant Hill or not. If you've publicly proclaimed Jesus as your Lord through baptism and repented of your sins and your heart is right with the Lord, we invite you to remember Him with us today.

Will you stand and pray with me as I pray for you and ask God's blessing on this time of response and the elements we'll receive to remember Jesus? Amen.