



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

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Introduction

In the face of strong opposition, Paul had defended his own conduct while with the Thessalonians (2:1–16), and after he left the city (2:17 – 3:13). In doing so he gave us a biblical prescription for ministry. In these last two chapters of the epistle, he now turns his attention to the conduct of his readers. As born-again believers, we too can profit greatly from these instructions and guidelines for Christian conduct.

Exhortations Concerning the Conduct of the Thessalonians (4:1 – 5:24)

Paul's instructions come in a series of exhortations, encouraging and challenging believers to live out godly lives. He had instructed them on all of these issues previously (4:2), so his intent here is to not to call for a change of behavior. Rather, he is exhorting them to continue in their current pattern of godly behavior.

Exhortations Regarding Moral Purity (4:1–8)

Moral purity can be a tough sell in today's over-sensualized culture. The Hollywood ideal of non-committal sexual relationships is thrust at us from every angle. TV commercials, billboards, internet ads, and even some workplace conversations help to fuel this idea. But God has not saved us from sin so that we can wallow in the mire of sexual impurity. God's calling of believers through the gospel involves His calling us to moral purity.

The Basis for Paul's Exhortations (vv. 1–2)

Paul had instructed the Thessalonian believers on a great many things during his short stay with them. Amidst the many things he taught them were instructions for godly living. These directives were very necessary at the time because Paul was dealing with new believers, plucked from the very throws of paganism. Remember that nearly all of the Thessalonians would have been involved in idol worship and immoral practices not too dissimilar from the Corinthians prior to their conversion. But now they had received instruction on these matters

and were seeking to live out holy lives. Notice the cause-effect relationship in verse 1:

Cause: Walking/living as we ought (i.e. in a godly manner)

Effect: Pleasing God

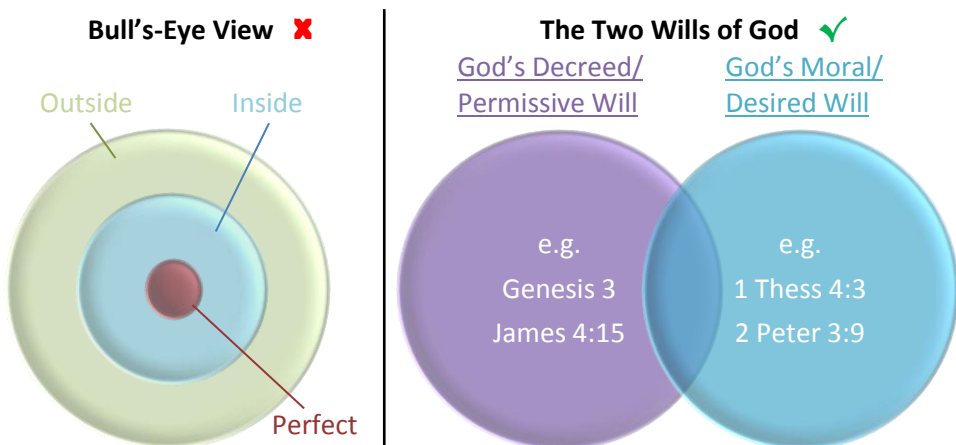
Paul was calling them to abound in this — i.e to do it more and more, so that God is more and more pleased. This exhortation goes back to the idea of progressive sanctification. We are being continually molded more and more into Christ-likeness as we walk in holiness. The exhortations Paul gives us here are important to be followed. But not simply because they are his personal opinions on moral standards; rather they are given on the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself. These commands are sourced in God, and we would do well to listen!

The Moral Responsibilities of Believers (vv. 3–6a)

Paul had previously identified the object of these exhortations as born-again believers (“brethren,” v. 1). Here he notes that these instructions are God’s will for believers — specifically God’s desired/moral will.

Sidenote: God’s Will

There has been a lot of confusing teaching on discovering God’s will in recent years. The most popular model for conceptualizing this is the bull’s-eye diagram on the left. Every decision and plan is either viewed as inside or outside of God’s will. The goal is to hit the bull’s-eye: God’s perfect will for your life (Rom 12:2). The problem here is that there is only *one* right way to hit the center target. Missing the elusive bull’s-eye is often viewed as somehow coming short of God’s best for you.



The better approach to understanding God's will is to see two overlapping circles. One circle represents God's decreed or permissive will. This circle includes everything that *has* and *will* happen. It is decreed because God has foreordained all things according to His own secret council. It is permissive because some events occur which God does not desire, and yet He allows them to happen (the left part of the circle). Sometimes God chooses to reveal this aspect of His will, e.g. the coming Messiah, or the future of Israel. However we often don't know this side of God's will until after events have actually unfolded.

The other circle represents God's moral or desired will. These are positive things God desires that accord with His moral goodness. While this circle represents what is morally ideal, we recognize that this ideal is not always met (the right part of the circle). Ideally, we want to find ourselves in the area where these circles overlap. This means we are actually doing what God desires for us.

The best way we can find out what God desires for us is by reading our bibles. The Scriptures are clear that no one can know the mind of God (Isa 40:13; Rom 11:34). But as believers, we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). The more we understand the Scriptures, the more we can evaluate things spiritually and understand what God's moral will is (1 Cor 2:12–14). We should also recognize that as believers, we have a great deal of freedom. In many cases, there is not a single "bull's-eye" answer to the plans and decisions we make.

Abstinence from Fornication (v. 3)

In verse 3, Paul is referring to God's moral or desired will. All believers are to abstain from sexual immorality. The Greek word used here is *porneia* (πορνεία) from which we get our English term "pornography." The word literally means fornication and refers to any sexual activity that occurs outside the marriage relationship. God's clear instruction is that sexual activity is reserved for marriage alone (Heb 13:4). But we must be careful not to define this too narrowly. The biblical term is very broad and covers many sexual acts that would not lead to a pregnancy. Our responsibility is to live holy lives in this area, being above reproach. This should not be viewed as an optional thing for Christians. Nor should we attempt to rationalize our behavior saying, "since all my future sins were paid for at the cross, I can continue to live a life of sin." Paul had strong words for such unbiblical thinking (Rom 6:1–2). We are

not to continue in sin so that grace can abound! Christians should abound in holiness and service to our Great Redeemer!

Abstinence from Lust (vv. 4–5)

Moral purity is possible because it is produced by the spiritual fruit of self-control. Paul uses the term “Gentiles” in verse 5, but he uses it in a derogatory sense of those who do not know God, and lack the ability to control their lustful desires. So in effect, he is not referring to all Gentiles per se, but to all unbelievers. Unbelievers lack the fruit of self-control and are therefore given over to all sorts of lewd behavior. But not so with believers. The Holy Spirit enables us to live in such a manner that is holy and honorable. Part of that behavior involves abstaining from lustful desires. Internal lustful thinking is not something that continues without effect. Unchecked lust drives outward sinful activity. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took this even farther, saying “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). As Christians, we are called to control our inward thoughts in this regard.

On a practical level, we should consider two things with regard to lust. First of all, every Christian should be careful to limit their exposure to sexual imagery. Our culture has mainstreamed many images and advertisements that would have been considered inappropriate 50 years ago. In reality, many things that were once viewed as pornographic are now filling primetime slots on TV and are commonplace on major internet sites. Complete avoidance of these things is not always possible. But as Christians, we should make a concerted effort to avoid exposing ourselves to inappropriate imagery that our minds can dwell on and lust over. And when we do by chance come across inappropriate images or immodestly dressed people, we would do well to remember the mindset of Job: “I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman” (Job 31:1, NIV).

The second thing we should consider is what kind of imagery we are displaying to others. In American culture, we are rapidly becoming an “imperial society” — many people are trying to don the emperor’s new clothes! But consider this: every person inhabiting a body has the ability to display an X-rated image to those in their immediate vicinity. Of course, that is not God’s ideal for our day to day living. After the Fall it was shameful for humans to expose their nakedness (Gens 3:7, 10), so

God gave Adam & Eve clothing to cover their bodies (Gen 3:21). Many of the outfits being made today are designed to be tight fitting and revealing so that very little is left to the imagination (i.e. they are trying to get as close to the X-rating as possible without being illegal). As believers we should cloth ourselves modestly so as not to be a stumbling block for others. This goes for both men and women! As with the previous term *porneia*, we should be careful not to define our wardrobes too narrowly. Our culture operates on the mindset, “if it’s not X-rated, it’s ok.” As believers, we should operate with the mindset, “If it’s not G-rated, it’s not ok.” Outfits that are designed to expose and reveal have the net effect of eliciting the lustful thoughts of others, and should not be part of a Christian’s wardrobe. Of course, all responsibility does not fall on those who are immodestly dressed. Believers should avoid lustful imagery wherever it appears. The question we should ask ourselves is, “Do I dress in such a way in public, that other believers should in good conscience try and avoid me?”

Abstinence from Adultery (v. 6a)

In verse 6, Paul focuses in on a specific type of sexual sin — adultery. When a believer engages in adultery, it defrauds or cheats another person of what rightly belongs to him — his spouse. Extra-marital affairs are particularly harmful because they trample the lives of at least four people! Additionally, adulterous relationships have torn apart and destroyed countless marriages, families, and even congregations. The scope of this sin extends far beyond any one individual. Adultery is not a private sin and has no place in the Christian community.

So how should believers express love toward other brothers and sisters in a positive way? As Christians we need to be loving and kind, but also guarded with our affections around other believers who are married. Our aim should be seeking to live above reproach. This means we are upright with our conduct around others, and careful not to walk into a situation where an accusation could be brought against us — even if our intentions were pure. Satan has wreaked tremendous damage in the lives and ministries of many Christians — several of whom have sought to serve others with pure motives, but have done so by carelessly placing themselves in compromising situations. A wise believer will avoid even the appearance of evil!

Reasons for Moral Purity (vv. 6b–8)

God's moral laws are not just empty commands given to make us look like a bunch of prudes. There are good reasons — both temporal and eternal — why we should obey.

God Punishes Transgressors (v. 6b)

God does not look lightly on sexual sins. The Lord is called an Avenger here and will take it upon Himself to punish those who transgress these commands. This does not mean that a believer's eternal destiny is in jeopardy. But a Christian may endure severe chastisement if he or she chooses to thumb their nose at God's commands here. It may not be immediate, but God will judge those who violate His commands here in this life.

God Calls Believers to Holiness (v. 7)

On the positive side, we should strive for moral purity because God Himself is pure and holy. We may ask ourselves, "Why would God punish believers for such sins?" It is because we are called to holiness! God's design in salvation has as its goal our sanctification. He doesn't just want extra bodies to fill heaven. He wants us to live for Him in the here and now!

The One Who Rejects Paul's Directives Rejects God (v. 8)

Paul concludes this section by restating that it is on Christ's authority that he has written these things. To reject Paul's instructions is to reject the words of God Himself! This again reinforces the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. God breathed out His words (2 Tim 3:16) through human writers, and they have been recorded for us in the Bible. It should be a sobering reminder for all Christians that God's word is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). At times that word may seem cumbersome for us, but its instructions are for the benefit of all those who believe. And those of us who are born-again are not left without help. We have the Spirit of God indwelling us and helping us to live out holy lives!

Conclusion

God has called us to holiness and moral purity. Those who live and walk by this standard will please God and receive a great reward! Are God's ways abounding in your life? We would do well to heed Paul's instructions here!

~AWB