

Living Holy Lives (1 Thess. 4:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 4:1–12; Matt. 25:34–46; Gen. 39:9; John 13:34, 35.*

Memory Text: “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (*1 Thessalonians 4:7, NIV*).

Key Thought: Though human sexuality is a gift from God, as with all gifts, it can be abused.

The three opening chapters of 1 Thessalonians focus primarily on the past. In chapters 4 and 5, however, Paul turns to the future. There were things that were lacking in the faith of the Thessalonian believers (*1 Thess. 3:10*), and he wants to help them remedy these deficits. The letter begins the process, but more can be done only after Paul and the Thessalonians can get together again.

Beginning with 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul builds on the friendship he had affirmed in the first three chapters and offers practical advice for the Thessalonians' everyday life.

The main area of concern (but not the only one) in the verses for this week deals with sexual misconduct. Though we're not told what specifically prompted his admonition, Paul speaks very clearly about the need to avoid sexual immorality. He's very strong in his language here, saying that those who reject his instruction are, in fact, not rejecting him but the Lord. All one has to do, though, is look at the suffering that sexual misconduct has caused in so many lives to understand why the Lord would speak so strongly through Paul on this topic.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 18.*

Abounding More and More (1 Thess. 4:1, 2)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 and 4:1–18. How does the content of chapter 4 expand on various parts of the prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13? What is the relationship between Paul’s prayer and his inspired words to the Thessalonians?

Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 contains a number of key words that anticipate the content of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–18. The prayer is about “abounding” in “holiness” and mutual “love” in light of the second coming of Jesus. All these themes point to specific passages in chapter 4.

In our text for today (*1 Thess. 4:1, 2*) Paul picks up on the language of “abounding” in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, although the connection is masked by most modern translations. Modern translations have the commendable goal of making things more understandable in today’s language, but they may inadvertently hide connections that are explicit in the original. In the King James Version, the parallel between 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1 is explicit; Paul invites the Thessalonians in both places to “abound more and more” in their love for each other and for everyone.

Paul began the work of building their Christian framework while he was with them, but now he is impressed by the Holy Spirit to fill in the gaps (*1 Thess. 3:10*) and clarify their understanding. The result would be “more and more” of what they were already attempting to do, which is to live worthy of their calling.

Paul begins chapter 4 with, “Finally, then” (*NKJV*). In chapters 4 and 5 he is building on the previous chapters, in which his friendship with the Thessalonians is the basis for the practical counsel he will now give. They had made a good start. Now he wants them to continue growing in the truths that they had learned from him.

Two mentions of Jesus in this passage (*1 Thess. 4:1, 15*) are particularly interesting. They indicate that Paul was passing on the teaching of Jesus’ own words (which were later preserved in the four Gospels). Paul was offering more than just good advice. Jesus Himself commanded the behaviors that Paul was encouraging. Paul, as Christ’s servant, was sharing the truths He had learned from Christ.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 4:1. What does it mean to walk in a way that will “please God”? Does the Creator of the universe really care about how we behave? How can our actions actually “please God”? What are the implications of your answer?

God's Will: Holiness (1 Thess. 4:3)

First Thessalonians 4:3–8 forms a complete unit of thought. The will of God for each Thessalonian believer is “holiness” or “sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3, 4, 7, *ESV*). What Paul means by holiness here is explained by the two following clauses. Each believer is expected to “avoid sexual immorality” and to “control his own body” (1 Thess. 4:3, 4, *NIV*). Paul concludes the unit of thought with three motivations to holy living (1 Thess. 4:6–8): (1) God is an avenger in these matters, (2) He has called us to holiness, and (3) He gives us the Spirit to help us. In today’s lesson and the next two, we will be looking at this passage in more detail.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and 7. How are the two verses linked? What is the basic message of both, and how is that message relevant for us today?

Verse 3 builds on verse 1, where Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how they were to “walk” (*NKJV*)—“live” in many translations—a Hebrew concept used to describe daily moral and ethical behavior. In verse 3 he uses another Hebrew concept to describe spiritual life and growth, “holiness” or “sanctification.”

A typical definition of *holiness* is “set apart for sacred use.” But Paul gives the term more specific meaning in this letter. Holiness is the condition the Thessalonians will be in at the return of Jesus (1 Thess. 3:13). But in chapter 4 Paul chooses a form of the concept that emphasizes process rather than outcome. It is a noun of action: “sanctifying” more than “sanctification.” It is the will of God that we be engaged in this process (1 Thess. 4:3).

Paul clearly does not endorse a law-free gospel. There are behavioral requirements for those who are in Christ. In verse 7, the opposite of “holiness” is “uncleanness” (*NKJV*) or “impurity” (*ESV*). As Paul goes on to explain in verse 3, “you should avoid sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3, *NIV*). The word for “sexual immorality” is *porneia* in the Greek, which would today cover everything from pornography to prostitution, to any sexual activity outside of marriage.

While salvation is by God’s grace through faith, the Christian life is to be a growing life, constantly striving for the perfection that has been promised us in Christ.

The gift of sexuality is powerful evidence of God’s love for us. Yet, this gift has been so abused that, for many, it has become a curse, a cause of great suffering and sorrow. What choices can we make that will help to protect us from the potential damage that abuse of this gift can bring?

Not Like the Gentiles (1 Thess. 4:4, 5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5. What message do you find in these verses? What do they say to you, personally?

Although the moral philosophers discussed in lesson 3 attacked many forms of sexual excess, Gentile society as a whole had little or no sexual restraint in Paul's day. According to the well-known pagan orator Cicero, "If there is anyone who thinks that youth should be forbidden affairs even with courtesans, he is doubtless eminently austere . . . but his view is contrary not only to the licence of this age but also to the customs and concessions of our ancestors. For when was this not a common practice? When was it blamed? When was it forbidden?"—Quoted in Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 235, 236.

In today's world many find sexual restraint of any kind distasteful. They feel that passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5 were relevant mainly in some other time and place. But the ancient world was no more sexually restrained than our world is today. Paul's message would have been no more acceptable in the wider society then than it is now.

Paul's solution to the problem of sexual excess is that every man should "possess his vessel" (1 Thess. 4:4). The word translated as "possess" normally means "acquire" in the Greek. The meaning of "acquire his vessel" is unclear. If by "vessel" Paul means "woman" (it was a common ancient expression for woman; see 1 Pet. 3:7), he is saying that every man should seek honorable marriage in order to avoid sexual promiscuity.

But most modern translations understand that the word *vessel* refers to the man's own body. In that case the phrase "possess his vessel" should be interpreted as "control his own body" (NIV).

In either case, Paul clearly confronts the moral laxness of his own age. Christians are not to behave as the "Gentiles" do. The norm of the wider society is not to be the norm for us. Sex is holy, set apart for marriage between a man and a woman. As Paul goes on to point out in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, sex can never be a casual matter. When indulged in outside of the norms established by God, it is inevitably destructive. Who hasn't seen in the lives of others, or in their own lives, just how destructive this gift can be when abused?

According to God's Design (1 Thess. 4:6–8)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:6–8. What is Paul saying about sexual immorality?

A man who had been sexually active outside of marriage said to a pastor: “As a young man, I learned to see sex and love as one and the same thing. When I got married, however, I discovered that premarital sex destroys not only your body (I got a venereal disease) but also your mind. Although we are now Christians, my wife and I have had to struggle with the mental and emotional behaviors I brought into our marriage from the past.”

The Bible’s restrictions are not there because God wants to prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Rather, the restrictions protect us from the physical and emotional damage that occurs as a result of sexual immorality. We restrain ourselves sexually because we care about the impact of our lives on others. Every person is a soul for whom Christ died; he or she is not to be sexually exploited, in any way. To do so is to sin not only against that person but to sin against God, as well (*see Gen. 39:9*). Sex is not only about how we treat others but how we treat Christ in the person of others (*see also Matt. 25:34–46*).

Sex, ultimately, bears upon our relationship with God. It is the Gentiles who do not know God who live lives of passionate lust (*1 Thess. 4:5*). It is ignorance of God that produces immoral behavior. Those who ignore the Bible’s teachings on this subject reject not only those teachings, but they also reject the call of God and even God Himself (*1 Thess. 4:8*).

On the other hand, when we follow God’s design, sex becomes a beautiful illustration of the self-sacrificing love that God poured out on us in Christ (*see also John 13:34, 35*). It is a gift of God and, enjoyed according to God’s will for us, it can powerfully reveal the kind of love that God has for humanity and the kind of closeness that He wants with His people.

We are told in 1 Thessalonians 4:7 to live a “holy life.” What is your understanding of what this means? Is this text talking about more than just sexual conduct? If so, what else might it include?

Mind Your Own Business (1 Thess. 4:9–12)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 and 3:11–13. What aspects of the earlier passage does Paul reaffirm in today’s text?

The Greeks had a number of words for “love,” two of which are found in the New Testament. *Eros* (not found in the New Testament) is the Greek word from which we get the word *erotic*. It refers to the sexual side of love. *Agape*, though, is the form most used in the New Testament, as it refers to the self-sacrificing side of love. It is often used in relation to Christ’s love for us as manifested at the Cross.

Another Greek word for love, *philos*, is highlighted in our passage for today. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what they already know about “brotherly love.” The Greek word behind brotherly love is the word from which the city of Philadelphia gets its name. In the Gentile world *philadelphias* referred to love for blood relations. But the church extended this meaning to include love for fellow believers, the Christian family of choice. This kind of familial love is taught by God and is a miracle of God’s grace whenever it happens.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12. In your own words, describe Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians regarding business and employment in the urban context.

The Thessalonian church seemed to have a number of lazy and disruptive individuals. Enthusiasm for the second coming of Jesus may have led some members to quit their jobs and become dependent on Gentile neighbors. But being ready at all times to witness does not mean being disruptive, nosy, or lazy on the job or in the neighborhood. For some outsiders, the closest they will ever come to the church is the impression they take away from the behavior of known Christians in their everyday lives.

Paul’s solution to the Thessalonian problem was to encourage them to be ambitious (“aspire”), not for power or influence but to live a “quiet life” (4:11) that would involve minding one’s own business and working with one’s hands. In the ancient world, manual labor was the primary means of self-support. In today’s world Paul would probably say, “Support yourself and your family and save a little extra to help those in legitimate need.”

How could we apply Paul’s words in these verses to our own lives, our own immediate context?

Further Study: “Love is a pure and holy principle, but lustful passion will not admit of restraint and will not be dictated to or controlled by reason. It is blind to consequences; it will not reason from cause to effect.”—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 222.

“[Love] is pure and holy. But the passion of the natural heart is another thing altogether. While pure love will take God into all its plans, and will be in perfect harmony with the Spirit of God, passion will be headstrong, rash, unreasonable, defiant of all restraint, and will make the object of its choice an idol. In all the department of one who possesses true love, the grace of God will be shown.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 25, 1888.

“Those who would not fall a prey to Satan’s devices, must guard well the avenues of the soul; they must avoid reading, seeing, or hearing that which will suggest impure thoughts. The mind must not be left to dwell at random upon every subject that the enemy of souls may suggest. The heart must be faithfully sentineled, or evils without will awaken evils within, and the soul will wander in darkness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 518.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 518 (see today’s Further Study), Ellen White talks about guarding “the avenues of the soul.” What are some practical ways that believers can do this? What implications does this principle have for our choices in entertainment and education?
- 2 In 1 Thessalonians Paul frequently uses the phrase “more and more” to describe growth in character and Christian behavior. What can churches do to encourage this kind of “more and more”?
- 3 If a young person asked you to give at least two practical reasons why he or she should “wait until marriage” before sex, what would you say, and why?

Summary: In the first 12 verses of chapter 4, Paul tackles a couple of the most difficult problems found in most churches, particularly urban churches. Sexuality is a very private matter; yet, there is abundant peril to the church when sexual immorality is not confronted. Equally important is the kind of church the world sees in the neighborhood and workplace. Paul’s guidelines in these matters are as important today as they were in his time.

Finding the Way Home: Part 2

“Take your things, and don’t come back,” Mother said as Verusca opened the door. Verusca paused and then said softly, “I’ll collect my things when I return from church.” She hurried toward the church, crying.

As Verusca entered the church, a woman was telling the mission story of a girl who faced trials similar to Verusca’s. Tears ran down her cheeks as Verusca listened to how God had prepared a safe haven for the girl who had dared to follow Jesus.

After church, Verusca stood near a wall wondering what to do next. Marques approached and saw her tears. She told him what her mother had said, and he offered to take her to his home. But Verusca declined. She didn’t know Marques’s family. The two walked toward town together. They found a bench and sat down to talk. Marques prayed for her and then read her some promises from his Bible.

Time flew, and as sunset approached, Marques said he had to return to church for vespers. Verusca walked home alone. Her mother wasn’t home when she entered the house, but she found a note on the table. Trembling, she read it. “Please don’t leave. Love, Mom.” Verusca smiled and hurried toward the church. God had provided a way for her!

But as she returned home after dark, fear once again enveloped her. She prayed for peace and entered the house. Mother welcomed Verusca with a look of relief. Verusca realized that her family had been worried about her.

No one mentioned religion that week, but Verusca knew her mother wasn’t happy with the direction she had chosen. In time her mother calmed down, and Verusca continued attending church.

Then one Sabbath morning Mother told Verusca, “Hurry or you’ll be late for Sabbath School.” Verusca smiled; her mother no longer opposed her decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

Verusca shares her faith with her mother, just as her brothers had shared theirs with her. Verusca has learned that her mother listens to some Seventh-day Adventist programs on the radio, and Verusca prays that God’s words will sink deeply into her mother’s heart and find fertile ground there to grow into faith. She prays that her father will find faith in God as well.

Angola is home to more than 350,000 Seventh-day Adventist believers. Our mission offerings help spread the gospel to the millions in Angola who have not yet heard the Seventh-day Adventist message.

VERUSCA DE PAIVA shares her faith in Lubongo, Angola.