

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 June 2020

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[0 : 00] 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 to 12 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 1 to 12 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 begins with a finally in many translations. Gordon Fee, however, suggests that it might be better translated as, as for other matters. The main purpose of this first epistle to the Thessalonians is the relationship between Paul and his companions and the Thessalonians, which occupies the significant majority of the letter. However, Paul also wishes to exhort the

Thessalonians to continue in what they had been taught. He speaks as though most of the Thessalonians were adhering to the teaching that he and his companions had instructed them in, yet some might be diverting from it, which is why he reiterates it without rebuking the entire church or belabouring the points. Paul entreats and exhorts the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus.

He speaks to them gently. One of the important features of apostolic rhetoric is its preference for gentle persuasion and reasoning over command, prohibition or rebuke. There are occasions when these things are appropriate, but most of the time we have persuasion and reasoning. Such rhetoric is designed for the mature, for people who have a stronger internal grasp of what is good.

By contrast, the rhetoric of the law is far more designed for people in a state of infancy and immaturity. Persuasion furnishes us with reasons for action that we can internalise and possess as our own. Command, however, gives us external reasons for action when we are not at a point when we can internalise the reasons yet. Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians as people in Christ who have his spirit indwelling them, and as mature people who can be reasoned with and persuaded and won over.

He has already instructed the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus on the matters that he is about to teach them on again, speaking to them as one with apostolic authority. And now he takes the opportunity to repeat the instructions that he has already given them. The teaching he gives relates to a fundamental issue in how we relate to God, about God's desire for us, namely the fact that God desires our sanctification. Sanctification relates to being blameless in holiness, which Paul mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 13. Being holy involves being set apart. And one of the aspects of this that Paul often draws attention to in his letters is holiness in sexual matters. Speaking of our bodies, or perhaps more particularly our sexual organs, as vessels. Paul maintains that we need to control our vessels in holiness and honour. We have been devoted to the service of the Lord, and we must treat our bodies accordingly. Self-control is emphasised here, in contrast to the Gentiles, who are ignorant of God, and who act in the passion of lust, their uncontrolled desires controlling them. The categories of holiness and honour are really important and prominent ones for Pauline's sexual ethics. They're categories that far exceed our more customary categories for sexual morality, that can boil down to little more than consent. For instance, the concept of same-sex relations as a form of dishonouring the body is an important aspect of Paul's argument against such practices in Romans chapter 1.

[4 : 29] Paul's teaching of sexual ethics rests on a very different view of the person, and he expresses this ethic most fully in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 to 20.

1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 10.

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything. Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never. Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh. But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

As Christians, our bodies have been visibly marked out for resurrection in the seal of baptism. Our bodies are the limbs and organs of Christ. Our bodies are the temple or the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells not merely within our minds or within our hearts, but in our bodies. Our bodies are the self as an object, even to ourselves. Before I have subjective awareness, before I have agency or volition, I am my body. My body is the very root of my being.

[6 : 51] It's my place in the world. It's the thing that people relate to as me. Our bodies, however, are marked out as holy. They're marked out as God's own. God claims us at the very deepest part of ourselves. Our bodies are the site of shame, of felt mortality, of weakness, of death, and many, many other things like that. We may feel exposed to the judgment of others in our bodies as their gaze falls upon us. We may feel violated by things that others have done to our bodies, or things that we have done with our bodies. We may feel that our bodies are failing us as we age, or through forms of infirmity or disability. We may feel, for instance, wrongly stigmatized by others on account of our bodies, perhaps because of our racial or our ethnic appearance. Yet God has claimed our bodies for himself, and he will raise up these bodies on the last day. Our bodies, being set apart for God, have great dignity and must be treated as holy accordingly. Our bodies are earthy, they're mortal, they're weak, they're ungainly, and generally somewhat unattractive. The scriptures never suggest otherwise. The scriptures don't divinize the body. They don't pretend that the body is anything other than what it is. However, God has made these bodies a realm of his habitation, and he desires to raise them up. He values our bodies, and he relates to us in our bodies, not just in ourselves detached from our bodies. This is why sexual ethics is such a hugely important issue for Paul. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and if your body has been set apart by the Lord, you must treat your body accordingly. Paul particularly speaks to those who are sexually immoral, and wronging their brother in this matter. Perhaps he has in mind a man having an adulterous relationship with another man's wife.

However, sexual behavior in general is, for Paul, not something that can be privatized, as we tend to imagine. Our bodies belong to Christ, they have been bought at a price by him, so we don't have the right to do what we wish with them. Husbands and wives must honor each other with their bodies. Whatever physical or psychological prophylactics we might employ, we cannot engage in sexual relations without acting towards another person's very self. Beyond this, sexual holiness has implications for our neighbors. Sexual immorality in the church compromises the whole body in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, as he says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Sexual immorality is also something that the Lord will judge. This is a fact which Paul and his companions had solemnly warned the Thessalonians about. To dismiss the importance of sexual holiness is to sin against God himself, who has sanctified our bodies for himself by the gift of his indwelling spirit. God has called us for the very end of holiness, and sexual impurity runs directly contrary to God's intent in salvation. We disregard this at our very peril. Paul concludes this section by turning to discuss the duty of love. This is something that they had already been taught by God. Perhaps Paul has in view the new covenant promise of God's more direct teaching of his people by the Holy Spirit. This is something the Thessalonians already knew. Paul is spurring them on to act more faithfully in terms of it. The issue that precipitates Paul's teaching seems to be the behavior of some indigents in the community, who are selfishly taking advantage of the provision of others and living off others' generosity when they could and should be providing for themselves.

Acting in such a manner is unloving to others and dishonors the church before outsiders. It is an honorable thing to live in a way that is provident and not dependent. We should aspire to live quiet lives that aren't disruptive, concerning ourselves with our own affairs, working with our own hands in our own labors, and seeking to be as self-sufficient as possible. People who don't live in such a manner are disruptive. They get into other people's business. They make themselves a nuisance and a burden in their communities and prevent their communities from doing things they could do otherwise. When we live in an appropriate manner, however, we will not selfishly make ourselves a burden upon others, and we will also be able to serve people ourselves much more readily. Living in such a manner will also be respectable in the eyes of the world around, which besides improving the church's witness is a good thing in itself, as it manifests the holiness to which we have been called.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which the aspiration to self-sufficiency is important for the practice of love?