

A Call to Purity, Part I

Call to Worship: Psalm 29

1st Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Hymn #683- *Praise Him! Praise Him!*

Hymn #87- *Holy, Holy, Holy*

Hymn Insert- *Change My Heart O God*

Introduction:

Having reminded the Thessalonians that their present sufferings were not unusual, but in fact, part and parcel for the Christian walk, and having sought to encourage them concerning their perseverance in their faith and love, and having poured out his own heart, concerning the great pains he has taken to get back to the Thessalonians, Paul now moves on to exhort the Thessalonian brethren, concerning the ways in which they ought to conduct themselves during times of suffering (and times of rest, for that matter). In other words, even in the midst of dark and confusing times, there are very clear and general principles that can help keep them on their way, so that even when they can't see in a certain providential sense, they can yet always see, in a biblical sense. What I mean by this, will become clear by the time we finish looking at our text for this morning.

Here then, in our text, we find the first imperative principle, which Paul sets forth as a particular focal point, especially during (but not limited to) times of suffering and trial. And that focal point is a call to purity.

I. A Call to Purity

Now, whether or not Paul had received an actual report (from Timothy), concerning some of the Thessalonians falling into sexual sin, is irrelevant (from our standpoint), because the fact of the matter is, that, especially during (but not limited to) times of trial, sexual sin can become very attractive. When the body is in ongoing agony, the spirit can grow weary. And when the spirit grows weary, it can long for some form of quick fix relief. And so, Paul wants to exhort them to see the big picture here, so that, rather than miss the long term and greater blessing of spiritual growth through their trials, by looking for an escape and regressing into sexual

immorality, they can stand fast, endure, and benefit from these afflictions, all of which, God has ordained for their good (as we have seen back in chapter 3:1-4).

And so, Paul states in verses 1&2 (of chapter 4), "Finally then, brethren (all that I have just said, being the case, therefore, finally...), we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus."

Now, just note for a moment that the words "urge" and "exhort," clearly indicate that what Paul is calling for here, is no small matter. This is significant. This is a matter of great importance that cannot be overlooked by the Thessalonians. This is one of the great purposes of this letter; the "called for actions," which Paul is after, and which Paul is most concerned about during this time of tribulation. It is the "active purpose" of the entire letter.

And so, what does he "urge and exhort" here? That they would abound more and more; that is, that they would increase and improve upon their obedience to the commandments of the Lord Jesus, which were given to the Thessalonians through Paul and his companions. And in this way; in walking in this way; in pursuing holiness in this way, they would please God. In other words, that same holiness, which Paul prays that God would establish the hearts of the Thessalonians in (given in verse 13), Paul is exhorting the Thessalonians to pursue from their end as well. God must give and grant it, but that does not leave the Thessalonians without the responsibility of pursuing it.

And so, brethren, here again, we find Paul implicating that cooperative effort, which exists between God and the Christian, in the working out of the Christian's own salvation. In one vein, Paul prays for God to do that work, recognizing the impossibility of the Christian doing anything in his own strength (vs. 12-13). And in another vein, he exhorts the Thessalonians, not to sit around and wait to get zapped with power in some way, but rather, to take steps of faith in pursuing such holiness in the fear of God, trusting that God would meet them there, and grant them what they could otherwise never achieve on their own. It is another way of Paul expositing, as it were, the idea of "working out our salvation with fear and trembling, recognizing that it is God who is at work in us, causing us to will and to do according to His good pleasure." It is in line with the Lord Jesus's command to His disciples to "believe that

whatever they ask, they will receive," leading them to act upon their requests by taking steps that would indicate that they believe that God has already granted them. It is the blind man going, by faith, to wash in the water, confident that Christ has restored his vision.

How does Paul know that focusing on obeying the commands of Christ ought to be the primary mission of the persecuted and suffering Thessalonians? Verse 3 states, "*For* this is the will of God, your sanctification..." God's will is not that we should be without suffering in this life. In fact, to the contrary, God guarantees that we will experience suffering in this life. God's will does not even *end* with the forgiveness and conversion of the redeemed sinner. No, as we have stated throughout this series, God's will is our being conformed into the image of His beloved Son; His will is the breaking off of what is still broken and defiled in us, and the renewing us day by day toward greater holiness; His will is our sanctification! And that process of sanctification; of putting to death remaining sin in us, and conforming us more and more into the image of Christ, is progressive in nature, until we come to the completed man in Christ.

Now, to that end, Paul brings up a specific category of holiness, which would have been most relevant for the formerly pagan Thessalonians, and in fact, arguably deals with the most prominent sin of all cultures, to which we are most vulnerable at all times, and especially during times of suffering and affliction, namely, sexual purity.

Notice, Paul continues in verse 3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: *that you should abstain from sexual immorality...*" Now, obviously, Paul is not saying that our entire sanctification is summed up in maintaining sexual purity. But again, this is a specific area of sanctification that addresses a predominant means of defilement within the heathen culture. Paul is putting his finger on the obvious threat, which largely exists, and which most wars against the purity of the Church. And as I have just stated, I don't think this ought to be surprising to us, because it is a great sin, which plagues the churches (pastors, deacons and laypeople) of our own day, in the form of adultery, fornication, pornography and etc. And so, Paul exhorts them to fervently abstain from; to flee from; to avoid at all costs, the gross and defiling sin of sexual immorality, which corrupts, erodes and seeks to destroy the sanctifying purposes of God in the believer.

Notice, Paul moves on to say in verses 4-5, "...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God..."

What is Paul saying here? That, the child of God; the redeemed, Holy Spirit indwelt, child of God, unlike the unregenerate Gentiles, has everything he needs to exercise self-control in the area of maintaining sexual purity. As difficult as it may be at times; as vulnerable as we are in the flesh, God has given us everything that we need; He has provided (and continues to provide) us with every means of grace necessary to tame and control the lustful beast of our natural man in Adam. In other words, we cannot say, "It's just impossible. I can't control the inner urge. It just jumps upon me and I'm done." No, there are means of controlling our own vessel. There are means of "reckoning ourselves dead to sin, and alive to Christ." There are means of "walking in the Spirit, so that we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." And if we do not access those means; if we do not avail ourselves to those means, then ultimately, we have no one to blame but ourselves. [Note: Some see "own vessel" as own wife...etc]

And so, that "passion of lust," that spurring and riling of the erotic emotions is controllable, by the grace of God, in Christ. And friends, this is that important to God. Sexual sin, adultery, fornication, looking at pornography... all of these, while certainly not unpardonable, are to be taken very serious, in our pursuit of holiness. In fact, consider the opposite of the words, "sanctification and honor," in which Paul calls us to possess our vessels, and see the gravity of the sins of sexual immorality. Partaking in sexual immorality is to subject your body to "defilement/unholiness" and "dishonor," according to the implications of what Paul is saying here. And so, without denying the fact that we constantly need the grace of Christ because of our failures in these or in any regards, for that matter; without flushing out all hope of grace and forgiveness, which come to us at the cross, we do need to see that this matter of our sanctification is extremely important in the sight of God. It is a battle that must be fought fervently and viciously, because the will of God is our sanctification, brethren. And better men than you and I, have become ensnared here, and that, unto significant temporal consequences (Samson, David, Solomon...etc).

Paul continues, "that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the Avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified" (vs. 6).

Now, when Paul speaks of not "taking advantage of or defrauding your brother" here, clearly he is specifically addressing the matter of adultery at this point, which obviously was not uncommon amongst the Thessalonian people, even as it is not uncommon today. And so, there is a heavy, weighty caution here, against tampering with the wives of other brothers in the church.

So relevant was this concern to Paul, that during the short time that he was among the Thessalonians, he considered it a priority to address this issue. He had warned them against the practice, and the warning was quite fierce, and sadly, unbecoming in the context of many evangelical churches today. It's not too often that you hear of the Lord; it's not too often that you hear of Jesus as an Avenger of any sort. And yet, in keeping with the fiery eyed, sword mouthed, glorious depiction of Christ, given in Revelation, Paul states here that Jesus is an Avenger of sorts. And in this case, it is related to those who are defrauded by others, who would tamper with their wives in any sexual sense. Again, this is not to say that adultery is unpardonable, but it is a matter not to be taken lightly, in any respect. God hates adultery even as He hates idolatry, which is spiritual adultery. And so, Paul reminds them of this warning, all the more, as the temptation might increase during this time of great tribulation.

Moving on then, Paul adds, "For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness" (vs. 7). Again, in keeping with the will of God, being not simply our justification, but also our sanctification, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that their calling was not simply unto forgiveness for sin, but also unto the forsaking of sin. The call to the sinner is a call unto faith in Christ, but not apart from a repentance toward God. It is a holy calling; a call not to remain in the defiled and unclean state of the sin from which Christ has redeemed us, but a call forward unto pursuing holiness in the fear of God. A call of grace, unto a battle in that very same grace, which now suits us up in the armor of Christ's righteousness, so that we can begin to put sin to death in us, even as it was put to death in Christ's death.

And then, finally, Paul closes this plea for sexual purity with these words, "Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit" (vs. 8).

Again, clearly Paul wants to be thoroughly emphatic in this exhortation. His "urging" and "exhorting" in the Lord Jesus have already confirmed this. His speaking of the Lord as an Avenger of the victims of adultery has confirmed this. And here, his emphasizing the fact that to spurn this exhortation; to reject it, is to reject God and not man. It is to "flip God off," as it were. And this God, is the same God, who has graciously given us His Holy Spirit as a down payment in our salvation. Why does Paul state this? It is a sobering reminder that as we (Christians) conduct ourselves in this life, we do so, with the Holy Spirit having taken up residence in us. To carelessly engage in sexual immorality, is to defile the body, which is indwelt by God's *Holy* Spirit. It is to subject the Holy Spirit; the very real and present Director and Guide to all holiness, to observe the very defiling and corrupting of that body, which He indwells, and which Christ has claimed by virtue of His Lordship. Again, that is no small matter, brethren!

This is in keeping with Paul's charges to the Corinthians, concerning these very matters.
[Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 & 5:1-13]

II. Conclusion

Now, brethren, there are several applications that we can take from all of this, and which, I would like to address. However, time will not permit me to do so, this morning. And so, we will stop here for this morning, and Lord willing, I will spend the great majority of next week's sermon, addressing several critical applications, which are relevant to all that we have just gone over in the text, this morning.

Suffice it to say for now, that, Paul's first order of business in the imperative (the command) section of this Epistle, deals with the significant matter of pursuing holiness of purity in our walk with Christ, and that, very consciously, in the face of great trials and tribulations.

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25