
Excelling in Pleasing God

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Christians struggle with two opposite tensions: the drive to be perfect and flawless and the desire for ease and indolence. The Bible calls us to a third way...

These two paragraphs are related to one another by the phrase *excel more* in (v.1) and (v.10). These two phrases introduce the spheres in which the believers were to excel.

Their Responsibilities in Purity

(v.1-8)

Every generation of believers must deal with the problem of immorality. Though we tend to view our own generation as being uniquely wicked, immorality has been a constant and corrupting influence from on the world on the church. Paul had to address the problem in almost every epistle he wrote.

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.

If the people of God want to excel in pleasing God, then they must excel in this area as well.

The Revelation of Christian Purity

(v.1-3a)

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. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification:

These instructions are coming with all the authority of the Word of God. These are not options which we can adopt or reject as it suits us. Why is this so?

These are the *instructions* they had received before (v.1).

These are the *commandments of the Lord* he had given before (v.2)

These are the *will of God* in sanctification (v.3)

So they had been instructed by the commandments of the Lord so that they knew what the will of God is. This was not simply Paul writing, but is God directing.

The Requirements of Christian Purity

(v.3b-6)

What God demands is given in three areas. Each of these begins with the word *that* to point us to specific requirements. Now this paragraph is not without its exegetical difficulties and debates.

...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.

Abstain from Immorality

(v.3b)

The Scripture is clear: abstain from immorality. The word here not only means not to do it, but to distance yourself from it.

To teens and singles - You are particularly open to temptation to immorality. All immorality is simply sin. You must not do it. Even in Christian schools we are prone to give all the worldly reasons for committing sexual sins: the potential for STD's and AIDS, the emotional effects, long-term effects on marriage. I want to give you the only reason that really matters: *GOD SAID DON'T*.

To spouses - Do all you can to protect your spouse from temptation and to provide for their needs in this area. A husband or wife who is withholding themselves may be sinning against God and making their spouse more susceptible to temptation. Husbands and wives—be totally satisfied with each other.

Maintain Your Purity

(v.4-5)

Now this is the sentence which causes us to pause and do some laborious work with the text. The problem centers around two words: *ktá'sqai* (to acquire or possess) and *skeu'o"* (vessel). Two views are commonly held and are represented by differing translations.¹

Each of you must know how *to acquire* your own wife (vessel) in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust like the heathen who do not know God.

Each of you must know how *to possess* your own body (vessel) in sanctification and honor, not in being controlled by passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God.

In the face of this ambiguity, let us then make application as though both were true.

When single Christians are surrounded by immorality, they must identify strategies in their relationships which allow them to acquire spouses without sex being the primary driving motivation. There are huge implications here for dating. There ought to be a stark contrast between how Christian teens and singles develop relationships and how the lost do. While unbelievers focus on and stress the physical, the believer knows that other spheres of the relationship must be primary.

All believers need to *know how to possess their bodies* in sanctification and honor. The key here is on *knowing how*. Do you know what tend to stir up sexual desire in you and to avoid those things except, for those who are married, with your

spouse? Do you know your body's cycles (men have them as well)? Are you simply being driven by your lustful desires?

Notice though how the ambiguity may be merged. It is a simple New Testament reality that the gift of celibacy is rare. Therefore, people ought to marry in the Lord, acquiring a spouse in a God-honoring, self-controlling way which does not focus on the sexual aspects, but on the relational aspects. Even Christian marriage does not put sex at its center, but rather submission and sacrifice.

The next sentence carries this idea into a whole new realm for most.

Respect Your Brother

(v.6a)

Here is a concept that we have little understood. An expanded translation would sound like this: "Do not disregard and cross over the bounds and thus defraud your brother in this matter of immorality by sinning with his wife or daughter." Now why would he say this? Why would he couch this in terms that sound like a contract or an agreement?

Because we are a community covenanted together, to have sex outside of marriage with anyone who is not your spouse and whose family is in church is to transgress the covenant and to steal by fraud and deceit what is not your own. This is why the church must rise up and discipline all such sin. God has forbidden it. It is a violation of our covenant community. We are first, brothers and sisters, then we are husbands and wives. This concept is sustained by Ephesians and 1 Peter.

The Reasons for Christian Purity

(v.6b-8)

Paul stresses the importance of these commands through three warnings.

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.

The Prosecution by God

(v.6b)

God will not allow sins in this area to go unnoticed and uncorrected. Be assured that those around you may not know and may never know. But God will prosecute in the court of His providence.

The Purpose of Sanctification

(v.7)

The purpose of grace in sanctification is not license. God has summoned and separated us to Himself and away from sin. Salvation has sanctification as its immediate project and glorification as its chief end.

The Problem with Rejection

(v.8)

To carry on and say that this is just man's perspective and man's word is to reject God who gives us the Spirit to sanctify us. When we reject the commands and warnings of the Word of God, we are rejecting the God of the Word.

The Resource for Christian Purity

(v.8b)

The Holy Spirit has been given to us in order to bring about our sanctification. He is to teach us, to convict us and to correct us through the Scripture. He is the power of God's grace energizing our consciences, our minds and our wills to excel in pleasing God.

Paul now turns to their loving harmony and honesty together as a covenant community.

Their Responsibilities in Propriety**(v.9-12)**

It seems, according to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, that there was a group in the church who were not involved in productive labor, were getting involved in everyone's business and were living off the benevolence of the church. It has been generally thought that they were using the soon coming of Christ as an excuse to abandon their daily responsibilities. Paul now speaks gently and carefully to the church as whole, while aiming at that group.

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.

Commendation of our Loving Practice**(v.9-10)**

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.

True believers are taught by God to love one another. And loving one another is not primarily one of feeling but of action. They were commended for how they *practiced* their love.

Is this true of us?

Do we expect to find a church filled with feelings or deeds of love? A believer who claims to feelings of love who has not the deeds of love is fooling himself and others.

Do we seek to put our love into practice through sacrificial deeds? For example: have you taken someone *who is not in your circle of friends or on your financial class* to dinner or lunch? Do you know someone who needs help with groceries, or car or house or children and you can help them? Do you know someone who is alone and needs just simple companionship? Do you ever approach a deacon seeking to help in a ministry area?

We must constantly seek to flesh out our love in practical efforts of ministry.

Corrections in our Loving Practice**(v.11)**

Here is the intensely practical side of the gospel.

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,

The Bible encourages a loving concern for one another expressed in practical care and the deals with those who take advantage of the loving deeds of others.

Admonition to the Bustling***Lead a quiet life.***

Here is a word to those whose lives, because of an over balanced commitment to a particular aspect of theology or practice, become frenetic rounds of activity. This was being addressed to many who were taking the coming the Lord too seriously in the wrong way. This infects certain church groups today, but thankfully is not too evident

among us. However, the warning stands true to any *cause*, even right ones. Honor, desire and make it your ambition to lead a life marked by a steady calm.

Admonition to the Busybodies

Attend to your own business.

The word is used in 1 Peter 4:15 to refer to “*a troublesome meddler.*” Paul characterizes some widows as “*gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.*” (1 Timothy 5:13 (NASB)). This applies to those who simply run around (in our case, usually via the phone) getting involved in everyone’s business and usually end up carrying each other’s offenses.

Admonition to the Lazy

Work with your hands.

No believer who is capable of working should be living off the benefice of the church (and certainly, charity, whether private or public through welfare.) If you can work, then make it your ambition to work, even if it means laboring in a menial job, which is implied in this text.

This may be addressed to one group of people whose fanaticism led them to stop working and start living off the church so that they could get involved in everybody’s business. But it also has equal force to anyone who is sinning by leading a life marked by frenetic activity in a cause or who is meddling or who is lazy. How can I say it is sin? Because God through Paul in the Bible *commanded them.*

What is the outcome?

Consequences from our Loving Practice

(v.12)

Paul expresses these as both the purpose for the admonition and the expected outcome.

[Do this]¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

The Propriety of our Witness

Our conduct prepares the way for our witness. When our lifestyle reflects the truths we profess, then we are exhibiting what it means to be a Christian. The unbelieving world cannot tell us what is right and wrong for us; but they well know when we are doing what *we* say is wrong.

The Provision of our Work

Literally, the phrase means “*to have need of nothing.*” The point here is that the normal means for God’s provision for us is through the labor of our hands.

When we lead lives that are marked by a steady calm as we give careful attention to ourselves and work hard with our hands, then our witness is powerful and we will have our needs met.

Reflect and Respond

There are three distinctives of an excelling church:

- ◆ **Their Holiness** (v.1-8)
They are a people who deal with the issues of sexual purity
- ◆ **Their Harmony** (v.9-10)
They are a people who know how to put their love into practice.
- ◆ **Their Honesty** (v.11-12)
They are a people who learn the value of working hard to provide for themselves and others.
- ◆ **Their Hope** (v.13-18)
They are a people whose expectation of the Lord's return encourages them even in the midst of personal loss and grief.

Now, it is not enough to just begin doing or practicing these things. The Thessalonians were too. What is desired is that we excel in them. Are we?

Notes

¹ Which is it? It seems we can settle the word vessel by an appeal to other Scripture. In 1 Peter 3:7, the word refers to a wife being a weaker vessel and in 2 Corinthians 4:7, it refers to our bodies being earthly containers for heavenly treasure. In both instances, it is the fragility which is in view. And yet, it was common in Paul's day for rabbis and scribes to refer to wives as *vessels*.

The word for acquire or obtain (learn to control (NIV)) is usually used to mean to acquire or obtain with two exceptions where it does mean to possess.

You can hear the text this way: "Each of you acquire your own wife in a fitting way and do not cross the bounds to take what is your Christian brother's (wife or daughter)." Then again, it can say, "Each of you know how to possess your own body in a fitting way and do not dispossess your Christian brother of what is his."

Neither translation violates other portions of Scripture. And both translations are supported by specific passages which argue in them for each of the views.