

Study 5 Holy and Hearty

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 5:12-28

In this last study on 1 Thessalonians, we consider two passages of practical instruction, the first focusing on holiness, and the second, for want of a better word, on heartiness.

Holiness is a relational matter (just as righteousness is a legal matter). 'Holy' describes what God is, what belongs to him or is for his use (and much else besides). He is 'the Holy One of Israel', suggesting that the belonging goes two ways. This relational aspect is highlighted by its link with love in our letter (3:12-13). It also describes a relationship in that holiness is the way of life that brings pleasure to God.

We could say that holy conduct would involve all ten of God's commandments but emphasis is put here on the seventh. This is not surprising given that these readers had recently turned from idols. The Graeco-Romans world thought little of sexual faithfulness and most men would have thought that sexual gratification outside of marriage was normal.

The matter is becoming similar in our own culture. We are focused on some of the more extreme expressions of sexual aberration at present but the 'horse bolted' long before our present problems. Once sexual activity is regarded as having a life outside of marriage—with the fidelity and care expected in that relationship—it is more than we can handle and must be given free play 'more and more' (to use Paul's phrase). The word used for passion (v. 5) signifies an overmastering desire. In fact, once we have abandoned knowledge of God (v. 5), God himself gives us over to uncontrolled and uncontrollable urges as an expression of his displeasure (Rom. 1:24-32).

Immorality not only displeases God, it is an offence against the neighbor. God's law expresses God's nature but it is also the way provided for our life together (a strong element in the spelling out of God's law in the Old Testament). God acts with vengeance against the one who offends his brother. It is this sense that the state is intended to wield God's 'sword' and take issue with those who offend (Rom. 13:3-4).

How different the new life of Christians! They are 'asked and encouraged *in* the Lord Jesus' to remember what Paul said from the beginning about how they *must* walk (v. 1). The word is a strong one, used often by Jesus about himself—particularly about his going to the cross. The Christian life is lived under an urgent necessity that we behave consistently with our calling (2 Thes. 1:11). There is nothing 'musty' in insisting on this because holiness is relational, pleasurable and a response to God's favour.

Further considerations open up this urgency. God's will is clear (v. 3): he wants us to be holy, that is, like himself. Second, he wants us to take up our body—suggesting we take control of it so as to make it the Lord's, and to honour it (v. 4). Christianity is unique among philosophies in giving a reason to honour our bodies.

Of the first century, one writer says immorality 'was excused by parents, commended by moralists, and consecrated by the Religion of Heathenism, especially in Greece and particularly at Corinth where St. Paul now was' (in L. Morris, p. 124n).

Third, God effects his will with a call (v. 7)—an important element in Paul's letters—not *for* or with a view to our being impure but *in* holiness. His call is holiness in action, catching us up into that holy purpose and giving us his Holy Spirit (v. 8; cf. 5:24; also 1 Pet. 1:2). The kingdom of God is not merely a teaching but a power (1 Cor. 4:20).

We could observe that this is why political conservatism will not win the culture war in our country unless it is accompanied by a power to effect what it wants to secure. We should do whatever we can to secure better laws and education and media representation, but it remains that the power for salvation, eternally *and* socially, is the gospel.

Harold Berman (former Harvard Law School Professor) says, 'People will desert institutions that do not seem to them to correspond to some transcendent reality in which they believe — believe *in* with their whole beings, and not just believe *about*, with their minds'.

Paul now speaks about love, feeling he does not need to say much because of what God had already done in them, a fact that is evident to all the northern Grecian peninsular churches. God himself teaches us to love by the gift of his Son, the joy of forgiveness, the gift of his Spirit and the hope of grace to come. In fact, we may question whether any of us will teach others to love without this gospel. But love is nothing if not practical and includes being as self-sufficient as we may be so as not to bring disrepute on the Christian message. The matter needs reinforcing when he writes again (2 Thes. 3:6-15).

The overflowing nature of Christian living is evident in the command to live and love 'more and more' (3:12; 4:1, 10). To stand still or to be content with past progress is to be going backwards. Leon Morris comments...

'It illustrates something of the exuberant quality of a right Christian faith. Far from acting as a brake on men's enjoyment of life, as many wrongly think, it opens up the door to real living.'

In the second section (5:11-28), instructions come quickly, almost as if he is describing one thing—heartiness. Charles Wesley' song exhorts us:

'Leave no unguarded place,
No weakness of the soul;
Take every virtue, every grace
And fortify the whole.'

New elders of the congregation may not yet be established and the congregation needs to respond well to the help they bring. All must share in this admonishing—the same word is used which signifies 'admonishing with blame' (Trench's *Synonyms*, p. 126), or encouraging—whatever is needed.

The remaining imperatives recognise the differences of personality, situation and opportunity normal in any community. Each member is responsible to the whole—to contribute whatever they may have to give (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7). Peace is not merely the absence of hostility but the presence of all the contributing elements that make a good society. Some need rebuke, others 'a hand up'. Everyone needs our patience! We can be wholly free of vengeance because God will attend to this (2 Thes. 1:6), leaving us free to serve others.

Joy, continual prayer and comprehensive thankfulness are normal for a Christian and need to be exercised. This is not an ethic but a 'life from above', supported by the Spirit and by God's word. We should be expecting God to intervene for our good—awakening the truth within us and speaking to our present situation. Not everything that comes our way is from above and this requires discernment and avoiding evil whether from within or without.

As if anticipating a sigh, he affirms this is what God wants and what he will supply. Augustine famously said, 'Give what you command, and command what you will'. God is near to every suppliant to keep us and have us ready for his eternal kingdom. And, as Paul concludes all of his letters, 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.'