

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to be sanctified, to live a life apart from sin and worldliness. Primarily this means living a sexually pure life. Sexual immorality is exploitative—it hurts other people. Sexual self-control allows us to love one another, rather than use each other.

Paul begins to conclude his letter by writing *Finally then, brethren*. His closing thoughts in Chapter 4 and 5 will answer questions the Thessalonians have about Christ's return by also urging them to focus on one important thing: *sanctification*. Sanctification is being set apart for special service to God and others. We become sanctified by walking in the ways of God.

He writes that he and his co-authors, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, *request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus*, appealing in the strongest terms to the highest authority, that just as they received from them *instruction as to how they ought to walk and please God (just as the Thessalonians do walk), that you excel still more*. The Thessalonians were already living out their faith excellently, showing love toward one another and endurance against persecution. But Paul and his team tell them to *excel still more*, to grow their love and stand firm against all attacks on them (1 Thessalonians 3:8,12).

Paul and company not only *request* of the Thessalonians to *excel still more*, but they also *exhort* or encourage them to do so. The reward for faithfulness is the opportunity to be even more faithful. The wicked and lazy slave in the parable of the talents properly identified this as a characteristic of the master (who represents God in the parable), namely that God rewards faithful service by granting greater responsibilities in His kingdom. The Master validated this when He rewarded each faithful steward by saying:

“Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”
(Matthew 25:23)

The faithful stewards were “faithful with a few things” so the Master gave them greatly enhanced responsibilities. Of course, along with that greatly increased responsibility comes “the joy of your master” which is the greatest fulfillment we can have as humans. This is the part that the wicked and lazy servant appears to have missed. For the reason of gaining the joy of our Master, Paul desires that the Thessalonians *excel still more* in the stewardship of their walk with Christ. In general, our lives are either decaying or improving. Coasting is seldom a true option. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to continue to strive all the more in their obedience to the ways of Christ.

He reminds the Thessalonians that they *know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus*. Even though Paul's time with the Thessalonians was brief, he was able to teach them some *commandments* by the *authority* of Jesus. He had clearly taught them to live a life of faithful obedience, to expect suffering and to endure it, to love one another as servants—

all things Christ Himself taught during His time on earth (1 Thessalonians 1:13-14). Paul then points to the reason to *excel* in love and to *walk* in a manner that would *please God*, because *this is the will of God, your sanctification*.

This is quite profound. It is important to note how definitive Paul's statement is, that *the will of God* is the believer's *sanctification*.

"To sanctify" is to set apart for a special purpose. It is similar to the idea of being holy. To be precious instead of common. To be highly valuable, like a rare gem, rather than invaluable, like rubbish. In ancient times, to be a noble or a royal, rather than a commoner. To be fine china that is carefully washed and cared for rather than a paper plate. To be highly useful, a prized tool, rather than something with little use.

God wants us to live in such a way that we live up to the extremely special purpose for which He designed us. What is that purpose?

We see in Psalm 8 a very clear statement of God's purpose in creating humans. We are assigned to silence His enemy, Satan. This is shown in this verse from Psalm 8, which speaks of humans as "infants and nursing babes" when compared to the angelic beings. Psalm 8 marvels that God elevated humans over His creation instead of angelic beings, given that humans are "lower." Compared to angels, humans are weak and dependent, like babies compared to adults. Yet, in Psalm 8, the psalmist declares:

"From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength
Because of Your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease."
(Psalm 8:2)

God appointed humans to have dominion over the earth. To rule the earth in harmony with God, with one another, and with nature. Romans 8 tells us the entire creation groans, waiting for all things to be restored to its proper balance, which requires humans to do their assigned job. But this is amazing, since, as Psalm 8 also tells us, humans are lower than angels. So why are humans appointed rather than angels?

The answer is "to silence the enemy and the revengeful." We humans are the "nursing babes." If you see a nursing infant, you know one thing for sure: they are newly arrived. Compared to angels, we are newborns. The angels have been around for eons. But God did not appoint them to rule the earth. He appointed us. Why? Paul expounds on this in his letter to the Ephesians:

"...so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places"
(Ephesians 3:10)

The angels (the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places") have been around for eons. They have been in the presence of God. They have been taught by God. Where then are they looking to understand the manifold wisdom of God? The church, which is the body of those who have

believed on Jesus (John 3:14-16). Angels are watching believers live by faith. That is teaching them things about God that they cannot learn through firsthand experience in the presence of God. This tells us that this short life on earth we have to walk by faith is a very precious time. By excelling still more in faithfulness, the Thessalonians will be gaining the greatest possible benefit of their time on earth.

Part of this angelic gawking at humans to understand God appears to apply to the good angels. But part of it is also to “shut up” the enemy and the revengeful, namely the fallen angel, Satan and his minions. The word “Satan” is not a proper name, it is an occupation. It means “the accuser.”

We as humans have a special purpose. Obviously, right now things are not as they were designed to be. We live in a fallen world. This is acknowledged in Hebrews 2, which quotes Psalm 8 (see commentary on [Hebrews 2:5-8](#) and [2:9](#)). It states that we do not currently see humans crowned with the glory and honor of reigning over the earth as it was intended. Right now, Satan is the prince of the earth (John 14:30). It could be that he was restored to being ruler of the world when Adam fell in the Garden of Eden.

What we do see however is Jesus who has been crowned with glory and honor. He was given all authority over heaven and earth as a result of His obedience to the Father coming to die for the sins of the world (Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:5-10). This makes it certain that He will displace Satan, and take up His reign over the earth (Revelation 12:9-12; 20:1-3).

We follow the example of Jesus when we choose to walk in a manner that is sanctified. When we set aside fleshly desires, and walk in obedience to the Father, we are doing our assigned job through a walk of faith. We shut up Satan, in some way, and in doing so accomplish our very special, cosmically significant assigned task. This is what our Master wants us to do: Do your job. The Church exists to do this job, and that happens when each member does its job for the sake of the whole body (Romans 12:1,4-5). This is God’s will for us, to walk in sanctification, no matter our circumstances.

Israel was also assigned the task of being a holy people, to be sanctified among all other peoples and tribes (Exodus 19:6). They were to be a priestly nation, showing the surrounding nations how to live in a self-governing way, serving one another. A love-based society, rather than a society of exploitation.

Paul provides an explanation of how to live in a sanctified manner. In a nutshell, it is to serve and love rather than exploit and extract. And a primary means of exploitation is sexual. He tells the Thessalonians that *the will of God* is their *sanctification*, which specifically includes that they *abstain from sexual immorality*.

Sexual immorality was something all new Gentile believers likely had to unlearn. The Greek and Roman cultures embraced adultery, temple prostitution, and pursuing physical gratification at the expense of others. Paul urges a different path, *that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God*.

This is the same basic idea as in the letter to the Galatians, to live by the Spirit rather than the Flesh.

Paul shows why choosing *sanctification and honor* rather than *lustful passion* is God's will for how we ought to live: sexually immoral actions *transgress and defraud* our brother or sister. These actions exploit and harm someone else. To extract pleasure from another, while feigning care, is to *transgress* against them. It is to *defraud* them. Not only does this behavior harm other people, it will be punished by God Himself: *the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you*. Sexual immorality is exploitative—it extracts from others for our short-term benefit, and when the LORD returns, He will avenge exploitation.

Further, sexual immorality creates damage to ourselves in this life. As Paul explains in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

“Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.”
(1 Corinthians 6:18)

Just as with any sin, there is a progression of God's wrath. God's wrath is revealed against sin when God allows us to become enslaved to our own lusts, to the point even of our mind becoming depraved, perhaps through addiction (Romans 1:24,26,28). When we choose to sin, we will experience negative consequences (Romans 6:23). Thankfully, Jesus will never reject us due to sin, since He became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). However, we reap the rewards of what we sow: life if we sow to the Spirit, and death if we sow to the flesh (Galatians 6:8).

Believers are set apart to demonstrate how to serve (like Jesus) rather than exploit (like Satan): *For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification*. Again, by *sanctification* Paul means to accomplish the cosmically significant task we have been given to be leaders through serving. To reign as servants, like servant-kings. Focusing on serving a mission that benefits others, rather than a mission to elevate self. When we live a sanctified life, we avoid the *impurity* of sin. Sin is simply walking apart from God's ways. *Impurity* comes from the sewage of the world. Its opposite is *sanctification*.

So, Paul concludes, *he who rejects this command about sexual purity is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you*. He is saying that this is not some rule that he came up with to control other people; it is not a manmade idea to ruin people's fun. It is a law of reality from the one true reality Himself, God, that He designed sex for one meaningful, correct context, and that all other uses of sex are destructive to humankind both individually and generally. We believers reject the Holy Spirit when we choose flesh, when we pursue exploitation of any kind, particularly sexual exploitation. When we walk in the flesh instead of the Spirit, we get the corrupt and destructive consequences or rewards of the flesh (Galatians 6:7-8).

Paul's first tenet of *sanctification* is to remain sexually pure. Why? Because at its base, sexual immorality is about using others for our own pleasure. It is the opposite of love and service. It leads to shattered families and abuse. It leads to human trafficking. It leads to the sex trade.

As Paul states in his first letter to the Corinthian church, sexual sin is worse than other sins, because it is a sin against our own body (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). Pornography is beginning to be called the new addiction. It is imaginary relationships that destroy real relationships. In this same passage, Paul notes that joining our bodies to a prostitute is also joining the Holy Spirit to that prostitute. This demonstrates that sexual intimacy is, at its core, a spiritual activity. It is intended to intertwine two spirits into one. When this is done for exploitation rather than unity, it has enormously severe adverse consequences, negative consequences that corrode our souls. When sexual union is done correctly, it is a thing of great beauty. Sexual union in committed marriage creates a picture of God, and of the intimacy Jesus has with His church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

We can't be fully serving others when we living a pattern of exploitation. We cannot do the job God has given us to be servant leaders if we are following sexual immorality. When we are in sexual immorality, we are doing exactly what the enemy wants us to do. Satan is an exploiter, and wants us to exploit. We serve his ways when we exploit, and help Satan in his hopeless quest to prove God wrong, and attempt to thwart God's plan to elevate humans over him to reign over the earth. We see this basic conflict in the book of Job. God is the one who brings Job to the attention of Satan, essentially saying "Job is a righteous man. He is shutting you up." Fortunately, we are promised in Revelation that God will win:

"And they sang a new song, saying,
'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.
'You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.'" (Revelation 5:9-10)

Paul continues with his picture of sanctification. The opposite of living a life of exploitation is to live a life of "agape" love. He has already exhorted the Thessalonians to "increase and abound in love" for each other and all people (1 Thessalonians 3:12). This "agape" love is a love based on choosing to live out godly values in order to benefit others, regardless of our emotions.

When we speak about "seeking God's will" we often mean "What circumstances can I choose so that I get what I want?" We certainly should not make foolish choices. Our choices are our most important stewardship. But it is much more important how we do what we do than what circumstances we choose (job, school, church, etc.). A key to pursuing being sanctified, which is God's actual will for us, is not to pursue a futile attempt to manipulate circumstances. Sanctification is living in obedience to God's commands, and to loving others, seeking their true best interest in whatever we do, regardless of our circumstances.

Biblical Text

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

6 and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. 8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.