

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8

Brian Orchard, January 6, 2017

We are resuming our study of Paul's very positive letter to the Church in Thessalonica; 1 Thessalonians, Part 2. Paul here is giving a great deal of support and encouragement to the congregation in that area.

Their example had been exemplary – “Their faith, labor of love and patience of hope” was a very fine example to the members there and to other Churches around in the area.

It is clear that Paul is writing this letter to encourage them to engage Jesus Christ as the One they should focus on. And given the environment in which this Church is located that should not be surprising, but it's something all of us need the encouragement to do.

From what Paul is writing here, there are two particular ways that we can see how he's doing that. One is, they have met some difficulties and problems coming out of the culture in which they exist and coming into God's Church. That becomes clear as you read some of the context. And so, Paul is giving them some encouragement of dealing with the physical circumstances that surround them. He is encouraging them to look to Jesus Christ, to look to the bigger picture rather than the immediate, physical circumstances that are at hand.

Secondly, it's very clear that he is directing their hope and their faith towards Jesus Christ in the sense of His return and the resurrection that occurs at His return. Both of these points are captured very well in the last three verses of chapter 3 where Paul says:

1 Thessalonians 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.

12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you (to grow in that spiritual quality that binds them together, that holds them together, that strengthens them. But he says),

13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

The Church in Thessalonica was made up of Gentiles and Jews. And, as we saw in the first study, that is because of the location in Thessalonica; a Gentile area. But it was a very heavily commercial area because of the Roman road that went through there and the natural seaport that was there. It was a strong commercial area and so, although it was located within the Gentile area, it attracted a number of Jews to that particular place. Each group brought unique qualities to the Church. We might call them issues as well as qualities, because some of the things that Paul had to deal with here came from both the Jewish and the Gentile area and presented things that needed to be addressed.

The nature of the location of the city provides some of the issues that had to be worked against in terms of God's people dealing with the society in which they lived. We saw from the first Bible Study that circumcision was certainly an issue. And it was important that the letter that came from the council in Acts chapter 15 be read here to these people, and it was. But clearly from what we're going to see now in the middle of Paul's letter here, is that there were aspects of the Gentile culture that became issues as well. In the sense that we say Gentile culture we may as well be saying pagan culture, because that is really what we're dealing with here.

In chapter 4 here in 1 Thessalonians we specifically address the problem of separation from the idolatrous culture setting in which they were located. It is probable that some of the trials and the difficulties that these people faced came from the withdrawal from this pagan culture in which they were located. In chapter 1, verse 6, we read:

1 Thessalonians 1:6 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit,

The true gospel of God would not have been well received in such a pagan environment.

9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

And that becomes a particular issue here for the Gentile section of the congregation.

10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

So, there you've got a little sense of both the Jewish and the Gentile issues because of the Jewish attitude towards Jesus Christ. But you've got the Gentile problem of coming away from a culture that worshipped idols.

What I'm going to do is read the first eight verses of chapter 4 and then we'll comment on it.

1 Thessalonians 4:1 Finally then, brethren, 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;

And even though Paul says that they've done a great job, that they're exemplary and he lifts them up because of that and encourages them, he keeps saying, "But keep going, keep going forward, keep moving forward. There is still work to be done."

2 for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification:

The whole purpose of calling someone is to remove them from the world, the environment, and bring them into the spiritual body of Christ. And so he refers to sanctification twice here in this particular area.

...that you should abstain from sexual immorality;

4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

6 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.

7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.

8 Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

Now, we need to look at this not just from an historical point of view, which we can do because there's much evidence showing the pagan nature of the culture, the temple worship that went on in some of these cities like Ephesus and Corinth. And you've got the same situation here in Thessalonica. Sexual immorality underpins our society and so it is something that we need to read through contemporary eyes and with a contemporary application, because this is being written for us and for our admonition, as well as it was for the people at that time.

Now, I would just like to make that point because I think it's very applicable to us today to consider this aspect of sexual immorality. This material came to me after I had prepared some of this, but this endorses the whole concept that Paul is trying to bring across here. This is a current article dated December of 2016, and the title is "The Pornographic Worldview of Modern Man". Just a little bit from this because it supports what we've been trying to say here recently about the relativity of this society in which we work. It says:

Pornography is more than images or words; it propagates a specific view of man, morality, and life. It is not at root, about titillation, though that is obviously how peddlers often market it to consumers. To approach pornography merely as the impropriety of certain pictures or descriptions is to miss completely the very real ideology behind it, which is no less than a philosophy of perversion, a worldview of man freed from God and His law, where evil is remade by man into good and Christianity's good, along with its God, is made the new evil. The real horror of pornography is this positive declaration of a new moral ethic. The modern pornographers claim the moral high ground and point an accusing finger at Christian ethics. In this, they are heirs of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, a conscious revival of the man-centered (that is humanistic) thought of the ancient world as a rejection of the God-centered (theistic) thought of Christendom.

And this supports a point that we've been just been trying to make here recently as we think about some of these philosophies and their impact on us today. If you go back to the God-centered thought of Christendom of the time, it was not healthy, it was not right. The Church had an unhealthy view of sex and so you would say that there is a case to be made that the humanistic approach was moving away from error and bringing Enlightenment. But, when man uses his mind to determine what is right and wrong he misses the point, he misses the boat.

But I think we need to understand the point that is being made here of turning things upside down; calling that which is evil good and that which is good evil. That is what is happening in our society. It says:

The Enlightenment thinkers emphasized the supremacy of human reason and saw nature as the source of law, thus allowing themselves the luxury of subjectively picking and choosing what elements of the Christian tradition were reasonable and reflective of the laws of nature. They took the centuries of civilization created by Christianity and glibly assumed its capital could be transferred to the account of the Enlightenment's rationalism.

So, as I say, there is a contemporary aspect to what we're reading here. We live in a world that is very, very similar to the environment of the people who were receiving this letter from the Apostle Paul. The dominant cultural norms of Thessalonica centered on cultic ritual worship involving sexual practices. And so, temple worship did involve immoral sexual practices. Because it was temple worship, though, it was being raised onto a particular level of acceptance because this is the way of worship. Sexual immorality was encouraged. I think we're all familiar with the temple prostitute aspect of worship. Here we have total immorality, but it's being portrayed as a part of a way to worship their gods.

When Paul says here that you should "abstain from sexual immorality" the word is *porneia*. In other words, it was a way of life. *Porneia* isn't one specific sexual practice. It covers those sexual practices that were outside of the will of God, particularly as it

pertains to marriage – sexual practices which don't align with God's purpose and will in regard to sex. I think it would be true to say that our society today is a *porneia* society.

God designed and created sex. It is an aspect of "everything that He had made and indeed it was very good." God created sex and it was very good, which is why I make the point about the Church at the time of the Enlightenment was not portraying sex as something that was very good. It was misrepresenting something that was good that God made. But again, to go from one ditch on this side of the road to another ditch on that side of the road is not appropriate either and that's where human reason often takes us.

Sex has a spiritual purpose as well as a physical purpose. It stems from the fact that God is a family – Elohim, as we're introduced to God in the beginning pages of the Bible. God created man in His own image. He created them male and female. Adam was created from the dust of the ground. But Eve was not. Eve was created from the rib that was taken from the man. She was taken out of the man and when a man and a woman become husband and wife in the sexual union, they become one flesh. Marriage mirrors the unity of the Father/Son family relationship.

The sanctity of this union (I'm using the word sanctity, because that's what Paul used here twice – 'sanctification') is reinforced by Jesus Christ. In Matthew 19, the words of Christ begin in verse 4 where he said:

Matthew 19:4 ..."Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female' (as I just referred to),

5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?

6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

And so, marriage is something that was created by God, not by man. And it is God who joins a man and a woman together to become one flesh.

Sexual immorality is any sexual activity outside of this one-flesh relationship. It breaks the sanctity of the marriage relationship as a type of the God family relationship. And is, in fact, a form of idolatry. And it was an idolatrous society that the Church in Thessalonica found itself in, as we do today. You look at Malachi 2, verse 10, to build the support of the sanctity of this union.

Malachi 2:10 Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?

It's clear that the covenant was made by Israel to God. That it was a marriage covenant as the covenant made between a man and a woman coming into the marriage relationship is a covenant relationship.

11 Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god.

The word 'profaned' here is "*ko-desh*". It refers to that which is sanctified. In the *King James Version*, it is translated holiness. It profanes, it breaks something which God has sanctified and set apart for a holy purpose. Let's go to the book of Jeremiah and just pick up a few thoughts here. The way Jeremiah is written, there are many things throughout this entire book that refer to the marriage relationship and God's attitude towards the marriage relationship.

Jeremiah 2:1 Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

2 "Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord: "I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.

Now, he's talking about Israel and he's talking about when they came to him and made that original marriage covenant.

3 Israel was holiness to the Lord, the firstfruits of His increase.

Israel was holiness to the Lord. Now, if we come to chapter 3, verse 14, there is a statement made here by God:

Jeremiah 3:14 "...for I am married to you.

So, God regarded Israel as His bride and the relationship between the two of them as a marriage. In verse 20:

20 Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel," says the Lord.

21 A voice was heard on the desolate heights, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel. For they have perverted their way; They have forgotten the Lord their God.

It gives us a view from God's mind towards the sanctity of marriage or how He regards marriage. Now, in chapter 7, verse 8, there are some thoughts here that just may as well have been Paul's words to the Church in Thessalonica.

Jeremiah 7:8 "Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit.

9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know,

10 and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'?

What I guess we see from Paul's writings to the Church in Thessalonica is, that some of those who have come out of that pagan culture and were called by God and come into the Church had not completely let go some of the immoral practices because in that former worship it was a part of the way they worshipped their gods. It was very hard for them to let go of that. And they have come into God's presence ("stand before Me in this house") and say these things are okay. Some of these immoral practices they have not completely rejected or completely let go. If we look still in Jeremiah chapter 29:23:

Jeremiah 29:23 because they have done disgraceful things in Israel, have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken lying words in My name, which I have not commanded them. Indeed I know, and am a witness, says the Lord.

There is a sanctified quality to marriage. As I said, there is a spiritual aspect to marriage as well as a physical aspect. It's not just a physical relationship. Now, as I said, Paul refers twice to sanctification which is a state of purity or holiness within a marriage relationship. Leviticus 11, verse 44, this is something for us to be very mindful of because the subject of Leviticus 11, as you just begin the chapter and read through it, is clean and unclean meats. But if you look at the last part of this chapter, it says:

Leviticus 11:44 For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy.

They were to regard themselves as being holy. They were to consecrate themselves, sanctify themselves; set themselves apart.

...Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

45 For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

This is a point that is being made by clean and unclean meat. Every time that you approach the subject of clean and unclean food and you have to make a decision as to whether something is clean and can be eaten or unclean and can't be eaten, you're doing something that is to remind you of a higher spiritual level.

46 'This is the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that creeps on the earth,

47 to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten.'"

Each time that we apply the law of clean and unclean food, we're reminding ourselves that we are to consecrate ourselves to be holy because God is holy. We're being reminded of that.

Leviticus 18:24 'Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you.

That is an aspect of why God cleansed the land He told Israel to enter into and wiped out the land because they had been involved in gross, sexual immorality. This chapter, if you began reading from verse 1, is a list of laws regarding sexual morality and things not to be done within a marriage relationship. 'Do not defile yourselves with any of these things', God is saying.

Leviticus 18:3 According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.

4 You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God.

5 You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.

A way to be sanctified is through obedience to God's laws and those laws in particular that refer to sexual morality, as we're looking at it here. Chapter 19 verse 2, still here in Leviticus:

Leviticus 19:2 "Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Sexual immorality defiles holiness, the holiness of a covenant contract with God. It is God who binds a man and a woman as husband and wife and we say that clearly in our marriage ceremony within the Church. It is a divine institution and we need to remember that and keep that in the front of our minds in this society in which we live today where there are hostile forces to the sanctity of a marriage relationship. And we know who the author of that is.

Let's come back now to 1 Thessalonians 4 and see a little more powerfully the words that Paul spoke here.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 ...that you should abstain from sexual immorality;

4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

We should seek to lift our marriages onto that level of sanctification. I'm not talking about the specifics of what a husband and wife in the privacy of their marriage bed can or can't do. I'm not getting into that. I'm just talking about the aspect of marriage itself and how we view it. Raise it onto that level of sanctification, as Paul is trying to do here.

5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

This society of ours has a great deal of eroticism and that is one of the 'isms' that I referred to recently in a sermon. It is portrayed in our society as an art form. Now, that's a lie God, is saying in some of those scriptures out of Jeremiah, because eroticism is anything that causes sexual feelings. And that is something that we are to avoid and that's where pornography comes into the picture. It's a pornographic world view. There's much out there in our society that is wrong and encourages wrong thinking. That's not to be brought into a marriage. Man is to regard his wife in sanctification and honor. Not get involved in some of the sexually perverted practices that are out there in this world, that this world is telling you is just normal.

When a man and a woman in a marriage relationship engage in a sexual activity, both should feel good about it afterwards; clean and honorable. The marriage bed is undefiled.

Man was created to have a relationship with God. Marriage pictures and portrays and teaches us of that relationship. The sanctity of the marriage relationship builds and strengthens. Sexual immorality tears down and destroys, which is exactly why Satan has fashioned a culture of sexual immorality. Sexual immorality affects the mind. There's just no two ways around that. It does affect the mind and gives the person a different view and a different outlook.

Thessalonica's cultural setting is our cultural setting. Remember, it's a culture of eroticism, as I said. Anything that creates sexual feelings. One final quote here from this article on 'Pornographic World View':

Western culture since the Enlightenment has been recreating itself with each generation's image of man. (And I tried to portray that recently in a sermon on relativism.) As that humanistic image is clarified, man becomes less and less the caretaker of culture and more its destroyer. Man's image of himself has created a desire for pleasure and gratification. Pornography is one expression of man's desire to live in terms of his every urge.

That is the society in which we live. I'm just being honest and brutal about it. God has called us to holiness, a separation from the prevailing culture. That is what Paul is writing about here and the setting within Thessalonica is a very good teaching setting for us, because we live in a very similar cultural setting and God has called His people to sanctification and holiness and it is something for us to think about within our marriage relationships. ♦