

Making God Smile

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Date: 08 August 2021

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to dive into First Thessalonians chapter 4.

The title of this sermon is Making God Smile. This section of Paul's letter that George read for us earlier, it's all about application.

And so I just want to take a minute and reflect on that. We often think that we shouldn't be told what to do as Christians.

We don't like to be told what to do. Well, maybe some of us really like to be told, just tell me what to do and I'll follow the rules. But some of us, myself included, would be a little bit more like, whoa, I don't want any rules here.

I just want the good news of what Jesus did for me and then to kind of go live my life. But Paul, in this portion of the letter, is giving us commands from God.

[0 : 59] By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in the authority of Jesus, he's telling us what to do. And that might make us a little uncomfortable.

But before we look at the commands in chapter 4, we need to look at the gospel in chapter 1. Why? Because God never says to us, earn my smile.

He says, in Jesus, you have it. God never says to us, obey me and then I'll free you.

He says, I have freed you, so you can obey me. We have to see what Jesus has done for us before we can address how we are to live for Him.

And remember, this isn't a textbook, right? This is a letter. This is a real letter from a real person 2,000 years ago to a real church plant in a little place called Thessalonica.

[2 : 01] And letters originally were not intended, surprise, to be studied over the course of several weeks in small chunks. What do you do with a letter? Open it and then you read it.

And then you put it down and you think about it. And that was the original way this was kind of intended. This is the way it would have been received by its, well, its recipients. And even the chapter and verse numbers were only added many hundreds of years after Paul lived.

So all that means that chapter 4 was never meant to be read out of context of chapter 1. The application, the commands are never meant to be split apart from the gospel that Jesus has freed us.

So chapter 1 shows us that the church in Thessalonica, this little church plant, is a community of people who've been radically transformed by the good news of what Jesus has done for them. Specifically, Paul says that he loved them and he chose them. So if you have your Bibles, you can flip to chapter 1 or turn on your phone or whatever. We're just going to look at verse 4 for just a moment.

[3 : 11] In 1 Thessalonians 1, 4, Paul calls them brothers loved by God. A couple things to say on that. One, brothers is not a gender exclusive term in this context.

So women, you're not left out. It's just like in America, in the North, we won't say you guys. And where, you know, it is masculine, but in Greek grammar, it's this encompassing language.

In other words, men, women who believe in Jesus, you're loved by God. You ever let that sink in? You ever just marvel that the person who created all the beauty in the universe, everything, knows you and loves you?

Second, also in verse 4 of chapter 1, Paul says that we are chosen by God. He's God Almighty.

[4 : 13] He could have chosen anybody. He chose you. And really, that's just the gospel, isn't it? Loved by God, chosen by God.

He loved you by sending his own son to pay the price for every wrong you've ever done and ever will do. And God chose you for what?

Adoption to bring you into his family and make you his children. And every command that we're about to hear from chapter 4 only flows out of this reality that God gives us commands because he loves us.

God gives us commands because we belong to him and we were chosen. So we never obey to earn his love. We never obey to become God's children.

We obey because he loves us, because he already chose us. So now let's turn to chapter 4 and we'll look at these commands. Now this chapter 4 verses 1 to 12 divides neatly into two sections.

[5 : 18] So there will be two points to the sermon. The first section is verses 1 to 8 and that will be please God more and more in purity. And the second section is verses 9 to 12, love each other more and more.

Let me read again from verses 1 to 8. Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body and holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who don't know God, 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.

For God has not called us for impurity but in holiness. For whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Paul is saying to the church, y'all, you're doing really well. Now more and more, keep going, there's another step for you.

[6 : 41] We've never arrived. Not yet. Not this side of the resurrection anyway. There's always one more step to take in God's grace for God's glory, isn't there?

Now I want to talk for a moment about the will of God. You may have noticed that in verse three. He says this is the will of God. And how many of us, when we're facing a big decision, huge pivotal moment in life, we want to know the will of God, don't we?

What is the thing that God has for me? What's that next step I should take? What's the will of God? Well, as Christians, we don't throw a dice to find out God's will, right? We don't cast lots.

And God doesn't usually speak audibly from heaven and say, you know, change careers or marry this person, right? God is actually honored when we prayerfully use the intelligence and the experience that he's given us and the wisdom in our communities to navigate the big decisions of life.

God likes that. God wants us to be engaged in our lives at that level. But we do know very clearly what God's will is for us.

[7 : 57] Verse three, this is the will of God, your sanctification. That's just a really church word, right? Sanctification to grow in holiness, to grow in purity, to grow in how you're set apart from everything that's ungodly and set apart to God.

God's will is that we grow in holiness. So whatever your job, your career, whomever you date, whomever you marry, wherever you choose to live, to move, God's will is in that place with that person and that circumstance that you grow in holiness, that you ask him to help you take that next step more and more.

So when faced with one of these big pivotal decisions in life, in those big kind of key moments of life, you can ask yourself, if I make this decision, can I grow in holiness?

Can I grow in purity with this person? Can I grow more like Jesus in that job? Paul specifically applies this idea to the sexual ethic of the church.

So the will of God is that your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality. Each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who don't know God.

[9 : 27] So society today, he's doing a contrast, right? When he's talking about the Gentiles, he's just saying, we're talking about the household of God and not the household of man. So he's contrasting, he says, the household of God shouldn't look like the rest, which frankly in his day looks a lot like it does in our day.

Sexually promiscuous and permissive. Jesus's church is called from that society into a new society, which employs, which lives by an entirely different ethic.

For the world, sexuality is an expression of yourself. Sexuality is an appetite. And the relationship between intimacy and commitment has eroded, if not vanished altogether.

But for the church, sexuality is an expression of the Christ-like union of intimacy and commitment. It's not about expressing yourself.

It's about giving yourself to someone to whom you are entirely, fully, forever committed. And that's beautiful.

[10 : 46] And it matters, right? It's not arbitrary. God doesn't call us to purity just because he wants a community that's really kind of tightly wound up and constrained by rules.

It matters because it's how God relates to us. God when dealing with us never divorces intimacy and commitment.

Everyone whom God gives himself to, he fully commits to, which is such good news. So, the Christian sexual ethic is not just physical.

It's theological. The way that we express our sexuality says something about God. And it says something about the gospel, not just about physical and emotional appetites or an expression of how we feel.

And the phrase in verse three, sexual immorality, is just one word in Greek. It's the word porneia. And that means it's a catch-all phrase. It means the misuse of our sexuality.

[11 : 56] So it's not just one thing. It's any misuse of it. It's sex before marriage. It's sex outside of marriage. It's self-serving sexuality inside marriage. It's lust.

It's pornography, et cetera. But notice Paul doesn't say, God's will is your sanctification. Total abstinence. That's not the point.

Sexuality isn't wrong. It's misuse is wrong. So when Paul talks about God's will, our holiness, he's not just talking about refraining from something.

He's actually saying two things. One, don't misuse your sexuality, right? Refrain. But two, do properly use your sexuality. There's an active component to this.

And it's proper place, it's not self-serving, it's self-giving. It's not just satiating a physical appetite. In its proper place, our sexuality is holy because it's designed by God.

[12 : 57] It's given to us by God to say something about God. Now Paul, what's his rationale for saying this, right? This is the command.

And we understand this. Refrain from sexual immorality. But what's his reasoning that he gives for this command? Now he would be correct if he were to say that misusing our sexuality causes social harm.

That's an accurate statement. And the modern pornography industry has horribly harmed our society. Secular sociologists and psychologists agree with that as well.

When he does mention this in verse 6, he says, no one wrong his brother in this. Sexual immorality is inherently to do wrong to our brothers and sisters.

There is no harmless sexual sin. There is no sexual sin that only harms you. You do not exist in a vacuum.

[14 : 02] Sexual immorality turns the objects of our lusts into objects, something less than human, not image bearers of God, just things.

But Paul doesn't spend a whole lot of time talking about that. That's actually not the basis for the command. It's not the rationale. Now Paul would also be correct in saying that misusing our sexuality causes psychological harm.

It absolutely does. Because of this kind of immorality, forged neuron pathways that lead to something very like addiction. It's very hard to break.

And it brings with it a tremendous amount of crippling shame. Whole generations are suffering from the psychological harm induced by the modern normalizing of sexual immorality.

But Paul doesn't spend time on that either. So what is the basis for this call to purity, to holiness? Well, let me read 3 verses 2.

[15 : 07] First is chapter 3, verse 13. This is the end of Paul's prayer for the church plant. He says, so that he, Jesus, may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with his saints.

The Lord is coming back. His return is imminent. He's on his way. We don't know when.

But that's part of his rationale, isn't it? Jesus is coming back. Don't live like this is all there is. Live like the King is coming.

Chapter 4, verse 6, another rationale. He says, because, he's saying, don't harm your brothers in this way, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things.

The Lord Jesus is the avenger of all who have been sexually mistreated and harmed. So if you objectify someone sexually, if you harm someone sexually, the Lord will not turn a blind eye.

[16:18] We need to know that. Conversely, if you have been mistreated in that way, God is on your side.

He's your avenger. The Lord Jesus will put it right. Lastly, chapter 4, verse 8, Paul says, therefore, whoever disregards this, this command, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

In other words, this is not just a good idea. This is not a suggestion. It's a command from God.

If Jesus loved you and chose you and transformed your heart with the gospel, if he's paid for your sins, if he's adopted you into his family, then you belong to him. He's your King.

He's your Lord. He's your God. You're his and he's yours. To dismiss and disregard the Christian sexual ethic is to dismiss and disregard God himself.

[17:28] God help us not to do that. Now Jesus knows that he's calling us to this radical ethic in the midst of a promiscuous and permissive society, which means this is not going to be easy.

Let's not kid ourselves. Obeying this command will be very difficult. We know this. That's why we need to hear the end of verse 8.

I love this. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

The Greek grammar is important and fascinating to me when it says who gives. That phrase is crucial. It's a present active participle, if you're a nerd and know what that means or care.

Present active participle. In other words, God is right now continually, seriously, right now sending his Spirit to you.

[18:31] That's his posture toward you is giving God to you. We don't just have the good news of what Jesus did for us in the past.

We have God the Holy Spirit with us right now continually sent from the Father to help in time of need.

We say the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit of holiness. He is deeply holy and he is way more committed to your and my growth in holiness than we are, which is actually really good news because my commitment fluctuates.

I don't know about yours, but the Holy Spirit is continually being poured out on you and he deeply cares and he's committed to you.

So you're in really good hands. That's point number one, grow in purity more and more. Point number two, verses nine to 12, love each other more and more.

[19:36] Look at verse nine. Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write to you. It's not great. There's a church that Paul can say, I barely even need to mention this.

Love is just, it's the climate in this church. You have no need for anyone to write to you. For you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.

For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. So we urge you brothers to do this more and more, to aspire to live.

So what follows is how Paul wants them to grow in loving the brothers, right? To aspire to live quietly, mind your own affairs and work with your hands as we instructed you so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Again, they're doing really well, right? This church plant is just doing great. But again, there's always room to take that next step, to see the smile spread across God's face as he looks at your church.

[20:48] More and more, he says, keep going, keep growing. It's deeply encouraging. There's a lot that we could pull apart. I just want to look at three aspects of this passage briefly.

One is to aspire to live quietly, mind your own affairs and work with your hands. So what does it mean to aspire to live quietly?

The set of words seems to be political in nature. So I was talking about the public square. But to live a quiet life can't mean to keep your beliefs to yourself.

Paul is not telling us to be closet Christians. We're not to hide our faith, right? In chapter 1, verse 8, Paul says that he's thrilled that the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and

Achaia.

So somehow the word is sounding forth and Paul's telling them to live a quiet life. What's that about? Well, how did the word of God sound forth from them?

[21 : 55] It was primarily by this church's reception of the gospel and not primarily by their proclamation of the gospel. Sure, they were preaching, but the way that Jesus was glorified by this church primarily was by their life.

It's how they lived, it's how they received Jesus and lived the faith. In chapter 1, verse 6, Paul says it was their imitation of the apostles, right?

They saw what it was like to live a holy life, and then they went and did likewise. It was the reception of the word in affliction, and it was their joy in the Holy Spirit.

In verse 9 of chapter 1, Paul says it was their hospitality, how they welcomed ministers into their church, how they turned to God from idols, and how they're waiting expectantly for Jesus to come back.

In other words, Paul's not telling us not to speak up for Jesus. Paul's telling us to live lives that speak louder than any words we might shout.

[23 : 00] The way we live really matters. It's actually really encouraging. You can live a quiet life, and you probably think, all my efforts at doing good things, good works, go unnoticed.

But actually, God's saying, no. He uses the way that you live, the way, church, that you have received the gospel, the way that you love each other here in this community is radiating outward from St. Columbus, throughout Edinburgh, throughout Scotland, Nashville, Tennessee.

It's making a big difference. Keep going. More and more. Now, mind your own affairs.

Just from the mouth of Paul, he says, mind your business. Don't be a busybody. Pay more attention to your own problems than to the problems of others.

That's a little cutting for me. I don't know if you feel that way. Maybe we need to spend more time thinking about how we manage our own households, for instance, than about how others do, or maybe then about how the government manages their budgets or what have you.

[24 : 20] You're probably not, but if you're on Twitter like I am, maybe it means that we don't need to give an opinion on everything. I don't think the world needs to know what I think about Simone Biles and the Olympics.

I don't think it matters. In fact, that's probably divisive for no reason, right? To live a quiet life and mind our own affairs means to let ourselves be thoroughly transformed by the gospel and not to pick unnecessary fights in the public square.

Let Christ and him crucified be the only stumbling block we stand on. Let Calvary be the only hill we die on.

Lastly, Paul says to work with your hands. Now, he's not saying that manual labor is the best kind of labor. He's not advocating that everyone become a plumber or a carpenter or a stone mason.

The emphasis isn't on hands, right? Work with your hands. The emphasis falls on the word work.

Work with your hands. It's the answer to the implicit question, what should I do with these?

[25 : 34] Work with them. It's the opposite of being idle with your hands. You know the saying, right? Idle hands are the devil's workshop.

Isn't that true? So Paul says that the way that we love each other, he's talking to a church community. The way that we love each other is not to present any unnecessary points of division that aren't Jesus to the world.

Not to pick fights that we don't need to fight. Not to die on hills we don't need to die. To mind our affairs and give voice to what really matters.

And to busy ourselves. Not to be idle. So in conclusion, King Jesus this morning is giving us these two commands.

Grow in purity and grow in love for one another. Don't forget the tone.

[26 : 41] Jesus isn't standing with an angry finger and a sanctimonious frown. I think he's smiling. He's saying more and more.

You're doing really well. There's more. Further up and further in. There's a lot more I could say here, but let's end with this. Right before our passage in chapter 4, so the end of chapter 3, Paul speaks of Jesus' return and right after this passage he speaks again of Jesus' return.

This is, it's a Jesus coming back sandwich. And he is, he's coming back. Jesus, the avenger of the misused and abused.

Jesus the judge. And his will for us is to grow into a radiant community of purity and love. And his commands are for our deepest good. He's given us all we need to take that next step. It's not like he's given us the commands, but we're unable completely to do anything with them that would be cruel.

[27 : 50] He's paid for our sins. He's transformed our hearts so that we can love him so we even want to obey him. He sends his spirit to live with us, to help us, and he's given us this really clear pattern to follow, so won't you take the next step today?

He'll help you. Now if you're here, or if you're watching online and you don't consider yourself a Christian, I understand this has been a very in-house sermon.

This isn't what you call an evangelistic sermon. This has been primarily for the household of God, but I hope that you can see something about the nature of this community.

What Jesus is calling the church to is beautiful. And I hope you can see the beauty and seriousness of our King, Jesus, who stands up for the abused, Jesus who sets us free, Jesus who pays the price of our sins, but doesn't give us a free pass to keep on dismissing him and harming each other.

That's the Jesus we worship. He's so deeply good. And if you'll just trust him to be those things for you, he will be.

[29 : 15] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we come to you not to hang out with you at church, but to worship you.

We come to express our devotion to you, not so that you'll save us, but because you have saved us.

And so we've been confronted by your word today. You've given us a charge. You've given us something to do, a duty. And Lord, it's our pleasure to do it because we love you, because we've seen all you've done for us, and you let us obey and take these next steps in purity and love, not to earn your smile, but from your smile, knowing we can just see it spread across your face more and more.

So would you help us? By your Holy Spirit, would you help us to grow in purity, to grow in love for one another? Would you make clear what next steps we need to take by your grace and for your glory?

And it's just for your glory, Lord. That's why it's not so that we can look good and squeaky clean. It's so that the world around us who doesn't understand the gospel can look at how we live and see the gospel.

[30 : 46] Amen.