



RESOUNDING FAITH | INSTILLING DEVOTION

October 20, 2024

We are in the midst of a series focused on the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and the central theme of this letter, from beginning to end, is the power of the gospel to revolutionize and change our individual and corporate lives. Whether you're living in a pre-Christian culture like that of the Thessalonians or a post-Christian world like our own, when you place the gospel at the center of your heart and your life, it unleashes the power of God in the world.

Background

So here's the backstory. Paul traveled to the large seaport town of Thessalonica, located 200 miles north of Athens, and quite unexpectedly, a handful of people from a Jewish background and even more people from a Greco-Roman, pagan background welcomed Paul and his companions and received the message of the gospel for themselves, despite the opposition that they faced. And as a result, people from literally hundreds of miles around reported back to Paul the surprising news that the Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living and true God who has made himself known in the person of Jesus. And now several months have passed since Paul was in Thessalonica with them, and like a good pastor, Paul writes a letter addressing some of the specific questions and concerns he knows the Thessalonians have based on a report that he has received from his colleague, Timothy.

I know we've all had the experience of overhearing someone talking on the phone, and even though we can't hear what the other person is saying on the other side of the call, we can piece together the conversation, and that's a little bit of what's going on here. We only hear one side of the conversation. We can only hear what Paul is saying in response to the specific questions that he was asked, but we get the gist of what's going on. And one of the distinctive features of 1 Thessalonians is how often Paul refers back to what he had taught them when he was living among them. For example, he says in 1 Thessalonians 4:2, "For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus." He gave them instructions. And that reminds us that when God calls us into a relationship with Himself, he doesn't merely ask us to believe certain things to be true but to live our lives a certain way in response to his grace. And all of that shows us that when Paul was living among the Thessalonians, he did not merely share with them the essence of the gospel; he also shared with them the essence of the good life lived in response to the gospel.

So here you have a group of people who, at this point, have probably only been Christians for a matter of months, but they're trying to figure out how to live out an authentic Christian identity while living in a Greco-Roman city where their friends and their neighbors and their colleagues believe very different things about the world than they do now. So they're confused, and they report their confusion back to Paul. And if you were them, what do you think you would be confused about? What questions would you want to ask Paul?

Well, they let Paul know exactly what they're grappling with, and they tell him that they're confused about sex, they're confused about work, and they're confused about death. Now that's about as foundational as it gets: sex, work, and death. So Paul proceeds to answer their questions about each of those topics in turn, and that will become our theme for the next three weeks: sex, work, and death. Although today I'll try to keep it PG.

The first thing that Paul does is tackle the topic of sex, but he frames it all under the category of sanctification. So he says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "For this is God's will for you, your sanctification." Now that's a very strong statement. Have you ever wondered, "What is God's will for my life? What does God want for me?" Well, here it is. Here's the answer: your sanctification. But that's a very churchy word, isn't it? What does it mean? In order to answer that question, we're going to have to break that down. So as we turn to 1 Thessalonians 4, I'd like us to consider three things this morning regarding sanctification: 1) *what it is*, 2) *why we need it*, and 3) *how we get it*.

¹Finally, 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. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that 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. ⁷For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

What It Is

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification." So the first question we need to ask ourselves is what does that mean? The word sanctification comes from the root which simply means "holy." So sanctification is the process – the gradual, progressive process – of becoming more holy. But therein lies the problem. Because who wants to be holy? Most people would say, "I don't want to be holy. I want to be happy. I don't want to be restricted. I certainly don't want to become uptight or dull. I don't want to be holier than thou. I want to let loose and have fun." So it's understandable if you might feel that way, but I think most of us have the wrong idea when it comes to what the word holiness actually means.

Holiness might connote this idea of being cold or detached, reserved, perhaps humorless or unapproachable. We might think of holy people as those who cut themselves off from others because they don't want to be tainted by anything or anyone that might be broken. But that can't be right. You know why? Because Jesus was the holiest person who ever lived, and he wasn't cold, detached, or unapproachable. No, he was warm and engaging, and he pursued people. He pursued people even though they'd made a mess of their lives. He wasn't afraid of being contaminated by them. He loved them. So Jesus lived an utterly holy life, and yet his life was simultaneously absolutely beautiful. And that's the kind of life that we long for. That's the kind of life we were made for. That's the kind of life that we aspire to.

And we will never become the people that we were created to be unless and until we make becoming like Jesus — holy like Jesus — the central passion of our lives.

So let me see if I can change the way in which we think about this word “holiness.” Probably the most common definition of what it means to be holy is to be set apart. Have you heard that before? People would say, “To be holy means to be set apart.” There’s an awful lot of truth to that, and yet, at the same time that idea of being set apart is what introduces this idea of separation or distance or being removed. So how should we think about what it means to be holy in terms of how God is holy?

Of course, it’s true that God is separate from sin and God is separate from human beings. God is in a category all by himself. But the pastor and theologian Sinclair Ferguson wrote a book about this, suggesting that to think of holiness in terms of being set apart is to approach the question from the wrong end and to put the emphasis on the wrong space. Because if you think about it, there was a time before human beings existed, before sin entered the world. And yet God has been and always will be holy. So if we take human beings and sin out of the picture for a minute and just think about the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — what does it mean for the Triune God to be holy from before the beginning of time, when there was nothing to be separated from? What does it mean to say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — the Triune God — is holy? Ferguson writes:

“We mean the perfectly pure devotion of each of these three persons to the other two – absolute, permanent, exclusive, pure, irreversible, and fully expressed devotion...It is not something mechanical, or formal, or legal, or even performance-based. It is personal. In a sense ‘holiness’ is a way of describing LOVE. To say that ‘God is love’ and that ‘God is holy’ ultimately is to point to the same reality. Holiness is the intensity of love that flows within the very being of God, among and between each of the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...If this is what holiness means in God, then in us it must also be a corresponding DEEPLY PERSONAL, INTENSE, LOVING DEVOTION to him – a belonging to him that is irreversible, unconditional, without any reserve on our part. Simply put, it means being entirely his, so that all we do and possess are his. We come to think all of our thoughts and build our lives on this foundation...To be holy, to be sanctified, therefore, to be a ‘saint,’ is in simple terms to be devoted to God.”

So in short, holiness means being fully devoted to God. So the next time you’re in a Bible study and somebody says, “Well, to be holy means to be set apart,” you can say, “Yes, but the essence of holiness is not separation but rather devotion.”

I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of going into a New York City restaurant and we spot the perfect table in the corner next to the windows, and just as we’re about to ask the host if we could have that table, we notice there’s a little sign, and it says “reserved.” It’s been devoted to someone else. And you see the moment that you put your faith in Jesus, He places a sign over you that says, “reserved,” “devoted to me.” The reason why you’re set apart, the reason why you’re distinct is because God has wholly devoted himself to you. He’s made you the object of his holy love, and now he calls you to love Him in return with a love that is personal and intense. He devotes himself to you so that you might devote yourself to Him in return, and that’s how

we become progressively more and more like him. So what is sanctification? It is the process of becoming holy, meaning becoming wholly devoted to God. The reason why God sets his love on you is so that you would become more and more like him.

Why We Need It

But the second question we have to ask ourselves is: Why do we need it? If that is sanctification, why do we need it? And the answer is because this is God's will. This is God's purpose. This is God's goal for you. This is your destiny. It is impossible to be a Christian who is united to Jesus by faith and not progressively become more like Him. The problem is we all have a long, long way to go. We have a long way to go in terms of becoming holy like Jesus, and that is in part why Paul spends so much time giving us very practical instructions on how to think about sex, or work, or death from the standpoint of the gospel.

But first of all, he focuses on this topic of sex. In verse 3, he urges his readers to abstain from sexual immorality. Now that phrase is actually one word in the Greek, and it's the Greek word *porneia*, which forms the root for the English word pornography. And in the ancient world, *porneia* was a technical term that ruled out of bounds any and all sexual intimacy that took place outside of the context of marriage between one man and one woman. So *porneia* was this umbrella term that covered it all: premarital sex, extramarital sex, infidelity, adultery, prostitution, you name it. That was *porneia*. And so Paul is calling us to abstain from all forms of sexual immorality.

Now you might wonder, why does Paul focus on sex? Is he just being uptight and prudish? Does he delight in being restrictive? And the answer is no. The fact of the matter is that our holiness is often expressed in and through our bodies. As human beings, we are, of course, more than our physical bodies, but we are not less than our physical bodies. Our bodies are part and parcel of who we are, and therefore what we do in our bodies matters.

But the other reason why Paul focuses on sex at this point, let's not forget, is because they asked him to. The Thessalonians were confused. They didn't know how to think about this. They've only been Christians for a matter of mere months. This whole way of understanding the world around them is completely foreign to them. They need guidance and they need instruction. Just think about the kind of world that they were living in.

Greco-Roman society had social rules when it came to sex, they were just completely different from our own in our own world today. See, in the ancient world, sex was ultimately tied up with power. And you know what that meant? It meant that the body of a free Roman man was sacrosanct. Completely off limits. You couldn't touch it. But he could do whatever he wanted with whomever he wanted whenever he wanted. It didn't matter male, female, slave, free. It didn't matter how old or how young. No matter what he did, there were no repercussions. No matter what he did, there was no damage to his honor. But that was not true if you flip things around the other way.

So in Roman society, women were often handed over to be married at the tender age of 12, sometimes even younger, and wives were expected to be absolutely, completely

faithful to their husbands in order to manage their household and to provide these Roman men with legitimate heirs. But almost everyone else was not only allowed but *expected* to be wildly promiscuous. Which meant that many men had mistresses, if not concubines, and the institution of slavery made it very easy to have concubines in the ancient world. Pagan temples doubled as brothels for sacred prostitution. So in these Greco-Roman cities like Thessalonica, there would have been thousands of male and female prostitutes, and people considered it their religious duty to sleep with them. This led one historian to write that there probably has never been a period when vice was as extravagant and uncontrolled as during the Roman Empire. But Jesus changed all that. Jesus changed all that by calling his followers to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.

And here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul picks up and expands Jesus' teachings. So beginning in verse 4, for example, he exhorts us to know how to control our bodies in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles, like the pagans, who do not know God. And based on verse 6, it's possible that Paul has caught wind, perhaps through his colleague Timothy, that some of the people in the church in Thessalonica are having affairs with one another. They're stealing each other's spouses, which is why he writes, let "no one transgress and wrong his brother or his sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger of all these things." And of course even in marriage it's possible for one partner to take advantage of his or her spouse, which is why Paul also taught that we should never use our spouse to gratify our own needs.

Now why is this important? Well, Christianity is often denounced as being patriarchal and sexist, but that is not at all how it was perceived in the ancient world. Rodney Stark is a sociologist who wrote a book called "The Rise of Christianity," and he tries to account for how Christianity spread like wildfire throughout the Mediterranean world and suddenly overturned all the values of the Greco-Roman world, almost literally overnight. One of the things that he observes is that women embraced the new faith in greater proportion than men in the first few centuries of the early church, and the reason why is because women found within the Christian Church a new and rare dignity. You know why? Because Christianity got rid of all the double standards. Christian men were expected to be as faithful to their wives as their wives were to them, and women were afforded the same rights, the same responsibilities, the same pleasures as men. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul equally stresses the obligations of husbands to their wives as wives to their husbands, especially as it relates to sex. This was revolutionary stuff. Christianity not only purified but equalized the marriage bed. And the symmetry in the relationship between husbands and wives in Christianity was unlike anything the ancient world had ever seen.

So don't let anyone tell you that the biblical sexual ethic is negative and life-denying. It's not. It is positive. It is life-giving. It is life-affirming. And that is why people flocked to Christianity when it first emerged upon the Mediterranean world.

How We Get It

But if that is what sanctification is — this process of progressively becoming more holy, more like Jesus — and the reason why we need it is because we've got such a long way to go, how do we actually get it? How do we become devoted to God in every aspect of our lives? Well, let me point something out. In 1 Thessalonians 2:12,

Paul writes, “Walk in a manner worthy of God.” And here in chapter 4, verse 1, he says, “Finally, then, brothers and sisters, 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.” And what you need to realize is that when Paul calls us to live our lives in a way that is consistent with the gospel, he’s not telling you to become something that you’re not, but rather he’s telling you to become who you already are by God’s grace. And perhaps no one understood this better than the late fourth century pastor and theologian Augustine.

Augustine wrote an autobiography entitled “The Confessions,” and in this autobiography, he is quite candid about his struggles with sexual sin and temptation, especially when he was a younger man. He wasn’t a Christian until later in life. He becomes a Christian while living in Milan under the influence of a well known preacher named Ambrose, and then he returns to his native North Africa, and he reconnects with a former concubine. Now this story might be apocryphal, but nevertheless it fits the narrative that Augustine tells about himself. And the story goes like this: Augustine reconnects with this former mistress, and she tries to lure him back into bed. She wants to pick things up where they had left off, but Augustine is unresponsive to her advances, which leaves her feeling a little confused. “Augustine, what’s going on?” Maybe he doesn’t recognize me. Maybe he doesn’t remember me. So she says, “Augustine, it is I.” And Augustine responds by saying, “Yes, but it is not I.” She says, “Augustine, look, it’s me. Remember? Remember me? Look, it’s me.” And Augustine says, “Yes, I know it’s you. I can see you. I know you, but it is not me. I’m not the same person anymore. Now that the gospel has come into my life, I’ve received a whole new identity.”

See, Augustine understood that the gospel changes the motivations of the heart. A moralist will say, “I obey, and therefore God will accept me.” In fact, a moralist might even say, “God is obligated to accept me. If I obey all the rules, then God is obligated to bless me and to make my life go well.” So the moralist says, “I obey and therefore God accepts me.” The relativist, by contrast, says, “Well it doesn’t really matter how I live my life because God will love me and accept me no matter what.” But a Christian says, “God accepts me despite my sin, in and through Jesus, and therefore I obey.” See, the moralist says, “I obey, therefore God accepts me.” The Christian says, “God accepts me, therefore I obey.” Therefore I strive to love Him, serve Him, please Him, not in order to try to win God’s love, but as the demonstration that I already have it. So what motivates the Christian is not the sense of duty or obligation or guilt or fear but rather gratitude and joy for what you’ve already received from his hand. He gives you a whole new identity, and then he simply calls you to live out that new truth.

So think about how this relates to sanctification and the process of becoming holy. Most of us understand that you become a Christian by relying on Jesus rather than yourself for your standing before God. But then we make the mistake of thinking that the way in which we grow as a Christian, the way in which we become more holy, is by relying on ourselves and our own hard work and effort. Jonathan Edwards said that most people view their sins as a failure of willpower which needs to be corrected by greater self control. So if you really screw up, if you make a mistake, if you fail, well then you have to try harder. Or if you’ve done something wrong, you’ve got to tell

yourself, “This is wrong. There’s going to be consequences.” In other words, you wait on your will in order to try to change.

But all the great theologians — from the apostle Paul to Augustine and down through to the present day — have said that the way in which we experience true, lasting change in our lives is not through a greater exertion of willpower but rather through a change of heart. The way in which we really change is by experiencing a sense of God’s love on our heart that leads us to ask, “Why would I want to do this thing? Why would I want to live this way in light of what he’s already done for me through his life and his death and his resurrection?” So the way in which we grow as a Christian is the same way in which we begin. It’s by relying more and more on Jesus rather than ourselves. J. I. Packer once described sanctification in terms of dependent effort. We’re not supposed to be passive. There is something we’re supposed to do, but the effort we put forth is the effort of depending more and more on Jesus rather than ourselves.

So let me close by showing how this works. Most likely this letter to the Thessalonians was written from the city of Corinth, and Corinth was the original Sin City. What happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth. If you were living in the ancient world, and if you wanted to insult someone, or if you wanted to accuse them of being a little lax in their morals, especially when it came to sexuality, you know what you would call them? You’d call them a Corinthian. So Paul plants this church in Thessalonica, and then after a few months he travels down to the south of Greece, and he’s in Corinth, and He plants a church in Corinth of all places. And this was a church that was made up of a cast of characters. So if you read through Paul’s later letters to the Corinthians, you would probably agree with the person who said this is a church filled with Christians gone wild — especially when it comes to sex.

So in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul later writes to the church in Corinth and says, “Do not be deceived. You know that the sexually immoral” — there’s that word *porneia* again — “You know that the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God.” So right there, Paul rules out everyone who has done anything sexually outside the context of marriage. And then he goes on to list all kinds of people who would be otherwise excluded from the Kingdom of God because of their sexual sin. And if you know anything about the church in Corinth, he’s basically just excluded the whole church. But then he goes on to say, “You know that the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God, and such were some of you, but you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” That’s what some of you were, but you were washed. You were sanctified, past tense. You have now been reserved, devoted to God, justified in his eyes.

But the question is: How can that be? How can God love us and accept us despite all of our faults and failures, especially as it relates to our sexual sins? God’s grace comes to us completely free, but God’s grace is free to us only because it came at infinite cost to Jesus. And that’s why Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 6 by saying, “You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body.” So the question is: Can you believe? Can you believe that Jesus loves you so much that he was willing to leave the comforts of Heaven, to leave his father’s side, in order to suffer and die in your place, on the cross, in order to buy you, in order to purchase

you, in order to redeem you, to buy you back from your slavery to sin, including your sexual sin? And can you believe that Jesus does not want to leave you in this restrictive space — where you treat sex merely as a way of seeking pleasure or power over people or self-expression — but rather he's trying to lead you to a more positive place where you see that the purpose of sex is not self-indulgence or self-actualization or self-expression, but self-giving love. The whole purpose of sex is about self-giving. He's not trying to restrict us or confine us. No, he's trying to lead us down more positive, life-affirming, life-giving paths. That is what the biblical sexual ethic is.

The sexually immoral, the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God, and that is what all of us once were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and that is what this table is all about. That is what this table celebrates. You have already been set apart. You have already been reserved. You have already been devoted to God. Jesus has wholly devoted himself to you, and now he is calling you simply to be wholly devoted to him in return. This is God's will for your life: your devotion.

Let me pray for us.

Father, if we take an honest look at our hearts and our lives, we know that none of us are the people that you have called us to be. The whole church should be excluded from the Kingdom of God. But we thank you that Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to live and die in our place, as our substitute, so that we might be washed clean, so that we might be declared innocent in your eyes, and so that we might be wholly devoted to you. So help us to give you the entirety of our lives, to know that we are not alone, we have been bought with a price, and therefore help us to glorify you now in our bodies. Help us to return the love that you have shown us with our own personal, intense loving devotion. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.