

The Call to Holiness

Epistle of 1 Thessalonians

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:7-12

Preached On: Saturday, February 21, 2015

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Please look with me in your Bibles in 1 Thessalonians 4. I want to read from verse 7 down to verse 13.

7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. 8 He therefore that despiseth, [and you can see the marginal reading there, it says rejecteth] despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. 9 But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. 10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more;

Can you ever love someone too much? One for whom Christ has died? That's what he says. However you've manifested that love to this point, just continue more and more.

11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; 12 That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. 13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

We're going to stop there and pick up with verse 13 in the next study but in verse 7, we see here a contrast that's being made between uncleanness and holiness. Now, when we read words like this, we need to really just settle down and consider, to think about what these mean. What is it to be unclean? I know that this is a term that was used quite a bit in the Old Testament. It didn't take much to be defiled and there were a lot of ceremonial laws in the Old Testament that dealt with uncleanness, even down to the type of food that was eaten and I believe that those were given to show us that we are basically unclean in ourselves and everything about us in this world, the whole world lies in wickedness and to somehow think that, like I used to think, that somehow you attained a certain degree of holiness in your walk in life and therefore could be untainted from this world, such a notion is quickly undone as you consider what the Scriptures have to say.

But when it speaks here of uncleanness, I believe that any Jew that was reading this could quickly understand, he could relate to that term but remember that this book, this letter is written to the Thessalonians who were in great part Gentiles. So the word "uncleanness" to them would certainly have to relate to those things of which Paul has spoken to this point and this is what is so vital as we study Scripture that we look at the context. In the context, you go back and look at what we looked at last time where he said in verse 4, "That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour," and we looked and saw that that word "vessel" literally refers to one's wife.

So here in this context, Paul has been talking to them about fornication or about sexual impurity and the reason is because for the Gentiles, they had been raised in a culture that this was not even considered to be sin. I brought out last time that we're not far from that, really in our day when you think about what's being promoted on TV and in the movies, even some of the talk shows. What may have been years ago a taboo now it's just unbelievable the kinds of things that you are exposed to and you hardly can avoid it. It might be a station that's even considered to be a family station but more and more the guard has been let down in society and we have a whole generation of people that when you talk to them about fornication, when you talk to them about sexual impurity, they kind of look at you puzzled like, "Isn't that Puritan? Aren't we past that?" That's sort of the idea.

Nonetheless, Paul here deals with it because these were raised in that sort of environment. I believe as we teach the word, we have to by God's grace address those things that pertain to our culture and what it means to be separate not only in doctrine but in practice. I remember when I first went to Africa, I learned quickly by those that I was preaching for that many there did not consider it to be fornication if a person was unmarried. You could have sexual relations and it didn't matter. What they called adultery was if a married man went after another woman but if you weren't married, it was free game and that was part of that culture. So just like here, it had to be addressed and so in the context, that's what we see here. When it talks about, verse 5, "Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God." It's one thing for a person to be ignorant of God and to live that way, it's another for those who are the Lord's even under the guise of grace to take lightly the matter of sexual relations. Again, as we've seen, the reason is because marriage is honorable and it is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church and therefore vital. Just as vital as for Moses not hitting that rock a second time. That was a type of Christ. So you say, "Why do we honor marriage in a day when everybody just seems to be going whatever way they want to?" Well, it's because it is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ and his relationship with his church.

I'll tell you, just like with the Gospel, you won't be popular by taking a stand here in these matters but here's the call to abstain from all forms of sexual vice, immorality, adultery, incest, homosexuality. It's getting to where you're not even allowed to say anything against homosexuality in our day and age. It reminds me of the days of Lot. When he offered his virgin daughters to those men that were banging at his door, a lot of people wonder how could Lot have offered his virgin daughters to those men. He did it to make a point. He knew that they were so far gone that they didn't want his daughters. They

wanted that man that he had taken in. His daughters were as safe in that environment as any could be and that just shows how perverse things had gotten in that society. We live the same thing when you consider that a movie is up for Oscar nomination that has a homosexual relationship in it, it just, to me, it almost makes you not want to go anymore. That's just the way I feel. I'm thinking what are we supporting? But even with Lot, you remember when he gave his daughters out there, they said, "Who hath made you to be judge over us?" In other words, "Who are you to put your standard over on us?" And you're going to get the same reaction in our day. You get it with the Gospel, you know, "Who are you to say that that's the only way?" and with regard to this matter, you'll face it as well.

Nonetheless, I believe the call to holiness here in verse 7, "For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness," I believe it translates into renouncing any sort of following after the flesh whether it be with regard to sexual pleasure or whether it be even to the way we worship because much of the way of worship of the Gentiles, it was sexual pleasure, the temples that were built, all of it was pleasing to the flesh. And in many ways we could say even though this might not be going on in most works religion today, they'd probably denounce this sort of immorality but at the same time, much of it is built upon pleasing the flesh. Works religion. Exalting man above Christ. So even in that, we're to refrain. We're not to become involved.

I think of Baalim when he could not go against the people of Israel, he counseled Balac to invite the children of Israel to their sacrifices and what was at those sacrifices? Well, pretty women. Food. Isn't that what it's all about? Fun, food and fellowship? There's been an awful lot that's gone on in the name of God that's just nothing more than wanton lust of the flesh. But holiness, you know, when you talk about holiness and that's what I want us to consider here, "For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness." Holiness as you look at it in Scripture is only that which God calls holy. It's not even our imagined definitions of it. And I know this: he only calls holy what he has declared holy so we've got to find out what he declares holy.

I read somewhere these 2 statements and I think it's very good because a lot of people say, "Well, tell me what I need to do. What commandments do I need to follow to be holy? Do I go back and pick up some of these Old Testament laws and ceremonies as far as cleanliness?" I know some preachers try to do that, preacher a little grace and then go back and mix it in with these laws and ceremonies. I know this, 2 things: some things are true and right because God has commanded them and so as we go to Scripture, you may not understand why, we don't need to, God has simply set it forth and it's right because he has commanded it. Other things God commands because they are right and in accord with his character. Okay, so again, the Lord has commanded it because of what it reveals concerning his holy character. And a lot of people sit and puzzle, "What do we follow? What do we do?" We have to diligently seek his word to understand his will in all things, I believe, and to submit to all that is clearly taught there. But here's the key. I believe you give a key to somebody and it opens all the doors. The key is understanding God's holiness as it was revealed there at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything flows out of that because that is the only place, I believe, you're going to find in Scripture

where a sinner could be declared holy based upon a just satisfaction for sin. It's not something you do, it's something God has done.

So this call unto holiness is to consider the work of Christ. It's to consider the person of Christ who is the holy one, "Thou holy one of Israel." And to understand that if I'm called unto Christ, I'm called unto holiness. I'm called unto his holiness. I'm called unto his person. I'm called unto his work. I'm called because of his work that he established and that God accepted and that God imputed to my account. That's why I'm called and therefore there's a separating from this world. Therefore there is a coming out from this world. Therefore it affects all of my motive and conduct by the Spirit of God.

So I believe if we can understand that, we'll have a better understanding of what this particular portion is about. When he called us by his Spirit to be his followers, it was not that we should lead lives of impurity. This is human nature. It is sin nature to think, "Well, it's all under the blood. By the grace of God." That's how people tend to excuse even some of the most vile actions. Again, as you look at men in Scripture, David in the arms of Bathsheba was not given us as an example of what we can hope to get away with. It's an example of the grace of God and the imputed righteousness of Christ. It wasn't given to encourage us to live that way. On the contrary, it's given to show us the great grace of God. But some people interpret it that way. And David, you read the Psalms, Psalm 32. You read Psalm 51, what he wrote about that experience. God did not leave him at peace and he was called even in that moment, again, to look away from himself to this one who would come and put away his sin. He understood something of God's forbearance there in Psalm 32, of God not imputing that sin to him, not laying that to his charge because there was one who would take it. That was a call unto holiness. Alright, so I believe that that's what we see. We will, if God has been pleased to put Christ's obedience to our account and has called us by his Spirit, we will desire to fulfill his purposes when we're called into his kingdom. That's just going to be the Spirit of God so directing our heart.

And this word "uncleanness" here in verse 7 really it means any form of impurity or filth. I don't believe that a person can have the Spirit of God in their heart and treat sin lightly. There's a sensitivity to it when we sin and we do but the Spirit of God convicts us and causes us to look to Christ and cry out for mercy. He does not allow his children to continue in that way and therefore the call is unto holiness in the sense of being sanctified. Remember, we looked at that last time, the believer's sanctification. Just like those articles of the temple being set apart to a holy use, the priest couldn't just take that and go home and eat his meal on it at the house. It was set apart for the glory of God in worship and that's how we see our lives. It's not to be intrinsically holy or inherently holy. You know, I would have to duck down in shame behind this pulpit if I were to stand up here and tell you I've got an intrinsic holiness or I've got an inherent holiness whereby I can live a sinless life. That's crazy. That's a lie. We know that. We know that. But nonetheless, the Spirit of God having revealed Christ in my heart has caused me to see that in election I was set apart unto Christ my holiness and at the cross when Christ died, I was in him. When he died, I died. When he rose again, I did. There was a legal...in that sense, I'm dead to sin. I'm dead to its curse. I'm dead to its condemnation and now by the

Spirit of God, I'm made aware of exactly what Christ accomplished and that revelation causes me to look again and again and again to this one who is holy and to be submitted unto him. We've been set apart to God by election. We've been set apart by redemption. We've been set apart by regeneration and we do await the day when we shall indeed be made holy. Right now I've been declared holy and I look to that work of Christ alone but I look forward to the day when I should be made holy in my final glorification. I trust that's your hope because that's the effect of the work of Christ, what he accomplished.

Alright so, you come down to verse 8 here, Paul is saying that, "He therefore that despiseth this," in other words, takes these matters lightly, whosoever disregards it or sets it aside. It could be in 2 ways because you have 2 extremes. There are always extremes in doctrine. There are those that are extreme in their legalism. They refuse to submit to the finished work of Christ. It's like a man preached one time and he said, "You know, being holy is like a man walking with a tightrope. He's got his balance beam. On the one hand you've got the holiness of Christ which you need but on the other hand you need your own personal righteousness and so we're walking on a tightrope." This is how he explained it. That's crazy. That is to disregard what it is to be called unto holiness. But at the same time, you've got not only legalism on one hand but you've got licentiousness on the other which says, "It's all under the blood." And Paul answered that, didn't he? He said, "Shall we sin that grace may abound? God forbid!" God forbid. Both are equally wrong, you see.

So whoever sets this aside and rejects it, that's what the marginal reading is. Here it says, "despise it," but if you despise something, you reject it. Whoever rejects what is clearly taught in Scripture and sees it just as relative or merely the will or words of man. There are some that don't like the word "commandment." They think as soon as you mention that word then all of a sudden you're becoming a legalist. No, this word is God's revealed will and so, again, we look at it, we approach it, we prayerfully weigh it in all matters, submitting, bringing every thought into subjection unto the obedience of Christ. You know, his obedience that he worked out but we're submitted to it. I'll tell you, such a person stands condemned unless God is pleased to grant repentance before taking him from this world. Any who disregard the commands of Scripture have a light regard for its precepts or the word under the guise of grace. They're really rejecting and disobeying God. That's what this is saying. You know, some might be disposed to say that these were merely the precepts of men and therefore it wasn't important whether they were obeying or not. If you ever find somebody with that sort of attitude, they've not been taught of God. You just don't treat the word lightly. The Spirit makes this word precious. David even prayed that. He said, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any wicked way in me." We know we have wickedness here but it's one thing to know it and it's another thing to follow it. Again, we run this race looking to Christ alone.

So how is this call to holiness set forth here and in other portions of God's word? There's really a lot that the word has to say about it but how are we to consider it? Let me just give you 3 characteristics and I hope this will be helpful. It has been for me as I've studied this. First of all, this call to holiness is a call to live in both motive and conduct.

When we're talking about motive, we're talking about the heart and the thoughts. Conduct, that which is outward. But we're called to live as those who have been submitted unto the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ that was imputed there at the cross. That's our standard. Again, the cross is the standard. Christ said, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto myself." Those that he draws he draws unto himself as that one who was lifted up. We are seeing it in Revelation, aren't we? All of worship pertains to the Lamb slain. You can't just talk about following the Lamb. We follow the Lamb slain. Christ and him crucified. And I believe that that's where we look. We don't look in here for holiness, we look to an objective holiness that is completely outside ourselves, that's the Lord Jesus Christ and the work that he has accomplished at Calvary.

I believe Scriptures lay a clear case for true holiness being what Christ accomplished at the cross. If you look over in Romans 5, any that are not submitted to Christ and his righteousness and what he accomplished in his death are not holy. They might perceive themselves as holy because they feel like they've got a moral conduct but, dear friends, we know that none are holy but those that God has declared holy by his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Romans 5, beginning with verse 9. You can see in verse 8, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." It's not that we have anything in us, while we were yet sinners. That was our state under the condemnation in Adam. It took Christ dying to remove that condemnation.

Now, verse 9, "Much more then, being now justified by his blood." How is it we are justified? That word "justified" means "declared just; declared righteous." Well, it's by his blood, "we shall be saved from wrath through him." In other words, everything with regard to salvation flows out of what he accomplished there at the cross, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." There was a reconciliation that took place there at the cross before God. God looking at the work of Christ and on the basis of that work finished and accomplished, declaring righteous once for all every one for whom he died. We were reconciled, "much more, being reconciled," that reconciliation again being accomplished, "we shall be saved by his life."

Salvation is like an umbrella under which you've got a large range of doctrine, if you will. Election fits under that umbrella of salvation. Redemption. Regeneration. Justification. Glorification. That's all under this. We shall be saved. There's going to be an outworking of that salvation that God has purposed from eternity to eternity, you see. But as far as the time of when we were declared just and holy before God, when that legal condemnation was removed in which we were born under Adam, it was there at the cross. That's what the Scriptures are teaching. And because of that, those for whom Christ died, they shall be saved. It says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." It's not making belief to be the condition of salvation but it's the evidence. Believe and thou shalt be saved. Any that God causes to believe on his Son and submit to Christ as their only hope, their only righteousness, it's clear that they'll be saved because God has so purposed it. "And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." Or received the reconciliation. That's the word there, reconciliation.

So this call to holiness is a call to live in motive and conduct as those whom the Spirit of God has submitted to the very righteousness of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, imputed there at the cross. But secondly, coming back to our text in 1 Thessalonians 4:8, I would say this: this call to holiness is to live according to the dictates and the direction and the leadership of the Holy Spirit of God. That's why he's called the Holy Spirit. If you look here in verse 8, this is what Paul said, "who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit." Now, there are some that interpret that to mean that what Paul was trying to convince these of is that what he writes was inspired by the Spirit. Now, that's true but when he says "us, given unto us his Holy Spirit," he's identifying with these that are the Lord's. What is the evidence that we're the Lord's? What is the evidence that we've been redeemed by Christ? Declared righteous before God? Well, it's the Spirit. The Spirit has been given as that earnest so the calling of the Spirit in regeneration.

That's not what makes you holy. I think there's a great misunderstanding and for some time, I was taught that. I was taught in regeneration you're made holy but what a great disappointment. After you spend a few hours in this state and the next thing you know, you have fallen flat on your face and you keep striving then for the standard of holiness and perfection in yourself and you beat yourself to death because you can't ever reach it. What a blessing to know that the work of regeneration does not make us holy but what the Spirit does is give us life to know that our holiness is in Christ. I'll tell you, you talk about a sinner that has fallen and where are that sinner's eyes going to be turned by the Spirit of God? Again, to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Shepherd. As the Lamb slain. As the representative. As the Savior. The Redeemer. The justifier. Just like John wrote in 1 John 1, "My little children, I would that you sin not but if any man sin," what does he have? "An advocate with the Father."

You see, Satan would have you look at yourself and beat yourself, so would your flesh. So would others. Others will come with the rod ready, "You call yourself a Christian?" Boy, they love to swing that thing but thank God for the Spirit of God whose one work Christ said is to what? "When he comes, he will not speak of himself but he'll take the things that pertain unto me and reveal them unto you." What does he reveal? Forgiveness of sin. Grace. Righteousness in Christ. My standing with God does not change by my faults nor does it change by my supposed obedience. I am who I am by the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's a blessed thought. So that's important there where Paul says, "who hath also given unto us," not just his Spirit but his Holy Spirit. If there's anything holy in me as a regenerated sinner, it's the Holy Spirit. It's not in my flesh. My nature is what it is always in Adam but the Spirit is the one that is given me.

You notice, verse 9, how Paul then begins to show the effect of the Spirit of God in the heart, "But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another." You could look at that, "What is it to have the Spirit?" It's to be taught of God, to know the person of Christ and to be taught of who he is and what he has accomplished for sinners. If you look over in John 6 and I say this because there's just an impression that's left often that the work of the Spirit is something mystical. You get into this ether, what I call spiritual ether. You know, it's just people

trying to attain a certain feeling with regard to the Spirit. Everything the Spirit does has an object. There's an objective looking to the Spirit.

To be taught, when you're taught, don't you learn something? We're taught of God and here in John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." Well, how do I know I'm drawn? Look at here, "It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." To be taught of God is to continue to come to Christ as my all. My holiness. My righteousness. My mercy seat. My justification before God. I was thinking about that yesterday morning. I opened up the paper and saw somebody at the age of 55 had suddenly died and I thought, "Well, that's not too far off for me. What if that were me? What is my hope? What is my hope?" It's not in what I've done. It's not what these hands have done that can save my soul but it's in Christ and I believe that's what God teaches you. Where is my holiness? Where is my righteousness? Where is my justification before a holy God? It's in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what it is to be taught of God. You come to him.

So in regeneration, it's not that we're given a sinless nature but rather we're given the very Holy Spirit of God. Again, I believe it does despite to the very person of the Spirit to keep referring to some sinless nature just like people refer to Mother Nature. No, it's God. Here's the very Spirit of God himself by whom we're taught of God, we're taught of Christ, we are taught of his garment of righteousness that was imputed there in his death to our account. It's not imputed to our person. There are not multiple imputations. Just like we have multiple elections, you don't have multiple redemption. You don't have multiple regeneration. You don't have multiple justification. You don't have multiple imputations of righteousness. It's a legal term. It was imputed once for all in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, put to the account of those for whom Christ died. When the Spirit is given then, we're caused to submit to him and to worship him and to live lives separated unto him.

Now, verses 9 through 12. Come back here to 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. Here's the third thing I have to say about this call to holiness and that is it is to be directed by the grace of God the Father whose holy character we desire to emulate. There's no question that just like a little kid whose father loves him and cares for him, he desires to be like his father. We've all seen those little commercials about a kid walking in the steps of his father as he goes around doing what he's doing. In the tender heart of a child, he idolizes his father. He desires to please his father. Well, I believe that's what's set forth here in verses 9 through 12. How does it manifest? Let me just give these to you real briefly. A holy love for the brethren. When I say "holy," I mean in the sense of in the righteousness of Christ, the Spirit now produces this desire to love the brethren. Isn't God love? God is love and therefore his spirit within his children so directs them to love one another. Notice here it's talking about a love for the brethren. A lot of people in this world are hard to get along with and you can just ignore them but there are an awful lot of brethren too hard to get along with but we can't ignore them. It's one thing to be in the world, it's another thing to be in the household. So the call here is to love.

Notice that what is taught here is not some general love. "Well, I guess I've got to love." No, it's a particular love for those who are the Lord's chosen and redeemed ones. The brethren. The brethren. Of all our family on this earth, it's the brethren. They are closer than our own flesh and blood. It's a household of faith and because it is God that has given his Spirit in conjunction with his grace, I believe we can expect that as he causes us all to be drawn to the Savior and to his cross and the Gospel, it's going to cause an increase more and more in fellowship, in care for one another, in desire to be together under the one true Gospel. That's what I believe the Spirit produces.

Secondly, I see here what I call a holy diligence in our labors. Again, when I say "holy," it doesn't mean sinless perfection but I mean under the knowledge of who we are as children of God and God seeing us as holy in his Son, it doesn't make you lazy. To use the grace of God as an excuse for laziness goes contrary to everything we see in Scripture. Paul says here in verse 11, "study to be quiet, and to do your own business." Before I learned the Gospel, I was in a congregation where you were into everybody's business. We were divided up in the congregation I was in and I was part of the eldership and so we went around and we had our list of people we had to visit regularly. We went into their homes. We sat down with them. We asked them about their relationships one with another. All these things. Just meddling. Just meddling. You learn more than what you need to know as a man.

But I believe here in verse 11, "study to be quiet," even as God himself. Doesn't he act with a singleness of purpose? God is not affected by what others do. He acts with singleness of purpose. He works his providence in quiet ways and that's exactly how we, being his children, I believe direct our lives. He gives us a meek and quiet spirit in the face of great difficulty. We live in peace and not in turmoil. We're not to go around tale bearing and gossiping and speaking unkind words and accusations. You know, keep yourselves from these social get-togethers under the guise of fellowship that are nothing more than idle gossip. You know, the restless love to go there because they like to stir it up and if they are miserable, they like to make everybody else miserable as well. I don't think we ought to be engaged in that kind of thing. We ought not to be engaged in these public demonstrations of social activism like you see so many of these people in religion doing. Going out there and protesting and getting people excited. We don't see an example of that in Scripture and we don't see it in our Lord's example or anything that he taught his disciples. He told them to live by one standard: the Gospel. And to pray for those in the world that we might live peaceable lives but not to go out there and carry banners and protest.

"Do your own business." In other words, mind your own business, is what that is. Don't be concerned with the business of others except for it be out of a genuine concern. If someone ask you for help, then certainly approach but I'll tell you, we're to be diligent and to occupy, to make good use. It says, "work with your own hands." Religion makes people so lazy, it gets them to give up their jobs, a good living and go and live lives of hermits and then someone's got to support them. Someone's got to support them. It's a religious welfare system.

Then it says here, "walk honestly and honorably in the world." In other words, pay your bills. Don't bring ill repute upon the name of the Lord under the guise of being his children. I'll tell you, there are some that use religion as an excuse and I saw, sadly, a lot in missions, missionaries that got an extended vacation. They go over there and build these huge homes and put walls around it and call it missionary life. It's despicable.

Anyway, just to sum this up: God is one and we see here the work of the Father, we see the work of the Son, we see the work of the Spirit by whom sinners are declared holy. Holiness is God's chief attribute and while we don't profess to be holy in our flesh while we're on this side of glorification, yet having been declared saints, that's what we are by the grace of God. Ordained so in election, but justified, sanctified in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and called by the Holy Spirit, we do then submit to his will and to his word and to his work.