

Clarity and Comfort

God's Will: Your Sanctification

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1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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Introduction:

Good Morning Redeemer City Church!

I am here with you this morning to share with you God's will for your life! That's right! You heard me correctly! The Lord has spoken to me and revealed to me His will for each and every one of you. Isn't that exciting? Isn't that just what you have been waiting for? Someone to come along and tell you EXACTLY what the Lord would like you to be doing? Well, that is what I'm going to do for you right now. Are you ready for it?

GOD'S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE IS YOUR SANCTIFICATION!

This is His will for each of you as individuals, and it is also His will for you collectively as a church. I know this to be true not because the Lord has spoken to me in a divine vision, but because He has spoken it to all of us in His holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. Let's open that Word together so you can see for yourself.

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.

Finally, 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. 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 in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not 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. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

Now concerning brotherly love 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. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What we have just read is the beginning of the second half of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. In the first three chapters Paul spent significant time encouraging the church and recounting some of their shared history together. In this second half, Paul shifts his focus to exhortation. Timothy has returned to him with a report concerning the church's wellbeing, and Paul is now giving his instructions to the church in light of that report.

Evidently Timothy's report was quite positive, for the Apostle Paul begins by saying:

“Finally, 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. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2)

Overall, the church was doing a great job. Paul had previously told the church how to walk in a manner that pleases God, and by the Lord's grace they were doing just that. They weren't in need of a new command, so Paul simply exhorted the church to persist in that which they were already doing.

And what was it that they were doing that so pleased God?

They were pursuing holiness! Or, in theological terms, they were living sanctified lives. That is to say they were being obedient to God's will for their life.

Now if our sanctification is something that pleases the Lord, then I think it is worth taking the rest of our morning to stop here and spend some time considering what sanctification is.

We are going to do this by answering three questions:

1. What is Sanctification?
2. How Do We Pursue It?
3. Why Do We Pursue It?

Let's jump into that first question then:

What is Sanctification?

While sanctification may look like a big and fancy theological word, it really isn't. It is simply a word for the process of being made holy.

The NLT, a Bible translation whose primary purpose is to make the Bible both readable and understandable, translates the first part of verse 3 as:

“God’s will is for you to be holy...” (1 Thessalonians 4:3, NLT)

That’s pretty easy to understand, right? It’s also very accurate. So there you go, you can now cross another fancy theological word off your list. Sanctification, simply put, is the process of being made holy.

It’s important that you note that this is different than salvation. Salvation is something which we receive purely by the grace and mercy of God. We contribute absolutely nothing towards our salvation, but we do have a significant role to play in our holiness. As we continue forward this morning it is going to be necessary that you remember this distinction.

But before we move on, allow me a few words on holiness. Holiness is one of those words we hear a lot in church, and not a whole lot anywhere else. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if there was a bunch of people in this room who would struggle to give an accurate definition of what this word means.

You might know that it is a word used to describe God, but what is it saying about Him?

Kevin DeYoung, a well-known American Pastor, provides this very accessible definition in his work *The Hole in Our Holiness*:

“At its most basic, holiness means separation. It is a spatial term. When someone or something is holy it is set apart... God is holy because he is transcendent and different from everything he has made. He is separate and distinct, not ordinary or common. He is God, and there is no other.”¹

If God is called holy because He is set apart and distinct from all of creation, how then can we, as created beings, also be holy?

The answer is that we too are called to be set apart from the rest of the world. There should be a noticeable difference between the life of a Christian, and the life of a non-believer. Our lifestyle should serve as a reflection of the moral purity and set apart nature of our Creator.

But how do we set ourselves apart? Practically speaking, how do we pursue sanctification?

How Do We Pursue It?

1. By Abstaining from Sin

¹ Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 31-32.

The first thing that we can do in the pursuit of holiness is abstaining from sin.

This makes sense, doesn't it? If you want to be different than the world, stop doing the things that characterize this world. Stop living like you did before you knew Christ.

The Apostle Peter writes:

“For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery...” (1 Peter 4:3-4)

The first step towards holiness is putting to death our sin.

In the context of our letter this morning, Paul's principle concern was that the church in Thessalonica would abstain from sexual immorality.

“For this this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

My guess is that if Paul were to write a letter to the churches in North America that he would have a very similar concern. Just as the Thessalonian believers were steeped in a culture where sexual ethics were far removed from the design of God, so to we are living in a post-sexual revolution world where it seems like almost anything goes.

We have been living in this culture for so long that many of us have become blind to how complicit we are in this type of immorality. We give ourselves a pat on the back because we are not sleeping with anyone other than our spouse, but we refuse to take seriously Christ's word that a look with lustful intent is adultery in the heart.

This is to say nothing of the type of TV shows we allow ourselves to watch, or the books we read. After all, there is always something worse that we COULD be watching, so we can at least be proud we're not QUITE as bad as the world. But when did the worst the world has to offer become our standard of holiness? Shouldn't we instead be looking to the teachings of Christ for this standard?

And how do we even begin to address the extent to which pornography has infiltrated and ravished our churches? This is the hidden sin of so many, both men and women, young and old. We think it is a personal issue that only has consequences for ourselves, and therefore we excuse it or ignore it. But there is no such thing as a sexual sin that affects only one person. The truth is that pornography can cripple an

entire community like nothing else. It destroys everything in its path. Being in youth ministry I get to see this firsthand far too often. I regularly have young men come into my office feeling broken and hopeless because of their addiction. They recognize that this sin is destroying them in more ways than one, but they inevitably find themselves back in the same ditch.

As a church we need to start taking sexual immorality within our community more seriously. We need to start shining light into this darkness and we need to begin keeping one another accountable.

The truth is that most people already know sexual immorality is wrong, but that doesn't give us an excuse to stop talking about it. Paul didn't write a new command to the Thessalonians, he simply reminded them of the truth he had previously spoken. Let's do the same.

Parents, go home and have a frank conversation with your children. Ask them awkward and direct questions. It may not be fun, and they may resent you for it, but you will be doing something that pleases the Lord and could potentially save the soul of your child.

Do the same thing with your peers. Let's stop turning a blind eye to sin in the camp and let's get serious about abstaining not only from the sin of sexual immorality, but all the sins that plague us.

This is the first step towards holiness, and it is a step that is easier taken in community.

Abstaining from sin, however, is not the only thing we do in pursuit of a sanctified life. We also see in today's text that we pursue sanctification by doing good.

2. By Doing Good

As you remove that which is evil from your life it is important that you replace it with that which is good.

Paul told the Thessalonians to abstain from sin, but he also told them to continue to grow in brotherly love.

"Now concerning brotherly love 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. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you." (1 Thessalonians 4:9-11)

This is the pattern of holiness found throughout the Scriptures. As we put to death that which is worldly in us, we replace it by putting on the character of Christ.

I often tell our youth that they should think about this every day as they get ready for school. Just as they shed their dirty clothes and put on new clean ones at the start of a new day, we should be mindful of the necessity to do the same thing with our character and our actions. Each day presents a new opportunity to grow in holiness. We can be mindful of those things which we need to put to death, and we can be intentional about ways that we want to do better.

I can only think that we would all be better off if we incorporated this spiritual exercise to our regular morning routine.

I fear that one of the reasons we are not more intentional about doing good is that we have equated our Christianity with nothing more than right belief. We have elevated orthodoxy over orthopraxy. That is to say we care more about right belief than we do right action. This, however, is not the saving faith that is described in the Bible. I love the way Matthew Henry puts it:

“It is not enough that we abide in the faith of the gospel, but we must abound in the work of faith. We must not only persevere to the end, but we should grow better, and walk more evenly and closely with God.”²

What, then, is the work of faith that we are to be engaged in?

First and foremost, the work of faith are those things which display a love for God and a love for neighbour.

Paul praised the Thessalonian church for the way they cared not only for one another, but for all the brothers in Macedonia. This was a church that looked out not only for its own needs, but also for the need of others.

Can I take a moment and praise God that I believe this describes our own church? I am so thankful that both Cornerstone and Redeemer are churches that love their neighbours. Take a look at our finances this upcoming AGM and praise God that we have prioritized being an overflow church.

I can't say that I've loved a whole lot about this COVID pandemic, but one thing that I have loved was seeing how quickly our ministry focus shifted to meet the changing needs of our community. I loved that even though the church portable was closed to students that it began to fill up with groceries and care items that were delivered out not only to our own people, but to anyone who indicated a need.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, Accessed Online.

I loved having the opportunity to deliver fruit trays to senior homes as a way to thank our front-line workers and to encourage them to keep pressing forward. The truth is that we could have put a freeze on all spending out of fear that offerings would drop, but instead we re-prioritized and even increased spending in some areas in order to love our neighbours. This isn't just something our church leaders did, but it is something that YOU did. You continued to give, and you even went above and beyond the normal routine by donating items and helping to deliver them.

In that regard I say to you well done. Let's continue to do this more and more.

We must not grow weary of doing good, but rather we are to press forward, and keep working harder and harder. Indeed, hard work is one of those ways we pursue sanctification, and it is the third thing I want us to see in today's text.

3. By Working Hard

When Paul warns the believers about sexual immorality, notice what he says.

“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 in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like Gentiles who do not know God.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4)

Do you see what I see? Paul is saying that if you want to root out sin in your life, you are going to need to learn how to control your own body. You are going to have put in the blood, sweat, and tears, of saying no to the desires of the flesh. He doesn't just tell the church to sit back and let Jesus do the work, rather he tells them to get busy and start learning some self-control.

What does that mean for us? At the very least it means we need to start getting intentional about our pursuit of holiness. We need to make a plan and we need to commit ourselves to that plan. I don't know what your specific plan will look like, because I do not know the specific sins you struggle with. But maybe it means you turn off the Wi-Fi in your house at a certain hour. Or maybe it even means saying goodbye to a few friendships that are not good for your soul.

Whatever it is you need to do to best position yourself for holiness, do it!

It will be scary. It will be hard. But it will ultimately be for your good.

Now I recognize that as I make this point there are likely some people wanting to push back on the notion that we contribute to our own holiness. But what you need to remember is that we are addressing our

sanctification, and not our salvation. Let me read to you a quote from J.C. Ryle's classic work on holiness. He writes:

"Whose fault is it if [believers] are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace, and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for His praise. This is a point which is far too much forgotten. A man who professes to be a true Christian, while he sits still, content with a very lowly degree of sanctification (if indeed he has any at all), and coolly tells you he "can do nothing," is a very pitiable sight, and a very ignorant man. Against this delusion let us watch and be on our guard. The Word of God always addresses its precepts to believers as accountable and responsible beings. If the Saviour of sinners gives us renewing grace, and calls us by His Spirit, we may be sure that He expects us to use our grace, and not to go to sleep. It is forgetfulness of this which causes many believers to "grieve the Holy Spirit," and makes them very useless and uncomfortable Christians."³

Isn't that convicting? YOU ARE AN ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIBLE BEING.

Start working out your salvation with fear and trembling! God has given you a race to run, now run it!

But as Ryle also said, take heart that you are not running this race alone. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then you have been equipped with everything you need for your sanctification.

The Lord has given you the Holy Spirit for this very purpose.

Let us never lose sight of that. We pursue our sanctification not by means of our own strength, but by the help of the Holy Spirit.

4. By the Help of the Holy Spirit

This point, I imagine, is one of the reasons why some of you were feeling some pushback on the last one. Of course man by his own strength cannot produce his own holiness. Before the process of sanctification can even begin, we require the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our life. As one of the commentators says:

"Sanctification is at the same time both a divine work and a human obligation that can only be met through the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴

³ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001), 24.

⁴ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, TPNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 199.

We see that in today's text, don't we?

“Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:8)

To ignore your own holiness is to deny the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

This regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is what the Old Testament saints were longing for.

We see that all the way back in the book of Ezekiel when we are given the hope of God's New Covenant:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

The New Testament writers knew this prophecy, and they knew that it was theirs to experience. That is why they again and again encourage believers to walk by the strength of the Spirit. For example:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16)

And:

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:5-6)

Although Paul wanted the believers of Thessalonica to work hard towards holiness, he by no means wanted them to think they were to work by the power of their own strength. We see that in the prayer that precedes today's Scripture:

“Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, **so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness** before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)

And we see it again at the end of the letter.

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

So if all this talk about holiness discourages you, if you feel as though you have an impossible hill to climb, take heart, for God is the one who works in you and through you. He will be your strength, and your ever-present help. All you need to do is lean into that help which He provides through His Spirit. When you grow discouraged, go to Christ in prayer, and he will be the lifter of your head and the strength in your limbs.

Finally, brothers and sisters, having now discussed what sanctification is, and how we pursue it, let me conclude by answering the question of why we should pursue it.

Why Do We Pursue It?

While the benefits of holiness are certainly numerous, the number one reason why we should commit ourselves to pursuing it is because doing so pleases the Lord.

We see this in the very first verse of today's text:

“Finally, 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.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1)

Isn't there something particularly beautiful about this? Isn't it wonderful to know that you have the ability to please the Lord who created not only you, but all of creation?

I want to leave you this morning once again with the words of J.C. Ryle:

“Let this [truth] never be forgotten, for it is a very comfortable doctrine. Just as a parent is pleased with the efforts of his little child to please him, though it only be only by picking a daisy or walking across a room, so is our Father in heaven pleased with the poor performances of His believing children. He looks at the motive, principle, and intention of their actions, and not merely at their quantity and quality. He regards them as members of His own dear Son, and for His sake, wherever there is a single eye, He is well pleased.”⁵

Isn't that comforting? Isn't that good to know?

God knows that the road to sanctification is a long one. He knows that you are a fallen human being living in a fallen world. He knows that the path before you is going to be hard, and that is why He offers you His hand of support. He delights in each and every baby step you take down this path of holiness.

If you are serious about Christ, and if you are putting in an honest effort in the pursuit of holiness, then you can rest assured that God is pleased with you.

In light of that, brothers and sisters, as we leave here this morning, let us make it our aim to live such lives that would bring a smile to the face of our Heavenly Father.

Let's pray.

⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 27.