

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Taking Our Next Steps into Faithfulness

(Studies in 1 Thessalonians)

YOUR Next Steps Help US All

(1 Thessalonians 4:1-10)

Study #4

Introduction: Prior to prophecy...

When Paul wrote his first letter to the new Christians in Thessalonica, he wrote a lot about prophecy.

Now, we haven't emphasized prophecy to this point in our study because it hasn't been a major theme, yet. But Paul has mentioned the fact that Jesus is coming back at the end of each of the first three chapters.¹

If you look ahead, you'll see that a good portion of the fourth and fifth chapters of this letter have a lot to say about prophecy.

And, while I am not a prophet, I predict that Jeff will bring a message next Sunday that deals with the themes of prophecy that Paul addresses.

Before talking about things that have yet to take place, today we'll consider the world of what is happening now.

Remember. He is writing to the church. He is casting a vision to them all to take "next steps with Jesus" - together. Become the church Jesus saved you to be. That's what he wants for us, too.

But here, he turns his attention to individuals. He's calling each one of them - and us - to purity and to love. And in doing this, he isn't breaking with the theme of overall church health.

That because the spiritual health of the church rests on the health of the members of the church. And the next steps we each take into faithfulness and love will help the whole church.

Our passage begins with an apostolic "**Finally.**" Don't believe him. Paul's just kidding.

Prelude: An Apostolic Exhortation to MORE (4:1-3a)

The Basis for Paul's Call (vv. 1-2)

A request in light of our unity as a family

[1] Finally then, brothers and sisters...

This is a preacher's "**Finally.**" He's got a long way to go before he's done, and what he means by "**Finally**" is that he's just now getting around to fixin' to get ready to begin to start wrapping things up.

The significant thing in this first verse is not, "**Finally.**" It is that he is writing to family. To his brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Everything Paul says here comes straight from the heart. He loves them. He's urging them / us to a God-honoring life because that kind of life is the most beautiful life there is. A God-honoring life is the best life any of us could have.

Notice, too, that it isn't just "*brother Paul*" who is doing the exhorting. He's speaking on behalf of the Lord Jesus.

A request in light of the authority of Jesus

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:19; 3:13.

[1] Finally then, brothers and sisters, we request and urge you IN THE LORD JESUS...[2] For you know what instructions we gave you BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD JESUS.

The instructions Paul is about to give aren't things that he thought up. They come straight from Jesus.

This word, "**instructions**," is a word taken from the battlefield. It was how a commanding officer would give orders to his troops in combat. There is the ring of command authority here, and the commander isn't Paul. It's Jesus.²

He says what he says in the way he says it because he is about to get specific in his call to distinctively Christian living.

The Content of Paul's Call

To increasingly please God

[1] Finally then, brothers and sisters, we request and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received instruction from us as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), THAT YOU EXCEL EVEN MORE.

Everybody lives to please somebody. And we could live for our own pleasure. But there is no smaller package in the world than someone wrapped up in himself / herself.

Or we could live to please a fellow human, or a group of people, or all people. But living for the pleasure of another person is a trap, too.

If we please THIS person, we'll displease THAT person. No matter how hard we try to please people, everything we do will displease somebody.

Living for the pleasure of the people around us is a surefire path to neurosis. It doesn't work.

² Paul often used military terminology, never to imply physically assaulting someone, always to communicate a willingness to suffer; cf. 2 Timothy 2:4.

We were made for something more, something better, something transcendent. We were made to live for the pleasure of God.

There is nothing more fulfilling, nothing more satisfying than to live for God's, "*Well done, good and faithful slave!*"

Sensing the pleasure of God is what "the good life" is all about. And that is the way these very young believers in Thessalonica had been living.

Paul commended them for the way their lives pleased God, and then added, "*Brothers and sisters, stay the course. Increase velocity. Don't be satisfied with your progress to this point. Seek to please the Lord more and more and more!*"

And the course to follow to lead a life that pleases God is the path of *sanctification*.

To travel the road to sanctification

[3a] For this is the will of God, your sanctification...

Sanctification is a big word. It literally means "*to set something apart for a special purpose.*"

As Paul used the word here, he was thinking of the process of spiritual growth.³ You and I are increasingly *sanctified* as we take next steps with Jesus.⁴

So, you believe in Jesus? Great! God's will for you is that you become more set apart for Him, day by day.

In what follows, Paul zooms in on a couple of life arenas in which we are to pursue sanctification.⁵ First up: sexual purity.

³ Sometimes, the word speaks to a finished act, as in *we are sanctified*. *We have been set apart* for God's purposes. See 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11.

⁴ See Romans 6:19; 2 Timothy 2:21.

⁵ Paul urges the Thessalonians to work hard (vv. 11-12) on the way to becoming powerful witnesses. I won't emphasize this thought today, as it figures in more

Glorify God by Your Commitment to Purity (4:3b-8)

Passionately Pursue Purity! (vv. 3b-6)

Abstain from sexual immorality (v. 3b)

[3] For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality

The Bible's treatment of sex and sexuality

What we have here are six verses about sex. So, what I'll say today won't be, *"Everything you've always wanted to know about what the Bible teaches about sex."*

There are lots of places in the Bible where sexuality and sexual themes are dealt with. And when the writers of the Bible address sex, as Paul does here, they do so honestly, sometimes bluntly, sometimes poetically, never crassly (except when describing a crass event).

The Bible provides sexual boundaries. It tells us what makes for human flourishing in the sexual realm, and what doesn't. It tells us what is good and holy, sexually speaking, and what is sinful.

And where there are unclear boundaries, the Bible provides sexual wisdom, guiding us from good to better to best.

What we read today makes it clear that if we would deepen and enjoy our walk with God, we will become more and more committed to sexual purity.

prominently in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians when he warns his readers to not be lazy or idle in waiting for the return of Christ.

Paul had to address this topic because the Christians at Thessalonica were brand-new and the culture in which they were living was thoroughly out of step with God's design for sex.⁶

Out of step

Paul was writing from the seaport city of Corinth, a city with a well-earned reputation for sensuality. Conditions in Thessalonica were about the same.

Sexual extravagance was everywhere in the ancient Greek world.

The best-known myths of the gods and goddesses were stories of their sex lives. Adultery was a common subject in Greek poetry. And sexual activity was ritually sanctioned in the religious cults.

The word that my Bible translates ***"sexual immorality"*** was a word that covered all kinds of sexual sin. It brought all forms of illicit sexual activity under one umbrella.

The word is *"porneia"*⁷ and it referred to homosexual and heterosexual sin, private affairs and public orgies, premarital sex and religious cult prostitution.

These practices were all "givens" in that culture. Most of them are in ours. And to all of these we would add the more modern sexual sins involving the Internet.

Paul wasn't writing to rebuke them, but to warn them. He's warning us of danger, too, because then and now there are lots of opportunities for sexual sin.

Which is NOT to say that believers were to stay away from sex.

⁶ Just because he gives this instruction, we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that Timothy brought back a bad report from Thessalonica, or that the Christians there were engaged in sexual sin.

⁷ The Greek word from which we derive our English word "pornography."

God's plan for sex

No, God created sex. He thought the whole thing up.

In the beginning, He created Adam and Eve and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, which certainly required that they had sex with each other.

Throughout the Bible's story, husbands and wives are encouraged to enjoy the pleasures of sexual union.⁸

But, if the Bible is clear about the beauty of loving, sexual intimacy in the covenant bond of marriage (and it is), then it is equally clear that sexual activity with a partner who is NOT one's spouse is destructive and wrong.

Now, having just said that, what I'm about to say is very important. And it is important to say it because I've tried to be clear to say that sexual sins are wrong.

Here it is: Jesus died for all our sins. Lying and cheating and gossiping and murdering AND all kinds of sexual sins.

The scandal of God's grace is that there is no depth to which any of us might go - sexually or otherwise - but that Jesus didn't go lower to pay the price for our redemption.

The good news of Jesus is that God offers everyone who has committed any sin the gift of eternal life when they believe, because Jesus paid it all. That's GOSPEL!

Christians have always placed a high premium on sexual purity. And the reason we have is because we have understood that purity - sexual purity - is the will of God.

⁸ The Song of Solomon is dedicated to sexual intimacy. Proverbs commends sexual activity between husbands and wives. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul told husbands and wives to give themselves to each other, sexually. Also, Hebrews 13:4.

And remember, *porneia* does not only refer to adultery, but to all forms of impure sexual behavior. And there are so many ways in which we might trip and fall, sexually, in the real or the virtual world.

Frankly, we're not surprised to find an exhortation to sexual purity in an equipping letter written by an apostle to a church.

But, in this passage where Paul dwells on things sexual, he goes beyond the simple, "***Thou shalt not.***" He goes on to urge each of us to get some "***know how***" when it comes to playing it smart with sex.

Get sanctified "know-how" (vv. 4-5)

[4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel⁹ in sanctification and honor, [5] not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;¹⁰

Sexuality expressed as lustful passion

The mindset Paul had observed in his travels through the Greek world with respect to sexuality was that of slavery. The message was, "*Sexual urges are irresistible. There is no use trying to rein in sexual desire. It is too strong. Might as well give in.*"¹¹

The Greek and Roman world was consumed with sex. But sexual experience was not a source of deep, satisfying joy. It was an insatiable appetite that had gained mastery over people.

⁹ There is debate among scholars as to what Paul was referring by the word *vessel*. Some think he was referring to a man's wife. But (1). Paul would not speak of a wife as being a man's possession; (2). a wife would not be considered a "vessel" any more than a husband is considered a vessel, as, for instance, both are in 1 Peter 3; (3). in the context, it makes more sense that Paul was urging a man to conduct himself (not to possess his wife) with sanctification and honor.

¹⁰ Paul's Jewish readers would have remembered 1 Samuel 21:5, "***the vessels of the young men were holy,***" which refers to the sexual life of the young men in David's army.

¹¹ *Passion* - Paul usually used this word in a negative sense. *Lustful* here speaks of a strong desire.

Jesus saved us that we would be free from this mastery. Paul writes to direct us to that freedom. And we who know Jesus are to conduct our intimate lives ***“in sanctification and honor.”***

Sexuality expressed in sanctification

Paul speaks of the desire for sex as an appetite. That’s helpful vocabulary. We have all sorts of appetites - for food, drink, sleep, sex.

None of these are wrong, in and of themselves, But appetites are to be mastered, not masters.

The Christian man is to rule his body. The Christian woman is to rule her body. We are not to be mastered by the sex drive.

Rather, in submission to God, we are to master the sex drive. Only then, will we see sexual union with our husband or with our wife as an opportunity to lovingly give.

There is a beautiful and a holy use for sex. And he exhorts us, today, as he did his Thessalonian friends, to purity. To sexual sanctification. That’s God’s will for us.

And yet, given that we know all of that, it is possible that we might still travel a different path.

So, if any of us are...
 ...toying with the idea of violating God’s will in this matter.
 ...currently involved in a relationship that violates God’s will.
 ...involved in sexual activity that doesn’t honor God, listen to Paul’s two reasons for pursuing purity.

First, we should pursue purity with passion, and we should abandon impurity like the plague it is because it is **UNLOVING**.

The price exacted by impurity (v. 6)

[6] and that no one violate the rights and take advantage of his brother or sister¹² in the matter, because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you previously and solemnly warned you.

Immorality is loveless

Paul views sexual sin as defrauding a family member.

When we step out of bounds, sexually, and are intimate with someone to whom we aren’t married, we cheat someone else.

Adultery is an obvious violation of the rights of another - the other husband, the other wife.

And adultery brings collateral damage. Sin always does. It cheats children and friends and extended family, the family of God.

Sexual involvement before marriage robs the other of a gift which ought to be brought into a marriage. The future spouse of the one you have slept with, if it turns out to NOT be you, has been defrauded.

Involvement with virtual sex and online pornography may seem like a victimless activity. It isn’t.

Pornography separates sex from relationship and cheapens our view of the opposite sex, turns sexual activity into something merely physical. And sexual activity is not merely physical.

My dear brothers and sisters - we cannot sin sexually without in some way cheating someone else. All sexual sin hurts someone.

¹² “*Brother*” might have a broader reference to the human population and not just to the church, as Paul would have envisioned adultery defrauding a man or a woman, Christian or not. It seems to me, though, that the thrusts of Paul’s concerns are with adultery and fornication within the church family.

What the Bible has declared for thousands of years is that key to the pursuit of purity is abstaining from sexual involvement outside of marriage. That key to preserving trust in a marriage is building a wall around sexual activity, the wall of exclusivity.

To engage in sexual sin is to sin against love. Paul also says that it is to invite “the avenger” into your life.

God, the Avenger in all these things

The avenger here is not the brother or sister who is going to beat you up for sleeping with their spouse.

The avenger is “*the Lord*” - Jesus.

As an argument against sexual sin, Paul might have appealed to the physical, psychological, and social consequences. And those consequences are real and cannot be dismissed lightly.

But his final warning against impurity is an appeal to the consequences for the believer in the presence of God.

He is not threatening eternal condemnation, because Jesus’ death on the cross guarantees the believer’s final salvation.

But the Christian who does not pursue purity will face a Jesus who is both Savior, and, at the Judgment Seat, Judge.

It is TRUE that the Christian is not under God’s condemnation (John 5:24; Romans 8:1). It is NOT TRUE that the Christian is exempt from the Law of the Harvest (Galatians 6:7; we reap what we sow).

Paul ends by reminding us of God’s call on our lives.

Sexual Purity in the Grand Scheme of Things (vv. 7-8)

[7] For God has not called us for impurity, but in sanctification. [8] Therefore, the one who rejects this is not rejecting man, but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

God did not save us so that we could live any way we pleased. He saved us that we might be increasingly set apart for His purposes.

God provided us with a whole new set of resources for living - the Holy Spirit within us, the Body of Christ surrounding us, the Word of God directing us - that we might be more and more sanctified.

So, one of the ways each of us can shine like the sun is by nurturing a passion for purity. Paul now moves on to consider a second realm of life in which we are called to sanctification.

Whenever a group of people come together, there is the possibility (likelihood?) of friction. Well, we here at Northwest, are, among other things, a group of people. So, it goes without saying that there may well be friction here.

Like an internal combustion engine running with no motor oil, if there is no love coursing through our relationships, the unavoidable friction will result in lots of heat and eventual [thermal] breakdown.

Ministries will sputter. Service will falter. Groups will become cliques. Worship will become lifeless. The church will seize.

We need love. And Paul’s recognition that we need love is what prompted him to write what we now read.

Glorify God by Your Love (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

The Critical Need in the Church: Love (v. 9)

[9] Now as to the love of the brothers and sisters, you have no need for anyone to write to you...

The necessity of love in the church

So, clearly, Paul, Silas, and Timothy spent a lot of time emphasizing the primacy of love when they were in Thessalonica.

For that matter, all the New Testament authors seemed to “get” just how important love is in the Body of Christ.¹³

We get it, too. The absence of love is a big problem.

At stake in the presence or absence of love

In another place (1 Corinthians 13), Paul says that without love, the most gifted, knowledgeable, faithful person in the world is worth a big goose egg.

But with love, a focus on the needs of others, comes all the good stuff in life.

With love comes forgiveness.

“I am perfectly forgiven by God for sins I have committed. I will, therefore, stop keeping lists of wrongs others have committed against me, and act in the way most likely to draw them to the Lord. I will forgive them.”

With love comes service and sacrifice.

“Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, so I’ll ‘wash your feet.’ Can I help you with childcare, with car repair, with home repair? Do you need help learning the Bible, learning how to pray? I’m here to serve.”

Life in the church give us real-time chances to grow into people who seek the best for others more than we seek our own interests.

We can come to church - or to small group meetings or to fellowship events - with one of two perspectives.

Either we think, *“I sure hope I get what I need out of this.”* OR we think, *“I sure hope God can use me as an instrument of His grace in someone’s life here.”*

- Imagine what a difference it would make if you adopted the second mindset when you show up for your Care Group meeting or ABF.
- Imagine how attentive you would be to your friend’s need, to her tone of voice when you grab a meal together.
- Imagine how God would use you to encourage and to refresh others when you come to church because you were intentional to engage, from the heart.

Love IS and ALWAYS WILL BE appropriate for the child of God. There is never a time when we will say, *“It’s not all that important that I be loving here / this time / in this case.”*

Paul taught the Thessalonians the importance of love. But he wasn’t the only One who taught them to love.

God teaches us to love each other

[9] Now as to the love of the brothers and sisters, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another

Now, it could very well be that Paul has in mind the words of Scripture when he mentions God as Teacher, because God certainly speaks through His Word.

Or, he could be referencing the life of Jesus, God in the flesh, who not only taught us to love but also showed us the way to love.

Here’s what I think.

I think Paul is telling us that part of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives is to prompt us to love; that a special ministry of the indwelling Spirit is to set up an on-going, internal, seminar in which we are schooled in the way of love.

He prompts us to love, opens our eyes to opportunities to love, and strengthens us to love.

All our lives we are pupils in this school of love. God is always at work in your heart, sensitizing you to need and nudging you to love.

¹³ The Apostle John mentions love repeatedly in his first letter. (1 John 3:10, 17; 4:7-12, 20-21). Peter writes of love in 1 Peter 2:17. Besides here, Paul also highlights love in Ephesians 5:2; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 Corinthians 13.

As evidence that God teaches believers to love, Paul had only to point to the way the Thessalonians were living, because they were famous for loving well.

The Thessalonian Christians Loved Well (v. 10a)

[10a] for indeed you practice it toward all the brothers and sisters who are in all Macedonia.

When Paul shared the Gospel with them and they believed in Jesus, they hit the ground, loving.

Later, when Timothy came back to Paul with a report as to how things were going in Thessalonica, he told Paul that they were growing in love.

Their love was expansive. It wasn't limited to their own city. It spread throughout the huge province of Macedonia. They loved as widely as opportunities allowed.

And they weren't selective in who they loved. God had lavished His love on them. So, in God's Name, they loved all Romans, Greeks, Jews, Persians, Republicans, Democrats, Iranians, Mexicans, Macedonians - everyone.

The Father modeled love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) The Spirit is right now, real time, urging us to love. And Jesus Himself, the most loving Man who ever lived, said that when we love our brothers and sisters, we are showing that we are His disciples. (John 13:34-35)¹⁴

And what does Paul say at the end of these two verses?

Keep Loving More and More and More! (v. 10b)

[10b]...But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to excel¹⁵ even more.

Maturity in Christ is not static. It is dynamic. The Christian life offers endless opportunities for growth, for change.

As we begin our lives in Christ, we aim at a target called "maturity."

After a while, we discover that on the target there are smaller and smaller circles leading closer and closer to the center. Maturity consists of aiming at the center. Hitting the bullseye is to be like Jesus.

Paul said that he had no need to write to them about love for the brethren (v. 9) - and then wrote about it.

In the same spirit, I will say, YOU are loving. I see it all the time in meals delivered, prayers prayed, services rendered - and I urge you to love even more.

Look for the needy person on Sunday morning. Notice who isn't here and let them know that they were missed. Touch base with each other during the week. Pray - in the moment - for your friend's need. Ask how you can help.

Get creative and love outside the box. As well as you are doing, excel even more!

Every movement you make toward purity helps us all pursue purity. Each advance you take into love helps us all learn to love.

We become the church Jesus wants us to be when we each take next steps with Jesus.

¹⁴ Further, He said that when we love, we are affirming that the Father sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. (John 17:21)

¹⁵ This is the third time we find "excel" in this letter (in 3:12 it is translated "overflow"). The term is characteristic of Paul's view of the Christian life.