

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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[0 : 00] Well, I hope so. I'll do my best. If you've been coming in the evening and following, I haven't managed to because when we started this series, Evelyn and I were in Japan, which was wonderful.

But I was here last week and we talked about a fledgling church, a new church that Paul had created, but now he wasn't there. He was down in Athens.

And so he's writing to them to encourage them. And this is where we've got to in the letter. It seems like it's the end of the letter, but actually it goes on for quite a little while after this.

But it's a fledgling church. It's a young church. And so Paul writes, as he should do, to encourage them and to reassure them that they are on the right road.

They've listened to his teaching and the church has been founded and that's great. And he's very kind to the Thessalonians. He's not quite so kind to other churches that he writes to, but he's very kind to them.

[1 : 11] And you can just get this picture of a group of young Christians excited about their faith, but still without any great knowledge or experience.

And so he begins, Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. And Paul does this throughout the letter.

He tells them, yes, you are doing it. But then he says, no, do it more and more. And that's the thing about Christianity. I've been involved, well, all my life really, but since I was converted at the age of 20, I'm over 50 years now involved with people who have become Christians, involved with young situations, involved with churches that have been on the go for a long while and have maybe never really yet come to grips with what it means to be a Christian church.

So Paul encourages them. And, you know, in these early days, I've seen so many young Christians who got so excited. Well, I was one.

So excited about their faith. And that was great, but they didn't have the depth. And so when things got hard, they stumbled.

[2 : 38] Hopefully, didn't fall altogether, but stumbled and then were able to rediscover a deeper level of faith. And that's what Paul's wanting here.

He says, you've got much more to learn. You've learned this already, but now you've got to do this more and more. And this is the first thing that came out of this passage for me.

There is no depth that you can reach. Whenever you reach a depth in the Christian life, you discover there's more.

There's always more. And that's wonderful. It's one of the most exciting things about Christianity and about being a minister. As Martin, I'm sure, is realizing already, when you discover, when you find people going deeper and deeper into the faith and you see how it's affecting their lives and how it's changing them, it's wonderful.

It's exciting to be part of that. But what's the aim of all this? What does Paul want them to aim for? Well, he says this in verse 3. It is God's will that you should be sanctified.

[3 : 55] Sanctified or made holy. This is the aim, that you should be sanctified, that you should become holy. Holiness is a common theme right throughout the Bible.

God tells the Israelites to be holy as I am holy. And that's still the aim as we become Christians in Christ Jesus, that we are still to seek this holiness.

Holiness. But holiness is a very tricky subject because it's had a very bad press. You know, if somebody says someone's a really holy person, you sort of want to avoid them.

You know that they're just going to make you feel guilty because they're so good and you'll be shown up beside them. And of course, our great bard, Rabbi Burns, didn't do holiness any favors

whatsoever in writing Holy Willys Prayer, which just made everybody think people who are holy are Holy Willys and that's not a good thing at all.

But holiness is simply being like God. And it's not something that you can just say, well, tomorrow morning I'm going to wake up holy. It's a process.

[5 : 17] It's something that you aim for, something that develops within you, something that is your aim right throughout the whole of your Christian life. Even if you manage to get as old as Dennis, you'll still be seeking more holiness in your life, more being like God, more being like Jesus.

And it all begins with conversion. However that happens, it could just be something that happens as you grow up. You hardly even notice if you grow up in church or it could be a clear experience.

But in that experience, the Bible says you have a new life, a new identity. You're a new person. And this is where it starts. This is the start of the process of holiness.

And as you continue on, as you read your Bible, as you pray, as you get into fellowship and learn things from other Christians, so you get deeper and deeper into this new self.

Paul in Ephesians says that you should put on your new self, put on your new self, created to be like God. This is the point of what he's saying here.

[6 : 30] Be sanctified. This is God's will for you. This is what he wants. You're created to be like God in true righteousness and humility. And of course, that's right.

Because we know the whole story, don't we? We know where it begins that man is made in God's image. And so that's the aim. That's what God wants.

God wants us to get back to that. That's why he sends Jesus. That's why the king is dead. But now the king is alive and now the king is risen and here so that we can put on that new self and become more and more like Jesus.

Our desire has to be more like the father. There's a lovely film called Bear where a tiny bear cub is born but its mother dies and so it's left alone and very vulnerable until a great big male bear spots him and adopts him.

And the film goes on with the cub and the big daddy bear going along together. And what the little cub does is to start to imitate everything his father does.

[7 : 44] He'll try to spear fish with his claw. He'll stand up on two feet. He'll rub his back against a tree. Everything that the father does the little bear cub tries to do as well.

And that's what Paul's encouraging the Thessalonians and us to do is to be more and more like the father. There's another lovely bit that comes in the story where the mountain lion who's been tracking down the little cub but can't get at him because of the protection of the big bear he suddenly discovers that the cub's been separated from the father.

And the cub doesn't know what to do but he's still imitating his father bear and so he growls and it comes out as a wee squeak. And the mountain lion says ah, this is it.

This is my dinner. And then all of a sudden the mountain lion turns and runs away. Why? Because behind the little cub is a great big bear and he's showing his claws.

And that's the promise for us as we try to be like the father. Even in the times when that becomes exceedingly difficult the father is there watching over us, guarding us.

[9 : 06] Holiness is much more like that picture than it is like Holy Willie's prayer. You should be sanctified, Paul says.

This is God's will that you are sanctified. You should want to be like your father if you're following Jesus Christ.

You should want to be like God to have God's characteristics. You should want to copy Christ. A little while ago there were little rubber bands going around people's wrists at Christian festivals. You could buy them for a pound. And one of them had the letters WWJD on them. What would Jesus do? It's a lovely question. There's a book.

An old book now. I managed to find it again and read it called In His Steps. And it's based entirely on that and a community who are transformed because the minister's transformed by this challenge to walk in Jesus' steps and to apply that question what would Jesus do to absolutely everything.

[10 : 15] And it's fiction but it's a great story and it lets us see what can happen if we're, as a church, are trying to be like Jesus. But this desire to be sanctified affects the whole of our lives.

It doesn't just affect little parts of it. It's not the religious part of it or the spiritual part. It's everything. It's everything that we do within our lives.

And Paul continues to take one example. I'm sure there's a very good reason why Paul chooses sexual immorality. And indeed, he probably would choose the same thing if he was speaking to people in our community nowadays.

It's clearly, it's a problem. And so he explains very clearly that this is not what God wants. This is not being sanctified.

This is losing control of your body. It's giving your thoughts away, your choices away to something else. And it's disrespectful. It's dishonoring other people.

[11 : 24] And just briefly, because I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about sexual immorality, but just very briefly, what I've found myself involved in again and again in recent years is the problem of pornography and people looking at these images.

And that has prompted me to go to a couple of conferences and to read some books. And one of the things, because young men think, well, it's okay.

I'm not harming anybody. But they are. They're harming women in general, but they're also harming the women who may well become their wife because they've planted this in their heads as being what sexuality is about.

Paul says, take control of your body. Take control of the decisions that you make in this area. But take control of your decisions altogether.

Controlling your body in a way that's holy and honorable, and he sets that against passionate lust and ignorance. Selfishness in any area whatsoever dishonors other people.

[12 : 47] Selfishness in a marriage dishonors the spouse. Selfishness in a child dishonors the parents. selfishness by the boss at work dishonors the people that the boss is over.

And it's got no place in the Christian life. Jesus said quite simply, but I believe that it's the core statement for a Christian who wants to be like Jesus.

Die to self. Die to self. There is no place for self as you try to follow Christ. That's not easy.

It's not easy at all. One thing that we saw in Japan became very, very evident is how the Japanese culture has is laced with self-control.

perhaps it's far too much and you can say that and you're probably right. But in that culture if you drink too much or if you eat too much you're losing self-control.

[14 : 06] And so we spent five weeks not seeing anybody who was drunk. We spent five weeks seeing a whole lot of people exercise and very few people who were overweight and certainly not Japanese people.

A different culture but a culture that still has self-control in it. My daughter warned us that when we returned we'd suffer what she called reverse culture shock.

And you do. Five weeks is long enough to make you forget what it's like here. I never saw one piece of chewing gum on the pavements and recycled a lot of pavements.

They just don't do it. That's not self-control to just spit out your chewing gum. There are no bins. It's not self-control to drop your litter. There's no litter. You take your litter home with you.

A completely different attitude. An attitude that is commendable in Christianity if we seek self-control by dying to self.

[15 : 11] Paul says that if we don't then we don't just dishonor each other we also dishonor God. I have been amazed on numerous occasions throughout my Christian ministry of people who I have thought had a very strong faith and yet I've discovered that some of their actions have just been clearly nothing to do with Christianity or their faith or Jesus or the gospel.

And one such person sadly was my worship leader and he burst into my study one night to say I've been having an affair but I don't want to lose my family and I was very straight with him and told him you're a married man go back to your wife tell her what's been happening and ask for her forgiveness which he did I'm pleased to see but in later conversations I said to him how could you have led worship the affair was with a woman in the praise band how could you have led worship even sung duets with this woman and still hold on to a Christian faith how can you do that and these words hit me like a sledgehammer I couldn't actually believe he was saying he said I compartmentalize my life I compartmentalize my life so I've got my family here and my work there and my affair here and my faith it doesn't work like that our faith covers everything sanctification covers everything every part of our lives how we are at work how we are at home how we are at play how we are no matter what we're doing every single part of our life

I wrote down compartmentalization it was so long I counted the letters and it came to 20 and I thought that's probably the longest word that I have ever used in a sermon but then I decided that what we really have to do is decompartmentalization so that's now the longest word we can't compartmentalize we can't separate our faith from everything else we can't have faith and look at pornographic images it doesn't work holiness is a daily series of choices that are formed out of faith and affect the whole of our lives so Paul goes on then to talk about some more of these choices he goes on to talk about brotherly love Philadelphia that kind of love it's very interesting the word in the Old Testament is means brotherly love but strictly love for your family so I didn't know this before so it is literally love for your brother but Christians changed it because Christians started to call each other brother and sister and they started to use this word for love in this kind of sense in verse one Paul says Paul talks about how to live and says you've got to do this more and more and now in verse ten he talks about how to love and he says you've got to do this more and more and once again he uses this wee trick it's a good one you know my grandsons are studying for external exams and I know that my daughter gets on at them and the way we normally do that is to say you're not studying hard enough come on it's far better to say you're really studying very well but I think you could do more and that's what Paul says here you love each other really well but I think you could do it more he talks about ambition make it your ambition in verse 11 make it your ambition and then he talks about three things to do and it's difficult to know what to make of this bit because he talks about lead a quiet life mind your own business and work with your hands it would be quite wrong to pick these up and say here's three laws for us today they were important obviously to the

Thessalonian church and if you need a commentary they'll probably make some suggestions as to what it might be but that's not really the point the point is to make your decisions that lead to increasing your love your love for your brother your love for your sister and also your love for your neighbor because immediately we think about this we immediately think of what Jesus said love the Lord your God with all your heart all your mind all your soul all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself so the ambition that we should have then is to increase our love both here in the fellowship and once again I want to say this about there's no limit to this there's no well Johannes I'll love you this far but you know not any further than that because you're

[21 : 06] German no that's not true I love Germans but there's no limit to it there's no boundary we love and we love and we love and as we love we forgive we continue to share and the Christian life in us but also in our community grows and grows whatever these three things meant this fledgling church had to live within its community and there might have been some people who were not leading a quiet life in a way that was not honoring God and not honoring the church and so he tells them not to do that some people who were more inclined to talk about other people's business than getting on with their own some people perhaps who felt that they didn't need to work too hard because everybody perhaps was giving to each other and so they weren't contributing whatever they are they had to find out what their place was in this society now that they were

Christians and that meant choices I have no doubt going back to his talk about sexual immorality that they had to make big choices about that because of what they would be involved in in their society and they got to make choices about how they love they have to make that their ambition increase your love inside and outside choices should reflect this the choices that we make and this perhaps comes to the nuts and bolts of the Christian life die to self love the Lord your God love your neighbor now make your choices reflect that whatever they might be if we're self-centered as that is so characteristic of the society that we're living in of the culture then we've got to realize that and work out what it means to die to self you think you know that as you're going on you're doing quite well but one thing I had to die to and this is my confession it's always good to make a confession at some point in the sermon when I became a minister

I'm a very competitive person I'm a very good loser because the Reed family never let you win when you were a child so you grew up knowing what losing meant but you also strove to win and so I've ended up being a very competitive person when I became a minister I wanted my church to be the best and sneakily into the back of my mind comes so I don't want the other churches to do too well and of course you because you're Christian and you're intelligent you reason it oh I only want my church to be the best for the sake of the gospel but when I'm having my honest moments it's no it's not just that it's so that I look good in presbytery against all these other churches I want my church to grow I want my church to be doing things I want my church to have more youth than

anybody else's church and when I realized that I had to come to grips with that and get it sorted out because it's not dying to self it's letting that self get a little bit in and then it starts to affect things I had to die to that sometimes we have to make choices about better occupation and I've always been impressed when I've heard a Christian say I'm going to shorten my hours I'm going to earn less so that I'll have more time more time for the family more time for the Lord and more time for the church I've not heard that very often which is sad there was a minister in Glasgow Presbytery a Presbytery meeting a church that couldn't get a minister and they didn't want to close it because it was the only church in a rundown area and this man who had just retired when this debate came up again what are we going to do with this church he stood up and said

I'll go which I always thought was a wonderful thing it was so unselfish so Christ like the decisions that we make should reflect Christ the decisions that we make should be made not out of selfishness but out of our love for our brothers and sisters and those outside the church pressure in society makes this very very difficult and I fully fully understand that part of the problem in Japan is the drive to make children successful and so they're driven and with the discipline which all Scottish teachers would be envious of but with the discipline in there the children are pushed and pushed and pushed and the suicide rate for teenagers in

[27 : 31] Japan is way higher than most countries and when they get a job they're still pushed they've got very few holidays they're they don't have contracts that say well I've done my hours this week if they're asked to do more they have to do more and sometimes education here does the same thing if you work hard if you pass your exams you'll get a better job and life will be so much better for you you'll be able to own a big house and you'll be able to get a good car one teacher was in the middle of saying that when she saw outside a man who was sweeping the streets and so she turned around and said if you don't work hard you'll end up like him and one wee boy put his hand up true story put his hand up and said please miss that's my father and there was silence

I went into teaching just to give you a good story about myself I went into teaching to teach children and I resisted telling people that I was a maths teacher I was a teacher of children of people and I loved it I would have done it for nothing thankfully someone paid me which was great my mother wanted me to be a banker had I been a banker I'd probably been successful I'd probably in my mid-fifties have taken early retirement I'd have paid off my mortgage I'd have buttermilk in Spain I'd never have met Evelyn I wouldn't have the children that I have I wouldn't have been doing what God wanted it wasn't God's way for me but selfishly I could have said well that route's going to pay an awful lot more than teaching a good friend of mine is called Mike McMahon he used to share the chaplaincy room with me in the secondary school and he told the story of how he went into the ministry to the young people in the chaplaincy room he said I was very ambitious I was on my way to be a millionaire that was my ambition and I was on route for that

I was very very highly paid and I decided to answer Christ's call and give it all up and become a pastor in this church in Dunfermline and the children looked at him and said that was stupid what would you do that for and he said well I did it because that's what God wanted and did you give up your car and he said yes and they were just shaking their heads and he said but wait a minute I was only in the job a couple of weeks when a man stopped me and said I hear you've given up your job to become a pastor I'd like to give you a car and of course the children said what kind of car how's about a BMG will that do and suddenly the children's attitude changed because they realized God is in this and when God's in it the choices are good so we're asked to make godly choices inside the fellowship and outside the fellowship we're asked to be holy as God is holy because that is what God wants for us seek it with all your heart not just spiritually but practically not just in some parts of your life not compartmentalizing but in every part your good deeds your compassion your love salad as