

Sermon: Lust, Love, Labour

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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Introduction

Knowing the truth is not enough for us – we must also live in accordance with it. We are all called to holiness. That is living in accordance with truth, with the will of God. Jesus said in the sermon of the mount: ‘You, therefore, must be perfect - as your heavenly father is perfect’. (Mat 5:48)

In his letter to the young and faithful church in Thessalonica, a letter we have been studying in the previous weeks, Paul now begins to speak of the Christian lifestyle – about love. In accordance with most of his letters, he has first focused on matters of knowledge, of theology, of the facts of the Gospel, and now his attention shift to living in accordance with this truth.

In the previous chapter, chapter 3, Paul spoke of the fact that the young believers in Thessalonica had true faith, and that this faith was given expression by their love. Now St Paul zooms in; he speaks of the practical application of this love.

1 - Love one wife

The first concrete subject Paul speaks about is love and its most physical expression, sexuality. Some people think these are topics not to speak about in church – but our apostle wrote about it, and we endeavour to not avoid any part of the apostolic message.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the instructions he gave them when he was there. **For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.**

He gave instructions – this is a military term, meaning: ‘marching orders’, and he gave those instructions ‘in the authority of Jesus’. These are God’s orders! So we better obey.

St John Chrysostom (349-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, from *Letters to the fallen Theodore*, 2.4, wrote:

There is only one calamity for a Christian, this being disobedience to God. All the other things such as the loss of property, exile, peril of life, Paul does not even consider a grievance at all.

Our real and only desire should be to please our heavenly Father. **It is God’s will that you should be sanctified**, says Paul. And the first thing he mentions: **that you should avoid sexual immorality**. In the young congregation in Thessalonica this must have been the foremost problem, as Paul starts with this issue.

Sexuality itself is not wrong, let me underline this. It is good. It is created by God. Our bodies are also not wrong. *Bad usage* of sexuality and *bad usage* of the body is wrong.

The Greek word Paul uses for ‘sexual immorality’ is *porneia*. The English word ‘pornography’ comes from this word. What do we watch on TV and on the internet? What do we allow to fill our minds? God wants us to control ourselves and that we live with our body in a manner that is holy and honourable. We should not be led by passionate lust. Who is in charge of our life? Is it our lusts? Or our wisdom and mind, guided by God?

In verse 3 we read: **man should learn to control his body in a way that is holy and honourable**. Another, and I think a better translation of the Greek is: man has to ‘take a wife for himself in a way that is holy and honourable.’ This is a strong warning against foolish behaviour.

1 Thes 4:5-6 says: do not do this **in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and [...] in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother**. Do not cheat your brother, is what Paul says. So, stay away from the wife of your Christian brother.

The principle of chastity, of not just doing as you like, dates from paradise. Man was made for *one wife* in his *one life*.

Man was also not made for another man, and man was not made for many women. And women were not made for many men. Husbands, stick to your wife; wives, stick to your husband. Unmarried people: wait with sex. For 2000 years, this has been the teaching of the church, based on Holy Scripture. Looking at the results of a different view of sexuality in

our modern society does not give us exactly good reasons to doubt the wisdom of this Biblical teaching of Jesus, the apostles, and the Church.

Why does God give us these rules? To make our life hard? No of course. He created us and he knows what is best for us. To live in harmony with his will is best for us.

The American pastor and writer Warren Wiersbe in his *Be- Series* on 1 Thessalonians, writes:

God's commandments concerning sex are not for the purpose of robbing people of joy, but rather of protecting them that they do not lose their joy. 'Though shalt not commit adultery' builds a wall around marriage that makes the relationship not a prison but a safe and beautiful garden.

2 - Love all Christians

This is the Word of God for us! 1 Thes 4:8: **Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.**

God has given you the Holy Spirit – *with stress on holy!* and therefore you know how to live a holy life, is what Paul argues. So do it!

He then proceeds to encourage them to love each other, as they already do. The word he now uses for love is 'brotherly love' (Greek: *philadelphia*). *Lusting for each other* is strongly condemned – but showing one another signs of brotherly and sisterly love is excellent.

The believers in the city of Thessalonica showed brotherly love to all other believers, not only those in their own city, but also to those farther away. Paul encourages them to do this even more. As God has adopted us all into his one family it is only natural that we love one another and care for each other.

St Clement of Rome, in his *Letter to the Corinthians*, 49, (written ca. 95 AD), writes about love:

What man is able to tell the excellence of its beauty, as it ought to be told? The height to which love exalts is unspeakable. Love unites us to God. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love bears all things, is patient in all things. There is nothing base, nothing arrogant in love. Love admits of no schisms; love gives rise to no seditions; love does all things in harmony. By love have all the elect of God been made perfect; without love nothing is well pleasing to God.

Is that not what we all desire?

This can be *our church; our community!* This is why as church, we meet together, we eat together (next week a potluck!); we do things for each other when there is a need. This is why we help projects in the diocese to alleviate poverty among our brothers and sisters. For the joy of it, come and see how our Sudanese congregation meets here on Sunday at 1 pm, and how they have a meal together afterwards, given to them, just to show our love and appreciation for them. If you like to personally help with this: we need about LE 850 per week for giving over 150 people a solid meal. For many the best meal of the week.

It is this love that also shows to all people around us that we belong to our Lord, the Lord of love. Read John 13:34-35. **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

Who would not want to be part of a community where this love is seen and felt between brothers and sisters?

3 – Work hard

It is interesting that Paul then continues to talk about our need to work hard. 1 Thes 4:11-12: **You should mind your own business and work with your hands, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.**

Greeks despised manual labour. Most of the real work was done by slaves. Paul, of course, was a tentmaker; and he was careful at Thessalonica to set the example of hard work. In his next letter to that same congregation, Paul said:

We command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.

Hard work is a good antidote against unhelpful desires. If you are wrecked by wrong desires, have you considered whether you have enough to do?

Work is something of immense human and supernatural value, for it is a means for personal sanctification and for helping others. It would be unworthy of a Christian to live an idle life and expect to be supported by the charity of others.

Some new believers in the church seemed to have misunderstood the teachings of Paul about the return of Jesus Christ. Next week we will look into this issue of the return of Jesus. But it seems people had given up their jobs, and were just waiting and sitting and doing nothing.

Well actually, people who are just sitting, often create problems. Don't you know such people, who have nothing to do? Often they go around creating problems. Hard work, on the other hand, is a tool in God's hand to help us progress in serving him.

St Josemaria Escriva (1902-1975), founder of Opus Dei, in *Friends of God*, says:

A person cannot be regarded as a good Christian if he does not try to work well, for our professional vocation is an essential and inseparable part of our condition as Christians. Our Lord wants you to be holy in the place where you are, in the job you have chosen.

Do not be a person who disturbs the peace of others. Do not wreck the life of others. Earn your own money, work hard. Even if you cannot find work, offer your service as a volunteer. If you do not have enough to do, you can always work as a volunteer. We have enough projects where you can show your brotherly and sisterly love by helping others. But at least: do something. Doing nothing is very bad for yourself and for other people.

Conclusion

Let us finish with a quote from St Josemaria Escriva, from his book *Friends of God*:

Christ's invitation to holiness, which he addressed to all men without exception, puts each one of us under an obligation to cultivate our interior life and to struggle daily to practice Christian virtues; and not just in any old way, nor in a way which is above average or even excellent. No; we must strive to the point of heroism.

Let us strive to obey our Lord in a heroic manner, and

-Do not allow lusts to wreck your life and that of others.

-Do love your fellow Christians in a tangible, practical manner. Find ways to serving other Christians. Eat together with us next week when we have a potluck!

-Work hard in your job.

People who live in such a manner honour God and they are a blessing to their fellow Christians. And you are even a testimony to the life changing power of God for people outside our community.

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen