

# 1 Thessalonians 4

## 1 Thessalonians 4 (NRSV)

4 Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.<sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.<sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification<sup>1</sup>: that you abstain from fornication;<sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor,<sup>5</sup> not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;<sup>6</sup> that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.<sup>7</sup> For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.<sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever rejects this, rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

<sup>9</sup> Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;<sup>10</sup> and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more,<sup>11</sup> to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you,<sup>12</sup> so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

<sup>13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.<sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.<sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.<sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.<sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.<sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

- While the NRSV translates the Greek word for “walk” as “live” and “behave,” Paul exhorts his readers with this need for ongoing *discipline*. There is distinctive “walk” that we need to undertake, a walk of *faithfulness* and *holiness*. This last section has an emphasis on *persistence*.
- Paul begins this section with “finally,” something not unusual in Paul's writing - 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 3:1. But the word “finally” does not (necessarily) mean at that it's the last thing!
- The church has *learned* from Paul and Silas, and Paul is now *urging* the church to persist in that taught and modeled behavior. Paul indicates that they heard the teaching as being the “word of God,” not of humans - 2: 13. Paul encourages them with an ethic of moral instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanctification – the process of becoming holy or set apart – becoming more like Christ.

- Sanctification means *holiness*.
- Some actions/behaviors were not simply permissible because they reflected the former practices of non-Jewish converts or because they indicated a desire of selfishness, as opposed to the fruit of the Spirit. There is mentioned that they should abstained from “fornication” or immorality. (Unfortunately, there is some ambiguity in Paul's word choice and meaning and consequently there is some debate here.) Regardless, Paul’s challenge is for the church to operate in holiness and purity. And hence not to be sexually promiscuous, which can also harm the person and any partner that *they* may have. Sexuality is a good gift of the wise creator, but like all good gifts, it is given for a purpose. Only in a world where the only purpose was self gratification could anyone suppose bet hard work was not going to be necessary to tame and train our powerful sexual desires. That was the kind of world that the Thessalonians found themselves in. Pagan temples regularly doubled as brothels, and sexual practices of all sorts were at least tolerated if not actively encouraged within society as a whole. The new way of life was therefore a huge challenge for the young Christians. There are two principles then that seem obvious: no participation in the sacred prostitution at Pagan temples, and having self control within marriage, In other words no cheating on your spouse. Remember proper sexual behavior is not negative, it is good!
- Having the *Holy Spirit* within us is also a call for us to develop have the *fruit* of the spirit, which is, after all, a growth in *holiness*. Put differently, God wants us to become people who bear *God's image*. After all, according to genesis we are made in the *image* of God. Paul says that we have been solemnly *warned*, which is why he is pleading and urging to live a life worthy of God.
- If God is an “avenger,” then self-vindication amongst those who are wronged is inappropriate.
- In **4:9-12** there is an emphasis on a *distinctive* living, that is a life that is distinct from that from *before* conversion. Whatever they have been doing, Paul exhorts them to do so more and more. He's talking about *brotherly love*, the love among siblings, that is to be increased amongst the believing community. The people have been taught *by God*, not self-taught - as some of the Greek philosophers would claim.
- Paul, as a pastor, praises what they do but recognizes there is room for improvement as well.
- Concerning Paul's admonition to “mind their own affairs,” that sounds familiar with the platonic tradition and a call away from public life to become a smaller community. If the church faced local hostilities and alienation, the last thing that they needed to do was to meddle in the affairs of the largest society. “Working with their hands” speaks of being self-sufficient, i.e., taking care of each other (financially) without encouraging laziness.
- *Reflection: We must be careful not to misunderstand Paul's emphasis on boundaries. If Christians ought to be different from the larger society, and that is our Calling, our quest must not emanate from a will to simply retreat to the remote corners of life. Our calling is not to isolate ourselves, but to conduct ourselves as children of God.*

- **4:13-18** (and to 5:11).
- Although this gives the impression of being new material, it may well be that Paul is just underlining and anxiety that the Thessalonians had, and that Timothy had mentioned to them.
- the Thessalonians had, of course, heard of the resurrection of the dead and many might have thought that the *parousia* would come before their fellow believers died. Paul writes to console them about those who have died already.
- He talks to them that they have *hope*. The hope that Paul has lies in the extraordinary power of Christ's coming as the *consummation* of the new age and the climatic conclusion of the old. Dramatically, it has the power to raise believers from the dead and to transform both the living and the risen into a lasting union with Jesus Christ.
- The line that "we believe Christ died and rose again" is obviously part of our creed.
- "Jesus rising" here, rather than the customary Paul language of "God raising Jesus from the dead" - see Rom 4: 24; 1 Cor 15: 15; 2 Cor 4: 14; Gal 1: 1; 1 Thess 1: 10.
- In verse 15 it begins "according to the *Lord's* own word . . ." we're not quite sure whether this is part of the "Jesus (oral) tradition" or just a phrase that Paul is using for authoritative purposes. Paul uses language to do with "the angel" and "the trumpet" that echoes the wisdom literature of the Jews at that time, including the mention of "clouds" from Dan 7: 13. The phrase "cry of command" almost speaks of a military battle, but one that nevertheless causes the dead to rise. Well death may "snatch" us, Jesus will snatch the dead and raise them up!
- Is language that is being confused as the rapture needs to be understood as being very different from *literal*. These are paintings to describe the indescribable. The contextual meaning of *parousia* (visiting conqueror or king) is implied and must be appreciated. (This is not a complete description of 'life after death' but the resurrection of Jesus suggests a new kind of physicality, not a purely non-physical ('spirit') body. The movement is not literally up/down, but an opening of a new dimension. All this is accompanied by vindication, justice, wrongs being put right, and a renewed creation.)
- Paul uses this description of the *parousia* to speak of mutual consolation, not speculation.
- Don't forget that 1 Cor 15 was written later and therefore needs to be read in dependently to this text, addressing another church specific issues.
- We ought to be encouraged in the midst of our grief because death is not the final word.
- Whether the non-Jewish audience had the apocalyptic background to understand all the particulars that Paul mentions is uncertain. Nevertheless, the message is reassuring both then and now.

## Questions:

### 4:1-8

- What is your reaction to Paul's ethical "urgings"?
- What does "holiness" mean to you?
- How does knowing Greco-Roman culture help understand Paul's plea for sexual 'purity'? What might this mean for us today?

### 4:9-12

- Paul urges familial love for the faith community. What does that look like? Then and now?
- Besides "love" what else does he encourage? Does that have relevance for today?

### 4:13-18

- Does this section give comfort or create confusion for you? Discuss.