

"The Particulars of Holiness" 1 Thess. 4:1-12 August 13, 1995

Text Comment

v. 4a **The** great translation problem in First Thessalonians. The phrase has been taken to mean, both by some early patristic commentators and by many modern commentators, "each of you should acquire a wife" rather than "learn to control his own body." Weighty arguments can be advanced on behalf of both translations -- the RSV, for example, renders the verse: "each one of you should know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor". Without taking the time to survey those arguments, let me say two things. I think the weight of probability rests on the side of the translation given in the NIV. It is interesting to me that most of the Greek speaking commentators of the early church took Paul this way. Second, however we render the verse, Paul's point is clearly that Christians are to live chaste lives, that sex is forbidden except in marriage and, even then, must be practiced in purity and love. Take Paul either way and his main point remains the same.

Last Lord's Day we considered Paul's opening statement in this new section of 1 Thessalonians. In this part of the letter he is urging them on in holy and righteous living, asking them to do "more and more" what they are already doing in living for Christ. This is sanctification, the continuing transformation of a Christians life according to the laws of God and the example of Jesus Christ, and, Paul says, it is God's will for every believer.

But he does not leave the matter in the general. He descends to particulars. In this case, he descends to three particulars, three areas of Christian living that he thinks call for special mention in his letter to these new Christians in Thessalonica.

But I do not intend simply to discuss these three areas of Christian ethics, to follow Paul's argument through each one and to identify the particular obligation Paul laid before his readers. I want to draw from all of the three together something of a philosophy of Christian obedience and godly living, or, perhaps better, an approach to sanctification, to "more and more" holiness and Christlikeness in our lives.

For there is a special importance, I think, in the fact that Paul, controlled as he was by the Holy Spirit as he wrote, thought to say three separate things about godly living to the new believers in Thessalonica. There is a great importance in that fact, that there are many things to say about godliness, many parts of true holiness, which Paul and the rest of the Scripture urge upon us. There are great lessons in the multiformity of holiness, the many-faceted picture of true, authentic living as given in the New Testament. Indeed, some of the most practical of all lessons for us who desire to be more godly, lie in this fact that Paul thought to say three separate and different things: that when he addressed them concerning sanctification he spoke to them of sexual purity, of brotherly love, and of a quiet and honorable life of hard work.

And the first of these lessons is this:

I. Each Christian's holiness requires special attention to specific issues forced upon him or

her or to specific temptations which lie in his or her way.

The Christian life is not a simple formula that can be applied by everyone in the same way to produce the same result. Nor is it a general formula that can be applied in order to obtain the different parts or aspects of true godliness. In the world God has made, a world full of utterly unique personalities in which no human being, and no Christian, is the same as any other, and a world full of constantly changing circumstances that effect us all differently and in varying measure, no one's call to holiness and to living a godly life "more and more" will mean exactly the same thing.

Each of us will fight our battles at somewhat different points, each of us will discover that the battle rages, **for us**, most fiercely at a different point in the line. Some of us will struggle with tears and in the teeth of frequent disappointment against temptations that seem nothing to others and those same others will be defeated in climbing what seems to them great mountains but which appear to us little hills easy to get over. One man cannot control his money; another finds no trouble with money but cannot reign in his tongue; another man is very quiet but wholly turned in on himself and of little good to anyone else; and so it goes.

I speak as your pastor, as one who knows many of you and where it is that you find your victories and your defeats in living for the glory of God. And I can tell you that this is a fact as true and as important today as ever it was in the days of the Apostle Paul. Every one of you has a battle to fight that is significantly different than anyone else's battle, even though all of you are seeking the very same thing -- the sanctification of your soul.

Look at these three particulars Paul draws the attention of his readers to: sexual purity, brotherly love, and a quiet and hard-working life. Now, ask yourself: why did he choose these three and not three others? He mentions many other ethical concerns in his other letters, why these three to the Thessalonians.

1. Well, sexual purity occupies an important place in NT ethics, for very much the same reason it must return to the front and center today. These people lived in an environment that was and had been for so long so radioactively sinful sexually, that it was hard for them to escape the habits of thought and action which had been dinned in to them.

In Greco-Roman society it was regarded as unreasonable to demand either that men abstain from sexual relations until they were married or that they confine those relations to their wives. It was taken for granted men would naturally seek the satisfaction of their sexual desires outside of marriage.

The same freedom was not, by the way, bestowed so readily on women! It was a wrenching adjustment for new Christians to abandon that way of life altogether and to practice Christian chastity -- that is, sexual abstinence before and outside of marriage and sexual faithfulness within the marriage bond. It is difficult enough to put on sexual faithfulness in a culture that admires and expects it -- how much more in a culture that neither admires nor expects it and in which no one else practices it.

In other words, people living in that particular time, had, as a result of the influence of the culture in which they lived, special temptations and the Christian life was for them particularly difficult in specific ways.

It has become so in regard to sexual ethics again in our own day because of our society's coming so widely to believe that sexual chastity is an unreasonable, even unhealthy demand. When I was in Amsterdam in 1984, I paid a divinity student to meet with me several times a week to work on my Dutch reading. I cannot remember the passage we were reading but the subject of sexual purity was raised and he, a ministerial student, reacted in surprise and offended pique. Modern studies had shown, he said, that it was unhealthy for young men and women to remain chaste before marriage. It is remarkable how thoroughly the ideal of chastity before marriage has disappeared from our culture in the last 30 years. You young people, who take this for granted, do not realize that even in my youth television script writers were never allowed to write as if every young person was promiscuous, indeed, quite the contrary. And every study that has been done of Christian young people and young adults indicates that the weight of this social and cultural expectation, the removing of all barriers to sexual expression, has had a profound influence on them. Even those who know it is right find sexual abstinence a terrible difficulty. So it was in Thessalonica. The culture was against purity at every turn and so it made purity a great struggle for Christians and something Paul needed to raise again and again.

2. The next of Paul's ethical particulars is that of brotherly love. Now why did he single out this particular duty among the many he might have mentioned?

We might wonder about this especially because Paul himself seems to say that these new believers in Thessalonica were already setting an excellent example of unity and charity. He says, in a rhetorical way, that he didn't really need to write to them about **this**, for it was a grace they already excelled in.

But, Paul was too well aware of how quickly problems had surfaced in all of his new churches to put strain on the brotherhood of the believers. I wonder myself if this subject was not particularly on Paul's mind because of his own recent bitter experience with Barnabas. He had had such a sharp disagreement with Barnabas, the man who had so wonderfully befriended him when Paul first became a Christian and who had brought him into the work of his apostleship 14 years later, and who had accompanied him on his first missionary foray, with Barnabas, the son of encouragement whom all the Christians loved and admired -- that the two men had had to part company. I wonder how often Paul had wished on this second missionary journey, in Philippi and then in Thessalonica and Berea and Athens, that Barnabas had been with him again. **Don't forget brotherly love; be on guard against all the Devil's attacks upon it, for he will try to divide you.** If you are united he cannot stand against you, but if you are divided he had pick you off person by person and group by group.

And, then, it had to be emphasized, I think, as well because it was such a new idea, a demand so revolutionary that it took a lot of getting used to and objections would naturally surface from those who had not yet adjusted to this new demand. Plutarch, the Greek moralist of a century before, had written a treatise "On the love of brothers." But his treatise concerned the obligations of blood relatives whereas in the Christian community **everyone**, however different

in personality, background, or custom, was to be considered a brother or sister. Jews and Gentiles, slaveholders and slaves, rich and poor, various nationalities -- all brethren. A truly revolutionary idea and the Devil was putting maximum pressure on it in early Christianity in hopes of discrediting the entire idea. The Christians in Thessalonica, Paul thought, would only resist these pressures if they were seeking more of this unity and love and not resting on past laurels; that is, they would only withstand the Devil's strong winds if they were leaning forward into them.

3. And, then, in the third place, Paul raised the ethical issue of a quiet hard-working life.

And we know exactly why this issue was raised. We learn in the following paragraphs and, especially in 2 Thess. 3:11, that there were some who were so excited by all that they had been told of the second coming of the Lord Jesus, were so enthralled by the expectation of his glorious return, that they felt it was not only pointless, but somehow not spiritual to continue with one's steady job. It was much more in keeping with the faith, they seemed to think, to go about proclaiming the end of the world. If they had need of this world's goods in the meantime, well, there were other Christians who could be relied upon for that. No, says Paul, that is not the way for you to live, it is not a right way for you to bear witness to the Lord's return.

So here we have an ethical lapse that derives from a false understanding of both doctrine and duty that some of these Christians had somehow come to.

Now, the point is this. Some temptations come from the culture in which we live; some come from the nature of our historical moment or the inevitable interests of our arch-enemy; some come from our own level of understanding of Christian truth. And we could go on: some of our temptations arise from our family background, from our personality and make-up, from our life-circumstances: some of us are tempted because of our blessings and some of us in different ways because of our trials.

The point is, every sanctification, every Christian life is a unique calling and challenge and difficulty because every one is different and has different temptations and battles. If you read the Scripture and the best of the church's books on growing in grace you will find that, if the desire to grow in godliness is present, the great issue, the great need is then to know, to know personally and accurately and precisely, how that battle must be waged in any Christian's own individual life: what his temptations are in particular, what his weaknesses, what the history of his battles teaches him about how victories will be won or battles lost, and what the Devil's way with him has been. You cannot put yourself on guard against the Devil's wiles --as Paul tells the Ephesians they must-- if you have not learned what they are. And the reason he does not tell the Ephesians what the Devil's wiles are is precisely because they are different in every Christian life.

This is the first lesson concerning sanctification to be taken from Paul's setting three very different parts of holiness before us. Putting on holiness is a matter of each Christian learning his own times, his own heart, and his own history, and applying that knowledge to his own case - - just as Paul applied it to the case of the Thessalonians.

II. The second great lesson concerning sanctification to be drawn from Paul's three-fold exhortation is that real growth in grace requires a commitment to universal obedience.

I suspect not a one of us in this room, not even the most serious, earnest, consecrated Christians among us, understands how often and how much we weaken ourselves by failure at exactly this point.

You see, what we wish, in our heart of hearts, if we would be honest with ourselves, is that Paul had said instead: Now those of you who want to concentrate on brotherly love, do this; and those of you who wish to make hard-work and simple living your emphasis, do this; and those of you who find sexual purity most attractive, work in this way. **But he did not and the Bible never does.**

Everyone of us is happy to work against certain sins in our lives, especially those sins that don't have that terrible grip on us, those sins that we don't love -- God help us -- that we don't still love so much. And we want to be able to believe that if we are working hard against certain sins, then our continuing with certain others isn't so serious or so bad.

And so the man says: Lord help me in my witness for you; help me to control my money and to be generous with it, help me to grow in the grace of prayer but he can hardly pray for sexual purity in thought and in deed because he knows in his heart that he is not ready to give up sexual sin, he loves it too much, he is afraid of holiness in that part of his life. And so he manages such a prayer as Augustine said he used to pray: "Lord, give me chastity, but don't give it to me yet." And he hopes that working hard on other sins, striving after other righteousness will compensate for his lack of consecration here.

And so the woman thinks who commits herself to this righteousness or that but who remains unready to give herself to the end of a judgmental spirit or to the honoring of her husband.

But Paul's point is that godliness is a unity, because godliness is not separate, abstract pieces of obedience patched together in someone's life. Godliness is love for God expressing itself in the doing of his will -- and to be doing one thing while refusing to do another is tantamount to doing **your** will, not God's. The other obedience you seek, you seek apparently not to please God, but to gain freedom for yourself to displease him. You want by certain acts of obedience to be left free to practice certain acts of disobedience. And that is not love.

I remember, many years ago, the first time I read John Owen "On the mortification of Sin." It was an epoch in my life reading that great book -- a book that has not seen its equal in all the centuries since it was written. And I remember distinctly how Owen both hammered me and liberated me with this fundamental lesson and rule of Christian sanctification. After certain introductory matters, Owen set about laying down the rules and directions for the killing of sin in our lives. The first was that you have to be a Christian first.

But the second rule was this: "without universal sincerity for the mortifying of every sin, no sin will be mortified or killed."

His point, made with his characteristically punishing force and clarity was that hatred of sin **as sin**, not only as something that troubles and distresses **you**, and a love for Christ on the cross, lie at the bottom of any true and effective warfare against sin. And if, he went on to say, you really hate sin and love God, you will be as watchful against all that grieves the Lord as you are against that which grieves you!

When I first read those words I was both cast down and lifted up: cast down because I saw how clearly I was guilty of trying to have my cake and eat it too, and lifted up because I saw so clearly the way forward to true holiness and sanctification. I would have to practice a universality of obedience; I could no longer pick and choose the sins I would seek to mortify and seek truly and sincerely to repent of.

And today, still today alas, that rule lies before me as a challenge and a summons and a rebuke, but also as a most encouraging and illuminating direction for my life.

This is Paul's second great point: a Christian who genuinely wishes for sanctification must seek it everywhere and not only where he or she least minds the cost and sacrifice and loss. No doubt everyone of those Thessalonians who first heard the letter read out to the church was much happier to hear one or two of those exhortations to specific parts of godliness than to hear the other. But godliness is most determined by how one reacts to the exhortation **he or she is least wanting to and least ready to hear!**

Hear then Paul's summons to you. First he says you need to be an expert in your own case and know exactly what holiness will require of you -- your specific weaknesses, the special demands of your historical moment, and the Devil's own way with you. And then, be sure you seek the Lord's will **at every point** in your life and not just at some; holiness everywhere, across the entire spectrum of life is the only way to holiness anywhere at any point in life.

You seek sanctification across the whole spectrum of your life and you will, to your dismay, learn the old lesson that multitudes have learned before you: "no man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good." But, remember this too: There are three things that a true Christians desires with regard to sin:

Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds!