

And Then...(Living to Please God More and More)

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (NIV)

¹As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ³It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. ⁹Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, ¹¹and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹²so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

With the snow nearly all melted and the temperatures on the rise, I see spring coming. That means pretty soon I will put away the snow shovel and have to get the lawnmower out again. Now, I don't know about you, but I really don't care for yard work. I do it because that's what you are supposed to do and, honestly, a freshly mown lawn always looks nice. Even though I don't like yard work, there is a nice sense of satisfaction in seeing a task completed. With the lawn, though, I try not to think about the fact that I'm going to have to mow it again in a week or so.

Life is full of tasks that you have to keep doing again and again. Lawns need cut. Buildings and homes require maintenance. You can do something once, but you often have to do more and more with it to maintain it. A church of people is no different. You start gathering people around God's Word and you have something new and fresh, but after they have received this wonderful news of free salvation given to us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that's when the maintenance starts, the repairs and remodels on our lives to build us in line with God's will.

Take the Thessalonian Christians for example. Paul came to Thessalonica around 51 A.D. and spent three straight Sabbath days in the Jewish synagogue reasoning with the Jews from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world, had to suffer and rise from the dead and that Jesus is that Messiah. Some Jews were persuaded as well as a large number of non-Jews, the Greeks, and quite a few prominent women. A new congregation of Christians in Thessalonica was formed.

But other Jews who heard what Paul preached didn't like it. They took this as an attack on their faith, their religion. They rounded up some bad hombres, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. They rushed a believer's house looking to hurt Paul and his companions. The situation was completely out of control. The city was in an uproar. It was so bad, in fact, that the new Christians in Thessalonica secretly sent Paul and his companions away that night.

Thinking about these new Christians and the fact that they needed someone to shepherd them, Paul sent Timothy, one of his companions, back to Thessalonica to carry on the work. About a year later, Paul writes this letter to the Thessalonian Christians to continue the maintenance work. "Brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living." (verse 1a) Earlier in this letter Paul says that these Thessalonian Christians were being imitators of Paul and Timothy, that they had turned away from idols, false gods, and were now serving the living and true God. They loved each other within the congregation as they had been taught by God. Their love, their labor, was prompted by their love for God. Their endurance to their belief in God was inspired by their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul even says that these Thessalonian Christians had become a model to all believers in the area. Paul first commends the Thessalonians on the fact that they not only kept their faith in God through this persecution, but that they continued to live it.

If Paul were writing a letter to us today, his brothers and sisters in Christ at Light of the Valley Lutheran Church in Layton, Utah, what do you think he would commend us for because we believe in God and love him? How would he see us living in order to please God?

Firstly and maybe most obviously, Paul would commend you for the fact that you are here, making it a part of your life to be in God's Word, soaking in what God has to say to you so that you can be built up by it. Your love for God is evidenced in part by the fact that you make the time and priority of being here for what God has to say to you. Then Paul could bring up how you let the light of Jesus

shine in how you treat people, how you welcome newcomers, but going out of your way to show people who come here that you care about them. He would commend you for all the family and friends that you have invited over the years to be here with you in church. He would commend you on your giving to support the Gospel ministry done here, how you support your pastor to not only serve you but also to reach out to this community. Paul would commend all the people who have spent their time on committees who plan and execute so many things for the betterment of this congregation and for the sharing of his Word with others. He would commend all the people using their time and talents who serve on altar guild setting up for communion, preparing the front of our sanctuary for Sunday morning worship, our organists who give freely of their time and talent to play for each of our services, those who prepare funeral luncheons, bake goodies for Sunday morning after worship fellowship time, who take pictures at church events. Paul would commend the community service done by you: collecting school supplies for E.G. King Elementary, buying gifts for the children on our Angel Tree at Christmas, presenting your friendly self and handing out candy at our Trunk or Treat. Then there's all the other stuff I don't necessarily see as you go and help one another out, pray for each other, encourage each other with words and hand-written notes and e-mails. This list could very easily keep going, but the point is to show that, yes, you are in fact living to please God as he instructed you.

Even though there was so much to commend the Thessalonian Christians, they, like any church family, needed maintenance. They needed remodeling. They needed to grow in their Christian life, the life of holy living, the life of sanctification; this was not a completed task, but something that required more and more effort, always moving forward. That's why Paul wrote to them, "Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." (verse 1b) and "In fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more." (verse 10)

For the Thessalonians, Paul urged them to avoid sexual immorality, to learn to control their own body in a way that is holy and honorable, and not to wrong or take advantage of another person. For the Greeks, sexual immorality, premarital sex, adultery – all of this was commonplace and rampant. The immorality was all around these Thessalonian Christians, and they had to fight these sexual temptations to follow God's will instead of just going with the flow of the world around them. Also, Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians to love their brothers and sisters in Christ more and more. To keep looking out for their fellow believers, to keep encouraging them, be patient with them, kind to them, to seek their good, to keep their anger in check, to keep no record of wrongs, to protect them however they could. At the same time, Paul urged more remodeling, more maintenance on another aspect of their lives. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you." (verse 11) Don't put your nose in other people's business. Don't perpetuate gossip. Instead of talking about people, help them, support them, pray for them. But make sure that you mind your own business and work for a living. Don't make yourself become dependent on other people to survive when you're able to care for yourself. Even if you need help, still put in as much effort as you can to not be a burden.

That's what he said to the Thessalonian Christians. Paul urged this some 2000 years ago and yet how applicable is this still today? Wouldn't Paul say the same things to us? If Paul was writing directly to us to encourage us to live to please God more and more, what would he say? Would he say to you that you should avoid sexual immorality? Would he say, "Get off that laptop and those sites! Do not let your mouse aid you in committing adultery in your heart as you look at those women lustfully!"? Would he say, "Give up your anger against that brother or that sister at church. Holding on to that anger makes you subject to judgment from God. Instead, love your brother or sister in Christ and forgive them as Christ forgave you"? Would he say, "Stop putting your nose in other people's business and mind your own"? Would he say, "You are capable of work; so, work! Don't pass the burden to another, but help in whatever way you can"? Maybe it would be something different from this list that he gave to the Thessalonians. So, we need to ask ourselves: What do I need to improve? What could I be doing more and more of in order live to please God?

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified." (verse 3a) God called you to holy living, and he urges you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. So, every day, we are looking for more that we can do for God because we are his followers. And there is going to be that part of us that says, "I just want this to be completed. I don't want to do more and more. I want to just stop."

For those days when you just want to stop dead in your tracks in your life of sanctification, your living your life for God, remember this: you have something completed to look back on and to soak in. God has completed your salvation. It's done. Jesus lived for you, died for you, rose from the dead for you. He completed your salvation. None of your holy living for God, your sanctified, Christian life, will add anything to that fact. You don't do the holy living to increase your salvation. No, your salvation is already won and it is already yours. It is completed in Christ. That's the completed project that you can relish and savor and admire. God has completed your salvation for you. This fact, this completed salvation done by God, is what motivates you to keep working for God and living for him more and more. He even gives us his Holy Spirit to keep us going for him, to fight that temptation to stop living for him more and more.

Knowing that your salvation is complete and knowing that God's will for your life is for you to live in order to please him more and more, what will you do more and more of? Which of these things that Paul gives to the Thessalonians will now become your encouragement, your work, the remodeling and maintenance of your spiritual life? Whatever you pick, God will give you his Holy

Spirit through his Word to motivate you and encourage you and strengthen you for your holy living more and more every day.
Amen.

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