

Holy Living

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 16th of July 2000. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled Holy Living and is based upon 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 to 12.

In the pews there are some Bibles and they're the black ones under the seats. And page 960 we're looking at a book that Paul wrote to some Christians in a church a long time ago.

And the church is called Thessalonica and Paul is writing to these Christians and instructing them on how to live. Excuse me Phil.

My arm is so you can't move up a little bit. It's got a middle clutch of little on the seats. Alright, okay. It's a male thing I think to ignore instructions on how to assemble or install a household appliance or assemble some piece of furniture.

[1 : 1 9] And when we ignore the instructions and try to do it on our own what usually happens? We usually stuff it up, don't we? I tried some years ago to assemble some bookshelves with no success before looking at the instructions.

I put shelves upside down, I scratched the white laminate and I made a bit of a blunder with it all. I made a mess of what I was doing. But when I decided that I thought I should follow the instructions I managed to assemble the shelf easily and now they stand with many of the books that I have on them.

Having learnt that lesson from that first lot of bookshelves I recently bought a computer desk and was determined to assemble it following the instructions this time.

I was excited. I went to the kids to the shop and we picked out the desk that we wanted and it came in a flat pack borrowed a friend's ute, drove home pulled the flat pack of this desk which came out pulled it out and I opened the box and the first thing I got were the instructions.

Can you believe that? I went and got the instructions. And then I pulled the stuff out I looked at it all and I thought everything's here I can assemble this.

[2 : 3 6] So away I went and I assembled it. And I reckon I assembled this computer desk in half the time it would have taken to assemble it without the instructions. Well how are you at following or listening to instructions?

The Apostle Paul, as I said a moment ago in writing to these Thessalonian Christians here now turns to some instructions on how they ought to continue living as Christians and please God in the process.

And the first topic that he instructs them on is what we call sanctification. What a word to use at a baptism service. Sanctification.

That word simply means holiness. And in that general area of sanctification he has a special focus in verses 3 to 8 on the area of sexual morality.

And then the next section that Paul instructs on is seen in verses 9 to 12 which focuses on love for others.

[3 : 40] And there are three more areas in this chapter and chapter 5 that Paul instructs the Thessalonians on regarding death what happens when we die the return of Jesus when he returns where he will be Lord and every knee and tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord regarding his return as well as some final comments at the end of this letter on how some other things that the Thessalonians should do.

Now I just intend this morning to look at verses 1 to 12 and those two issues of holiness and love for others. Now it's clear if you look at verses 1 and 2 that the Apostle Paul gave these Thessalonians instructions while he was with them in person in Thessalonica.

He writes in verse 1 you learned from us how you ought to live. And in verse 2 he says you know what instruction that we gave you or we gave you.

Now Paul affirms here he affirms and commends these Thessalonians for following these instructions just as a parent would affirm and commend his or her child for following the instructions that they had given them.

Good kid and so on. But then Paul goes on and he urges them to do so more and more. He's urging them to continue on.

[5 : 04] In other words he's saying you're doing a really good job so far and he's making it clear that there is much much more to do. And the source of these instructions that Paul writes about has an even greater authority to them.

They're much more important than words that just Paul says. And we see that emphasised again in these opening verses. And they aren't just as I said instructions given by Paul but instructions given by the Lord Jesus.

So in verse 1 he says we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus in verse 1. And in verse 2 he says for you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

And these instructions that he passed on to the Thessalonians aren't merely precepts to be followed but is nothing less than the will of God for them which is summarised as your sanctification or your holiness or better still your Christian behaviour.

This is how you ought to behave. As Christians it is important that we develop holiness in every aspect of our living and behaviour.

[6 : 25] God demands that of us. Now we know that we can't be perfect. We all know that we live in a fallen world. But we should strive in our behaviour to be more like Jesus God's Son who was perfect.

And that's why his death on the cross for our sins is able to bring about God's forgiveness of sins to anyone who asks for it. Perfection is something that we don't have but it is something that Christians do look forward to in heaven.

But it doesn't mean that we just stop. You see while we are alive on this earth we need to continue to grow in Christian holiness and behaviour and character.

It doesn't just happen at a baptism service where your kid is suddenly baptised and made holy. It doesn't happen for you or your child at the service but it is something that has to be worked on throughout all your life.

As that song that Warwick and I sang there it said keep on training and training and running and running. We send the kids out to Sunday school to learn and we preach sermons here so people will learn.

[7 : 40] We need to bring our kids up in the Christian faith and as parents you need to model it to your children in your own lives and talk about it with them.

That's what you are doing when we are talking about being sanctified with growing in Christian behaviour. Well Paul focuses here on one aspect of Christian behaviour that needs to become more holy namely that of sexual morality.

And the word sex usually gathers people's attention in any culture and it was particularly significant here for many Thessalonians who had recently converted or who had become Christians who had converted from what we call a pagan background.

See in that culture in the culture back in Thessalonica what they call the Greco-Roman culture the sexual mores and the practices that existed there were far and wide ranging.

In it in that culture premarital and extramarital activity was tolerated and even encouraged. So it couldn't be assumed that those who had converted to Christianity had any common understanding or expectation regarding sexual behaviour.

[8 : 57] Paul counsels these Thessalonians in this letter to abstain from fornication. And the Greek word for fornication is the word *porneia* where we get the word pornography from.

And the word fornication is a general term for any kind of sexual sin including prostitution, adultery or as this word that is used here fornication which refers to sex before marriage.

In verse 4 Paul goes on and spells out an important means of avoiding immorality. He says each one of you should know how to control your own body in holiness and in honour.

The self-control that the Apostle Paul talks about here is to be exercised in a way of holiness and honour. The very definition of holiness or sanctification conforming to God's character implies a knowledge of God.

That's who Paul is writing to. People who have a knowledge of God. It's the opposite. Holiness is the opposite of those who do not know God which is what verse 5 alludes to.

[10 : 12] And similarly the word honour refers to a matter of both respect for the opinion and concern for the well-being of others.

And that word honour is primarily other people-centred. So Paul writes in another letter he says to the Roman Christians that he writes to outdo one another in showing honour.

So we need to show honour to one another. In other words it stands in contrast to the lustful passion of the Gentiles that Paul talks about here in verse 5 as well which lustful passions involves a self-centred concern for one's own needs or desires.

Well in matters of sexual immorality Paul says in verse 6 we should not exploit a brother or sister. The reason being is that the Lord that is Jesus is an avenger in all these things.

And people who go on living life this way will be brought to judgment. Verse 7 gives an additional reason why believers should behave in a morally responsible manner.

[11 : 26] And that is God's call upon which their standing as believers is based is essentially a call to holiness. That is a call to become like God.

And in short these standards that Paul talks about here are a part of God's own character. They are a part of God's holiness. We ought to be holy because God is holy.

This means then that whoever rejects this instruction that Paul is writing about here in this letter is in fact rejecting no mere human principle or standard but you or they are rejecting God himself.

Well what is the significance of these verses for us today? It's this. We live in a post Christian world and by that I mean the influence of Christianity impacts less on people's lives today than it has in the past.

So the instructions that Paul gives here on sexual morality is just as relevant for us for each one of us here in this room as it was to the Thessalonian Christians.

[12 : 42] Now I'm sure that you know people today living together who are not married. that's been going on for years and years hasn't it? And I'm sure if some if not all of you are also aware of people who have been involved in extramarital relationships at some stage or another within their married life.

Now the world accepts this as normal and even inevitable is going to happen. But is that the kind of living is that kind of living holy living?

Is that holy living? Is it demonstrating God's character? If we take the Bible as God's word then the answer is clearly not is it?

It goes against what God wants from those who would seek to please him. People are just pleasing themselves. It's disobeying these instructions given here by Paul and elsewhere in the Bible that are spoken about by God and Jesus.

So if you want to grow in holiness and become more like God and this should be the goal of all Christians as well as seeking to honour other people then it means putting off sexual immorality.

[14 : 04] Now God is not a wowser when it comes to sex. God thinks it is a really good thing. After all he's the one who designed it. He is the one who created sex and its purpose is for the procreation and enjoyment within an exclusive heterosexual marriage relationship.

Sex is not there despite what the world might tell us. It is not there for multiple relationships. And I have seen so much damage caused to people in marriage where there has been sexual unfaithfulness.

unfaithfulness. And I've also seen it in unmarried people's lives where the relationship has broken up for one reason or another. Probably due to unfaithfulness within that relationship as well.

Now as a church we ought to be teaching more about a Christian perspective on relationships and marriage. But we ignore the issue and in a sense we conform to the world's views which promotes promiscuity.

society. Now in the last few years there have been more than a few cultural observers, I'm talking about journalists here, who have noticed that secular culture is for various pragmatic reasons seriously reconsidering the value of the kind of sexual ethic that has traditionally been proclaimed within the church.

[15 : 30] Let me give you an example. Bettina Arndt is a writer regularly in the age. What does she write about today? She writes about family issues.

Who knows what Bettina Arndt wrote about years ago and where she wrote. She wrote in girly or boy magazines and all sorts of things on all sorts of issues to do with sex and so on.

She has turned around and is highly valuing and promoting the family issues and the sexual morality within that family.

There are many other readers as well that do that sort of thing. She's not necessarily a Christian but I'm just trying to show you the shift back to the sexual ethic that is being traditionally proclaimed in the church.

It is both ironic and tragic therefore that many churches have lost their ability and authority to speak clearly on sexual matters. the church in some respects has become confused over other reasons and they don't know how to deal with the issue of sexuality.

[16 : 37] There are issues of confusion, issues of scandals they have to deal with in their own church and hypocrisy and so on that they ignore these basic issues of sexual morality.

But the reasons for whatever it might be that they ignore that are less important than the consequences of not talking about sexual morality. And it's time that we as a church, and I mean just Holy Trinity, I mean the Christian church in general, took out our spiritual theodolite and measured up how far we have gone askew.

Paul's instructions here to the Thessalonians offer a biblical antidote to the mass confusion that culture and the media generates over sexuality today.

Well, having talked about sexual morality, Paul now turns from offering instruction about how to live in holiness and encourages them to continue developing in another area that needs attention.

And the issue is seen in verses 9 to 12. He urges them there to continue in brotherly and sisterly love or in love for others. Let me read to you verses 9 to 12.

[17 : 49] Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone right to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. And indeed, you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.

But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more. It's clear that Paul is talking firstly about the love that Christians ought to have for their fellow Christians in this passage.

However, Paul makes it clear in verses 11 and 12, which I didn't read to you, that love for fellow Christians has implications for how Christians ought to relate to those outside the community as well.

In verse 12 he says, behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. Now it's worth noting that the Thessalonians' love for Christians is known throughout the whole region of Macedonia.

But Paul urges them to do so more and more, to let your love be known more and more, if you like. Verses 11 and 12 spell out what exactly it is he has in mind.

[18 : 55] And specifically, he wants them to aspire to firstly, to live quietly and to mind your own affairs. And secondly, he says, to work with your own hands.

Now on the surface, it looks as if Paul is encouraging these Thessalonians, that's a hard word to say, he's encouraging them to withdraw from the public arena of life in favour of a quiet, more contemplative setting that benefits only themselves.

But he writes to them as a church. When this letter has been first read, it's been read to a whole congregation of Christian believers. And that's who he is writing to, a whole congregation.

And in the context of brotherly and sisterly love, Paul is advising them to avoid as much as possible the strife and the social pressures and the tumult of the public arena and to focus instead on the needs and the building up of the congregation.

And when Paul talks about work here in verse 11, he's referring to work in general as a means of providing for the needs of the individual and the community.

[20 : 07] Freeloaders, it seems, had no place in Paul's concept of Christian community, which called for shared work in a context of personal responsibility. I encourage you to look at Galatians chapter 6 at some stage to see what that has to say about it.

And Paul had worked while he was there in Thessalonica and he had worked to support himself and his friends. And he reminds them of the significance of their work now because it will have implications for their witness.

That is, if they continue to live in this sort of manner, it will win the respect of outsiders. Now, these are sort of hard verses to understand and we don't have all the information as to why Paul urges them to continue working.

There's various thoughts that go on. But he's encouraging here everyone to do his or her own part in Christian community. And the consideration for them doing their part ought to be done out of brotherly and sisterly love for one another.

Elsewhere, Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians, let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let me repeat that.

[21 : 23] Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. The same applies to us today. We as Christians ought to look to the interests of others rather than our own interests first.

But again, it's such a hard thing to do when our world tells us to look after our own interests first rather than the needs of others. Let me give you another example. We've just adopted and embraced a wonderful new tax system, the GST.

How did they advertise that campaign? The focus of that campaign was on you and me, the individual. For example, we had the ad come on and it said the lady or the man gets it and says, what am I going to get from the GST?

And then it comes back and some voice comes over and says, you'll get an extra \$60 in your pay packet next week. And the guy or the woman says, well, that's not too bad, is it?

I mean, that's a little bit light-humoured and so on. But that's the sort of thing that they were advertising, wasn't it? And the advertisers, they know how to appeal to our selfish natures.

[22 : 43] This gets us in. They sold the GST to us because of the intrinsic benefit it would be for me. But what Paul writes to these Thessalonians here is exactly as Jesus taught his disciples and has written for us.

And that is, we should love God first and love our neighbour as we would ourselves. Now, if we're to take seriously Paul's instruction of brotherly and sisterly love then, we need to reconsider as Christians what it means to love our neighbour.

Let me give you two examples that we as Christians ought to consider. The first one is our choice of career. Our culture increasingly measures an individual's worth not by the quality of one's character but by the quantity of one's wealth and possessions.

So you get the slogan, you may have heard it, the one who dies with the most toys wins. It's hardly surprising then that high paying jobs are much more highly valued than low paying jobs.

I wonder if this sort of attitude has slipped into the minds of Christians as well. One survey among Christians suggests that Christians valuing most highly career choices that focused on helping others, career choices services like teaching, missions, medicine and social services is declining.

[24 : 23] That sort of area is declining. These were careers that were highly valued by Christians because they represented various ways of putting into practice brotherly and sisterly love by serving others.

But this subtle shift away from valuing jobs for what they accomplish toward valuing them for what they pay represents a shift toward a more self-centered perspective.

It's not other-centered, it is totally self-centered. And if you're a Christian, let me ask you this question. What is more important, accumulating wealth and affluence or serving others?

An honest answer to that question can function as an important tool as we reflect on career choices for now as well as in the future.

What motivates you to do the job that you do? So that's the first choice that Christians ought to consider. The second choice that we ought to consider is how we spend our money.

[25 : 32] If it's true that more and more Christians are making career and lifestyle choices based on affluence rather than brotherly and sisterly love, then how do we make decisions about the way we spend our money?

Well, let me frame it another way. What might it mean to make spending decisions on the basis of brotherly and sisterly love rather than affluence? It might mean making lifestyle choices on the basis of need rather than label or status.

For example, is a car being chosen for its transportation needs or is it being chosen because of the name and the label that it bears? Or do I go and buy an Oshkosh suit or a Target suit for a quarter of the price that will provide and do the same purpose?

Think about it. It might mean making lifestyle choices in the light of their impact on one's ability to contribute to the needs of others. For example, there are many people who are unable to give in the church.

They're unable to give more due to the size of their mortgage. But why do they end up with such a large mortgage in the first place? Perhaps, just perhaps, it's because advertising and peer group pressure has got the better of you.

[26 : 59] Oh, they bought a nice house. I've got to go buy a better house and those sorts of things. Why not decide first on how much you can give, say for example to the church, and then settle on a mortgage consistent with that decision?

And once you've made that decision, stick to your decision, when considering a discretionary purchase, perhaps a new high-tech golf club in order to gain that extra metre as you bang it down the freeway, when considering that discretionary purchase, it might mean asking whether there is some use to which the money can be put from which others might benefit.

It might mean taking seriously, it just might mean this, take seriously what Jesus said about those to whom much has been given.

Listen to what Luke chapter 12 says. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required. And from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

We have to be wise in our decisions, recognise where our money comes from and who it is we serve.

[28 : 21] Well in this chapter, Paul has emphasised two fundamental points, holiness and brotherly and sisterly love. Holiness focuses primarily on our relationship with God, while brotherly and sisterly love focuses, by the very nature of the term, on our love for others.

In this respect, I think that the Apostle Paul parallels what Jesus identified as the most important commandment. Mark chapter 12.

Are you following God's instructions in these matters?

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that your Bible instructs and teaches us. We pray that we would learn to grow in holiness and love and respect for our brothers and sisters.

Lord, help us to know what it means to serve you and to serve others. For we ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.

[29 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.