

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: that no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his Holy Spirit.

Preventive Ministry — Told Right Away

What we have in verses 1–8 is preventive ministry. The apostle had said these things to them in the three weeks he was with them, and now he reinforces them in writing. There is an important lesson here: persons who are saved need to be told these things immediately. They have been taken from one environment and set in another — separated from the former course and brought into relationship with God. They need to know at once what the will of God is for their new life. New believers should not be kept on a diet of elementary things indefinitely; the apostle spoke to these Thessalonians of deep and weighty matters in the first three weeks. What suits the state is what is given.

Abound More and More — The Liberty of Progress

Verse 1 speaks of abounding more and more in their walk. This is not like most subjects, where a certain level of engagement is sufficient and one can leave it at that. This is a subject in which there is always room to abound further. The book of James speaks of the perfect law of liberty — that Christians have liberty to make spiritual progress, to move forwards. The new nature delights in what God delights in, and it is free to express itself more and more.

Enoch is a beautiful illustration of this in connection with a corrupt world. He walked with God, and had the testimony that he pleased God — yet he was surrounded on all sides by the ungodliness of his generation, as Jude records, with the word *ungodly* appearing four times in Enoch's prophecy. He stood out against a corrupt and violent world, like a man whose walk is entirely different from those around him. And then he was not, because God took him. The parallel with 1 Thessalonians 4 is striking: godly walk through a corrupt world, and then — caught up.

Lord Jesus — Drawing the Affections

Verses 1 and 2 both speak of the Lord Jesus — the characteristic form of address throughout this epistle. When the full title Lord Jesus Christ is used, the thought of His authority and full place is before the mind. When Christ Jesus is used, the thought is of our position in Him. But Lord Jesus seems to draw out the affections — it is the personal name linked with the title, and it is this form that characterises a letter written to a people waiting for the Son from heaven with hearts set on Him.

This Is the Will of God — Sanctification

Verse 3 opens with a phrase of unusual weight. Darby notes that the article is absent before *will* in the Greek, and that the force is much increased thereby. It is

not merely *the will of God* — as though it were one item on a list of seventeen things God happens to will. It is *will of God* characteristically — this is what God's will is in its character. God is looked at as a person in authority, and the thing stated is of such a nature that it is bound up with who He is and what He purposes. This is not something one can say was never told to one, or was only vaguely mentioned. In verses 1 and 2, the apostle has already established that they received these charges and know what commandments were given. Verse 3 then lifts it further: this is not even just what we told you. This is the will of God.

Sanctification means being set apart — always to God in Scripture. These persons had been taken from one line and brought into relationship with God; they were set apart to Him. The practical aspect of that set-apartness is what is spoken of here: in the life, in the conduct, in the body. Positional sanctification in Christ is one thing — Christ is made unto us sanctification. Practical sanctification in the walk is another, and this passage addresses the latter.

Abstain from Fornication — The Gentile Context

The Gentile world did not abstain from fornication; it in many ways institutionalised it. The pagan religions made gods out of human lusts, deified those lusts, fell down and worshipped them, and practised them as an expression of their religion. The idolatry that these Thessalonians had turned from was thoroughly intertwined with such practices. What Christianity does is the total opposite. Self is no longer on the throne; Christ is. And the worship is consistent with the nature of the one on that throne.

The word fornication in this context is broad enough to include adultery, as indicated by its use in verse 3 alongside verse 6 which speaks of defrauding a brother in the matter. The Lord used the broader word in Matthew 19:9 apparently with similar intent — to be inclusive of various forms of sexual sin rather than restricted to one precise category alone.

Know How to Possess His Vessel

Verse 4 calls for an inward knowledge — not book knowledge but a sense in the soul of what is pleasing to the Lord. Each believer is to know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour. The body is a vessel — it is to be held and used for God's glory. The world tends to think that the body possesses the person: whatever appetites or desires arise, those are to be followed. Scripture reverses this: the Christian possesses the body, not the reverse. It is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The new nature implanted in the new birth partakes of the divine moral qualities. It operates as a fixed principle — like an engine on its track. The engine has liberty when it is on the track; it has no liberty when it leaves the track and bogs down in the field. True Christian liberty is not the freedom to do whatever the flesh desires — that is bondage. It is the freedom to move forward in what pleases God, as the new nature delights to do.

Defraud Not His Brother — The Implicit Word

Verse 6 speaks of going beyond and defrauding a brother in the matter. There is a word that is never used in this passage but that underlies all of verses 3 through 6: the word marriage. When there is a marriage, there is no defrauding. When there is adultery, the lawful husband has been defrauded — a wrong done against him. When fornication involves an unmarried woman, a father who intended to bring his daughter to her wedding day as a virgin has been defrauded of his desire. Without ever naming marriage explicitly, the apostle builds a view of the sanctity of the relationship that makes clear what is being violated when these things are done.

The warning is solemn: *the Lord is the avenger of all such*. And the ground is stated in verse 7: *God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness*. To

despise these things is not to despise some human convention or cultural expectation. Verse 8 is explicit: *he that despiseth despiseth not man, but God*. And God has sealed this in the most intimate possible way — *who hath also given unto us his Holy Spirit*. The very presence of the Spirit within is the seal of this calling unto holiness.

— *Study ends* —