1 Thessalonians 4

Verses 7-12: Holiness -- Brotherly Love -- Seek Earnestly to Be Quiet -- Work with Your Hands

Bible Reading

Opening Reading -- 1 Thessalonians 4:7-13

1 Thessalonians 4:7-13

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. But as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; and that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

Called Not Unto Uncleanness but Unto Sanctification

The word in verse 7 rendered 'holiness' in the King James is the same word as 'sanctification' in verse 4, so there is no real distinction between them here. The call of God was not to uncleanness -- that is not a call in Scripture at all. Rather, God calls unclean ones who were given to uncleanness, as the Gentiles were, out of that atmosphere and into another: the atmosphere of sanctification.

Uncleanness is the atmosphere of the world; sanctification is the atmosphere into which God's call brings His people. The world glories in moral uncleanness and increasingly codifies it into law, so that to state what God's word says about it has in some Western nations been made into a criminal offense. That very government which God established for the restraint of evil and the praise of well-doing has been stood on its head and made an instrument of oppression against righteousness. But God's call has not changed: not unto uncleanness, but unto sanctification.

Uncleanness is active, not static -- it is a working, a fermenting evil that gets worse and worse, like leprosy. Heaven, by contrast, is a perfectly clean place. And in the person of our Lord Jesus, all was perfectly clean at every moment. When he touched the leper, the leprosy departed from the man -- the moral glory and power of Christ was such that He dispelled evil rather than being contaminated by contact with it. The mud of moral defilement that adheres to us does not adhere to Him.

Despiseth Not Man but God: The Indwelling Holy Spirit

To despise these things, says verse 8, is not merely to disregard another person's opinion. It is to disregard God, who is the author of this order from the very beginning in Eden. And the last clause of verse 8 adds the particular weight: 'who hath also given unto us his Holy Spirit.' He dwells in us. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). This is not a minor thing: God has given to each believer something wholly undeserved, the most wonderful gift, the Holy Spirit Himself dwelling within. And He is holy. There is something due to that Holy Spirit dwelling within us: that the place where He dwells should not be an uncomfortable or defiled place for Him.

There is a distinction worth noting between grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit. Grieving causes sorrow -- it is what an individual does when his walk is

not what it should be. Quenching is to put out the fire, to suppress the Spirit's operations -- and this can apply to the assembly collectively, for instance by not giving the Spirit His place in the gift of prophesying (1 Thessalonians 5:20: 'despise not prophesyings'). To close down the avenue for the Spirit's gifts in the assembly is in effect to despise prophesying, whatever name may be given to the practice.

Brotherly Love: Taught of God, Not Needing to Be Written

Verse 9 says: 'as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another.' The brotherly love (Philadelphia) and the divine love (agape) are not separated here -- in fact the verse connects them, for it is because they have been taught of God to love one another that the apostle needs not to write about brotherly love. Divine love at the root produces brotherly love in practice. When brotherly love is divorced from what is divine, it always runs aground: it gets into sentimentality, or into expressions that disregard the word of God on sanctification and holiness.

It is worth noting that Paul chose to mention this even though he said he did not need to. It could have been passed over in silence. He chose to say it, perhaps for balance -- and perhaps to set the stage for what follows. You already know how to love, so here is something that connects with it: in verse 13, 'I would not have you to be ignorant concerning those who are asleep.' You know this; but here is something you do not know -- that is the implicit movement of the passage.

Abound Still More: The Breadth of Love Has No Boundary

Verse 10 notes that the Thessalonians already showed their love toward all the brethren in Macedonia. Their affections were not limited to the local assembly in Thessalonica. But Paul adds: 'we exhort you, brethren, to abound still more.' They should not think they had arrived. There is a breadth to love as well as a

depth. Locally, then through the region, then the province -- and the apostle would point to the whole body of Christ as the proper boundary, which is global. At any given time there are members of that one body spread across the entire earth. The affections of Christians ought to extend as far as the gospel has gone, and wherever Christ is owned as Savior there are our brothers and sisters in the same one body.

Seek Earnestly to Be Quiet

Verse 11 opens with a striking phrase: 'study to be quiet,' or in Darby's more pointed rendering, 'seek earnestly to be quiet.' The word earnestly implies that this is not easy. Quietness of soul is something that must be sought with effort. The natural person tends toward restlessness, toward involvement in other people's affairs, toward the noise and activity of the world around. Seeking earnestly to be quiet is a pursuit, not a passive settling into stillness. There is likely a moral progression to it: first the quietness, then the minding of one's own affairs, then the working with one's own hands. Each flows from the previous.

Idle hands make mischief -- it is an old saying and a true one. The first part of the chapter warns distinctly against various kinds of mischief, and then the latter verses prescribe busy and productive hands. The connection is real. There is no such thing as sanctified gossip; there is such a thing as prying into other people's affairs. These things are contrary to verse 11. And yet while we are quietly attending to our own work, our hearts can still go out to brethren a long way away. The one does not hinder the other -- in fact the quietness that attends diligent honest labor is the very condition in which the heart can be free for the larger affections of the body of Christ.

Work with Your Own Hands

The exhortation to work with one's own hands was not new to the Thessalonians -- Paul adds 'as we commanded you,' a reminder that this was already given while he was with them in person. This is apostolic instruction, not merely a social observation. The Apostle Paul himself kept a trade as a tentmaker and worked at it in some of the cities where he labored in the gospel. There is no degree of sanctification attached to one kind of work over another. Working with people is not more holy than working with things. The Lord Jesus was a carpenter for the greater part of His earthly life, working with wood and tools -- and He said 'I do always those things that please the Father.' He was no less pleasing to the Father in the carpenter's shop than in the three years of public ministry. The key is not what kind of work, but whether it is done according to the Father's will.

The second epistle adds a sharper word for those who refuse to work when they are able to: 'if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.' That is the severity of it. To go about perpetually chargeable to the saints when one is quite capable of supporting oneself is not a spiritual posture -- it is contrary to the word of God. Among certain so-called cults and movements that become excited about the Lord's return, it is common for people to stop working and gather somewhere to wait. The Thessalonian epistles are precisely the place where the Lord's coming is most prominently before us -- and the instruction is: keep working.

Walking Reputably Before Those Without

Verse 12 gives two motives. The first is 'that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without' -- Darby has 'reputably,' which is actually closer to the thought. It is not primarily about personal honesty in transactions, but about the reputation of the Lord Jesus as it is seen in those who name His name. A disreputable manner of life is like a dead fly in the testimony. And the concern is not that our name should be well spoken of, but that the name of the Lord Jesus should be held without blemish before those who do not yet know Him. The second motive

is 'that ye may have lack of nothing' -- or of no one, as Darby notes. Honest diligent labor normally meets one's own needs without requiring others to provide what one could provide for oneself. God knows all our needs, and we depend on Him; but dependence on God does not mean dependence on the saints to supply what our own hands could earn.

* * *

Lord willing.