

EXCEL EVEN MORE

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4: 1-12

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¹ Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. ² For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵ not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. ⁸ So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰ for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, ¹¹ and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, ¹² so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need."

Heavenly Father, would You lead us now through Your Spirit, into Your word, and show us, Lord, what we need to take from it. And then, Lord, help us to align our wills with Your will, so that we would not only hear Your word, but be obedient to it as well. in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Paul's word to the Thessalonians is both comforting and challenging at the same time. He tells them, "You're walking in a way that is pleasing to God." But then he immediately adds the challenge, "Excel still more. Don't stop there; excel even more." And in these 12 verses of this chapter, he's going to tell us what that excelling looks like, what it means to live a sanctified life, what does it mean to walk in a way that pleases God, and what does it mean to excel and still do more. Paul shows us that such a life is marked by sanctification. Sanctification is the key that is being set apart for God. Set apart for what? For sexual purity, love for others, a quiet diligence in our daily work. And it's not just about avoiding sin; it's about actively pursuing holiness in every part of our lives.

So today, as we begin to look at this passage, let's ask ourselves: In my own life, how am I walking? Am I walking in a way that is pleasing to God? And if I'm already doing that, then how can I excel still more, as he asks?

The central thought in this passage is our walk must please God. And if we think our walk right now is pleasing, then we ought to do even more. That's what he is trying to say. So, even if we're already living in a way that pleases Him, there's always room to grow, to press forward and to reach for a higher standard.

Paul makes it clear that this is the will of God – your sanctification. Sanctification is that whole period between justification when we met Jesus and glorification when we will one day stand in His presence. That in-between period, that season of our life, from the time we met Jesus to the time we either die or we are raptured up, it what we call sanctification – a life of holiness.

SANCTIFICATION – A working definition:

It is the lifelong process of God shaping us to look more like Jesus, more and more like His Son in our thoughts, in our desires, in our actions, and in our relationships, so that every part of our life is set apart for Him. Also, it means that we are being set apart by God for His purposes and being made holy in character and conduct through the work of the Holy Spirit.

When Paul writes in this fourth chapter, *This is the will of God, your sanctification*, he's saying that God's will is not first about where you live or what you do or the kind of ministry that you're in. No. It's first about who you are becoming.

R.C. Sproul puts it like this. "The goal of sanctification is to be conformed to the image of Christ and that involves the transformation of the whole person, our thoughts, our desires, our words, and our actions. The whole person!"

SANCTIFICATION – An expanded definition: what it means, how does it look, what does God expect of us in terms of a sanctified life.

1. It has to do with being set apart for God. From the moment we are saved or justified, God claims us as His own. We are called into His family.
Ephesians 2:19 says, *"So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household."* We become part of the family of God.

There are so many beautiful scriptures that talk about this new relationship that we find ourselves in.

Romans 8:16-17 *"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then we are heirs, also heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."*

Galatians 6:10 *"So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."* When we come to Christ, we are welcomed into God's household, no longer strangers, but beloved children in His family. And now, every step of sanctification is simply learning to live as those who bear the family likeness. We begin to look like God's family. What kind of family likeness does God expect of His children? That's how we need to be able to be seen.

2. It also means that there's something very present, continuous, because it's ongoing. It starts at justification, ends at glorification. So, it's an ongoing transformation, unlike justification which happens once in our lifetime. Sanctification is a lifelong process. Paul would tell the church at Philippi, *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to its completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

It's the progressive shaping of our thoughts, our desires and actions into the likeness of Christ. This lifelong transformation is the Spirit's work in us, conforming us more and more to Christ's image as we walk in obedience.

When we think about that, it seems like a daunting task. How can I possibly reach there? And yet, Paul would write in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 *"Faithful is He who has called you."* Each one of us who has been called by God, He is faithful and will bring it to pass. So we work in tandem with Him.

3. This is a partnership between God's grace and our obedience. God provides the power, and we provide the willing obedience. The power comes from God, for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure.

And then, we provide the willing obedience. Philippians 2:12 *"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not just in my presence; but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."* This working out of our salvation is the step after we have been saved, where we continue to live as saved ones under the power and the authority of God in our lives, through His Spirit.

So, God provides the power to become more Christ-like, and we, through our willing obedience, allow ourselves to be shaped in that matter. Jerry Bridges says, "The pursuit of holiness is a joint venture between God and the Christian. No one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, and similarly, no one will attain it without the effort on their own part." Both have to work together.

4. It must be seen in all areas of our lives. sanctification affects everything – our bodies, our minds, our speech, our work, and our relationships. Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:15-16 *"But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also, in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"*

So how should we live? How does that happen? What does it look like in my life? Paul tells us, look at these 12 verses that I am giving to you. If you want to see the sanctified life happen within you, then these are some of the things that you must follow.

WHAT MUST I DO TO STAY SANCTIFIED?

1. Pursue sexual purity.

In vs. 3-5 he says plainly, " ³ *For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;*" We are to reject anything outside of God's design for sexuality, which is within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

It is very clear. The writer of Hebrews says in 13:4, *Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.* This means guarding our eyes, our thoughts, and our actions from any impurity.

He also says, "Control your own body in holiness and honor. v. 4 Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and how we use them should reflect God's holiness, and not the world's values.

Think about that for a minute. You and I, we house God. Over the years, we look at all these grand cathedrals that have come up since the 3rd century. They are awesome places of worship, but they don't house God. Who houses God? God is in that cathedral when you and I go in with His presence. We take the presence of God into places and make them holy. The grandeur of those cathedrals must be the grandeur of our lives. If we want God to live in us, that's the kind of residence that we ought to give to Him.

Refuse to be driven by lustful passion like those who don't know God. Lust enslaves, beloved, but purity frees. Jesus said, *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*

He goes on to actually delineate between people who know God and not know God and says that if they don't know God then they act in this kind of manner.

What happens when we don't know God? Let me give you 3 things out of many possibly.

- If we don't know God, then we are driven by instinct and our own impulses. Without a living relationship with God, our moral compass is shaped by culture. It's shaped by personal desires or even pure influence rather than God's word. Instead of God's word, it gets shaped by everything that is around us. Lust then becomes the normal operating mode. And there is little inner restraint except for fear of consequence. The only restraint we have is that we'll get caught or somebody will find out.
- It's a very self-centered desire. Relationships can easily be reduced to self-gratification. I am the only one that matters in a relationship rather than the covenant commitment or the good of the other person. That's what lust does. It only focuses on me, it says. Because of the hardness of their heart and having become callous, they have given themselves up to indecent behavior for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. I want it for myself.
- There is no transforming power that works in somebody who doesn't know God. God's power is not at work. Without the Spirit, there is no supernatural enablement to say no to ungodliness.

Titus 2:11-12 *"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensible, righteously, and in a godly manner in the present age."* That's what the Holy Spirit does. But for somebody who doesn't have God, it's not there.

So, if you have God, what happens?

- Those who know God are guided by God's holiness. Knowing God means knowing His character, and His holiness sets the standard for our thoughts, our desires and our actions. But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior. "You shall be holy for I am holy."
- We're empowered by God's Spirit. Believers are given the Spirit who then produces self-control (that we see in Galatians 5) and who convicts the heart when lustful thoughts begin to rise. Here's the thing. Love replaces lust when we are connected with God. When we're not, love is replaced by lust. Where lust is about taking, love is about giving. And intimacy is framed by commitment, covenant and mutual honor which is the desired result of a good relationship that is anchored in God.

So, in short, for those who do not know God, lust is the default driver of passion. For those who know Him, passion is brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and then is reshaped into love and governed by God's holy Presence. The difference isn't merely in behavior; it's in the source and the purpose of desire.

2. Do not transgress each other.

He says in v.6, *"No one is to violate the rights and take advantage of his brother or sister in this manner because the Lord is the avenger in all these things just as we also told you previously and solemnly warned you."*

What is he saying? He's saying that to transgress means crossing moral or relational boundaries, taking advantage of others in business and relationships or even in ministry. Instead, we are to value others above ourselves. We read in Philippians 2:3, *"With humility, consider one another as more important than yourself."*

So, when wronged, we are to trust God as the avenger, not take matters into our own hands. This keeps our hearts free of bitterness and our relationship safe from revenge, which is so often what we want to do. When somebody hurts us, we wait for our day. And God is saying, "Bo, that day belongs to me. I'll take care of it, not you. I want you to continue to live the life that I call you to live." Love people who can love you back, and love people who sometimes seem unlovable as well. But operate in love.

3. Live in love with one another.

vs. 9-10 *You yourselves are taught by God to love one another.* Love is in our spiritual DNA. Why? Because God is love, and we are His children. So, love has to automatically be who we are as children of God.

Then he urges them to excel still more. Love isn't meant to stay where it is. We're called to let it overflow, extending even to strangers and to those who are difficult to love. This love is the defining work of a sanctified life. It's a good litmus test of us to see whether we have love within our hearts.

4. Practice quiet diligence in daily life.

Make it your ambition, he says in v.11, to lead a quiet life. By that, he means, be content, avoid unnecessary conflict and refuse to be swept up in constant noise and drama. He adds, mind your own affairs, focus on what God has entrusted to you rather than meddling in the business of others.

Finally, he says, "Work with your hands so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and you will not be dependent on anybody." Honest, diligent work not only provides for our needs but also serves as a testimony to the watching world.

So, in short, when we look at these 12 verses, what is he saying to us? he saying:

1. Guard against impurity or guard your purity.
2. Treat others with integrity.
3. Love deeply and sacrificially.
4. Live quietly and work diligently.

Then Paul adds, "If by God's grace you are already doing these things, excel still more." Sometimes, we come to a place in our lives where we say: I've got all the boxes ticked in my spiritual life. I go to church, I do this, this, this, and I think I'm pretty okay. Paul would say to you, "If you think you're okay, all the things that you're doing, do even more of. There's never an end point in growing in holiness and in being sanctified. So continue on.

But we can't leave these 12 verses without coming back to vs. 7 and 8, because there's a kind of seriousness that he brings into this whole passage. *"For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification."*

In other words, anything that draws us towards moral compromise or spiritual corruption, does not come from God. So, we're living outside of God's will for us. His call on our lives is a holy calling and holiness is not optional. If you're a Christian today, if you're one who has been saved, justified by God, you're a son and a daughter of the Most High God, and holiness is a mandate for you and for me. It's not something we decide. Should I be holy or should I not? You have to be holy.

So sanctification means being set apart for God's purposes. God saved us, not simply so that we escape judgment, but so that we can be transformed into the image of His Son. This means saying 'no' to impurity in all its forms, whether it's in thought or word or action, and saying 'yes' to a life that reveals His character.

Paul then warns us in v.8 "So, he who rejects this," rejecting what his teaching has brought, "If you reject it, you're actually rejecting not man, but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you." So, you're not rejecting the preacher, the pastor because I brought this message, you're not rejecting Paul for what he wrote. You're actually rejecting God, who has given you His Holy Spirit.

How does that work? Think about it like this. The Holy Spirit is in you and the Holy Spirit is the One who guides you into truth, guides you into what is right, who allows you to do and live by what God wants. And if we reject the Holy Spirit who has been given to us by God, we actually reject the gift that God has given to us, and in doing so, reject God Himself. So he says, "If you're not pursuing this life of sanctification, then you're not being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit." In other words, you rebuff the Holy Spirit. You don't listen, and if that's what you're doing, you're actually rebuffing God. Serious words. Rejecting holiness is grieving the Holy Spirit first.

A.W. Tozer put it like this. "The Spirit-filled life is not a special deluxe edition of Christianity. It is part and parcel of the total plan of God for His people." That's just what God expects from every Christian.

So the bottom line is: God's call is for holiness. His Spirit within us makes it possible and our response reveals whether we honor Him or if we don't.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Walk and please God. This is our daily calling.
2. Excel still more. No matter where you are spiritually or where you think you are, there's always room to grow.
3. Sanctification touches every area of life. Sexual purity, relationships, love, and work ethic and everything else. Make sure that you don't compartmentalize sanctification. I'll be sanctified on a Sunday because that looks good. No, sanctification is even more important from Monday to Saturday.
4. Rejecting God's standard is rejecting God Himself.
5. True holiness is both inward that is purity of heart, and outward which is behavior towards others.

Dwight L. Moody said: "A holy life will produce the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns. They only shine."

That's our mandate for today, that we too shine in this world, shine as beautiful stars in a world that sometimes is so perverse and dark and corrupt. We shine.

Amen.
