

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Christian Lifestyle – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

The first word of chapter 4 – ‘finally’ – has been the butt of lots of jokes about preachers! For many preachers, ‘finally’ doesn’t really mean we’re on the last point, ‘finally’ means we’re just about half way through!

But when Paul uses the word, he is announcing a *change* of subject. It tells us there is a *transition* in the body of the letter. Paul has been talking about one particular topic, and now he’s going to talk about *another* particular topic.

What is he moving on to? He tells us at the *start* of the section and – like a good preacher – at the *end* of the section too. Paul is dealing with how they are to *live* (4:1a). And he repeats that thought in 4:12 too. So, we’re looking at the passage under the heading of ‘Christian Lifestyle’.

In fact, the word Paul uses to speak about their lifestyle in verse 1 and verse 12 is the word for ‘walk’ or ‘walking’. Paul has already used this word in 2:12 – and he uses it in some of his other letters too. Of course, the word ‘live’ is a reasonable translation, but the image of *walking* is a helpful picture, because it carries with it ideas about making progress, a series of steps one after another, heading in a particular direction. Good walking is steady; there’s a consistency to it. And that’s what the Christian life should be like too.

When my younger brother began walking as a toddler, for quite a few years he walked on his tip toes. At a young age, he was taken to a physiotherapist who tried to teach him to walk by putting his heel down first. She helped him with a little rhyme: ‘Heel, toe, heel, toe. This is how the fairies go.’ Now that David is 34, six feet four inches tall, and fills doorways, I take great delight in reminding him of his early call to walk like a fairy! The point is, he was walking one particular way, and needed to walk in a *different* way. And Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that however they used to

walk, they are now to walk in a different way, a way worthy of God, a way which pleases God, a way which wins the respect of outsiders – Christian lifestyle.

We will look at how Paul introduces this topic in verses 1 and 2, and then we’ll see how it’s worked out in three areas in the rest of the passage.

Introduction (4:1-2)

The first two verses are very important because they set the scene not just for the section before us here, but for the rest of the letter. There are three things for us to focus on:

- First of all, *Paul speaks as a brother* (4:1a). Paul addresses the believers as ‘brothers’, reminding them how he is related to them in Jesus. This fits what we’ve seen elsewhere in the letter where Paul uses *family* imagery to describe the intimate bond between himself and the Thessalonians. It shows that he is not acting like a dictator; he is not simply putting across the party-line to a faceless audience. He doesn’t bark commands like a sergeant-major, but instructs as a *brother*, prompted by love and concern. He speaks not from outside the ranks on the parade ground, but from *inside* the family-circle, as a loving *mother*, as a concerned *father*, as a Christian *brother*.

- But secondly, *Paul speaks with authority*. Notice the important phrases in the first two verses – ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus... by the authority of the Lord Jesus’. The commands Paul gives, he gives *through Christ* – that’s where the real authority lies.

- And then thirdly, *Paul speaks with encouragement*. He praises the believers. The things he is about to talk about they have *already* been doing (4:1-2)! They *know* these things and have been *doing* these things, but just in case they start feeling a little too pleased with themselves, and because even

our strong points can be improved, Paul tells them to live this way even more.

Live what way? Well, Paul now goes on to spell out how the Thessalonian Christians are to walk in three areas. What should their Christian lifestyle look like?

1. A holy lifestyle (4:3-8)

First of all, it's a *holy* lifestyle. That's made clear in 4:3a. And again, Paul comes back to it later in 4:7. In Scripture, something is said to be *holy* when it is set apart for God, special and pure to God, separated for God's use. And that is the mark of a Christian lifestyle.

The particular thing Paul has in mind here is the area of *sex* (4:3). Paul discusses what a lot of churches and pastors won't: sex and God! In a situation where people became Christians out of paganism, this would have been a real issue, where a wide range of sex before marriage and sex outside of marriage was tolerated.

So, we might expect what Paul says to be useful wherever God's people live in a sex-saturated society where the constant message is that we need to be having sex, having more sex, having better sex, and being connoisseurs of sex. Here is some instruction from Paul about a holy lifestyle when it comes to sex. It comes in four parts.

- *Avoid sexual immorality.* God wants us to be holy and free from sexual immorality (4:3). Note that holiness doesn't mean cutting out sexuality; it means *controlling* it. We control it; it doesn't control us, so that we are free from its rule.

This means, of course, that we need to know ourselves. We each of us are individuals, and work in a unique way. You are you and are different from the person next to you, different from the person you work with. Knowing ourselves might even come down to recognising possible differences between men and women – although we perhaps mustn't make too much of these so-called differences.

In the book *Temptations Men Face* (by Tom Eisenman), sex is dealt with in the *second* chapter, after a chapter on the temptation to be

macho. The chapter considers the particular temptations of men of trivialising sex, becoming addicted to sex, pornography, and masturbation. In a similar book on women, *Temptations Women Face* (by Mary Ellen Ashcroft), sex is treated in chapter 9! And the chapter focuses on believing distortions about sexuality: the distortion that sexuality is bad, that women don't have problems with lust, that sex is a male need, that a happy marriage means fulfilling sexual intimacy, that there is such a thing as free sex.

Avoiding sexual immorality involves knowing yourself, knowing how you tick, and knowing when to stop. For each of us that will mean different things in different situations. A glance, a look, a conversation, a situation, a touch, any one or a combination of these could well lead to walking on thin ice. 'Avoid sexual immorality', says Paul. But he has something else to say...

- *Control your body.* This appears to be said in 4:4-5. In fact, however, it's not easy to know exactly how to translate verse 4. The NIV has: 'Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable.' But it could be translated: 'Each of you should know how to live with his wife in a holy and honourable way.' The translations and scholars can't quite decide which to go for, but the balance of evidence is tipped in the direction of those who take it to refer to a person's *body* rather than a person's spouse. Paul is telling them to gain control over their body with regard to sexual matters. We can tend to think that our bodies belong to us, that we can do what we like with them; but our bodies belong to God. 'You are not your own', says Paul in another of his letters, 'you were bought with a price. Therefore, honour God with your body' (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

It's not that Paul doesn't care about how we treat others (including our spouses), for he clearly does, and that comes out in his next instruction...

- *Honour others* (4:6a). Honouring others means that wives will not cheat on their husbands, and husbands will not cheat on their wives. Husband and wife are to be true to each other. But honouring others also

recognises that when a married person has a sexual relationship with a person who is not their spouse, the damage doesn't end there. In fact, if anything, it *begins* there – and the consequences of the act reach far beyond the initial two involved. We don't take advantage of others, or exploit others, but look to the well-being of others; we honour others.

The fourth piece of instruction is no surprise...

- *Fear God* (4:6b-8). When we fail in these matters, says Paul, not only are we damaging ourselves and others, but we are deliberately turning our backs on God's calling of us, rejecting his purpose for our lives, denying the Holy Spirit he has given us.

When it comes to sex, then, we respect *ourselves* by avoiding sexual immorality; we respect our *body* by controlling it; we respect *others* by honouring them; and we respect *God* by fearing him. Christians, says Paul, are to live a *holy* lifestyle. But if it's a lifestyle marked by holiness, it's also marked by love...

2. A loving lifestyle (4:9-10)

Many of the people who went to North America to settle in that so-called New World were escaping from the threat of imprisonment, torture and execution in Europe. William Penn founded a city to give refuge to these people. He called it *Philadelphia*, a Greek word meaning 'brotherly love'. That's the word Paul uses here (4:9).

This love is more than just nice feelings for each other. We know that from the sorts of things Paul has already said in his letter about his own love for the Thessalonians. It's a love that demonstrates itself in practical ways. It drives us into making an effort to discover the real needs of each other and to express genuine concern about those needs. It helps us be patient when people bore us silly or wind us up. It makes us sensitive to people. It prods us into good turns without any thought of what *we* might get out of it. It helps us think the best of others. We see evidence of this loving lifestyle when there is no gossip among us. We see evidence of this kind of love when those who are confined to their homes are visited, when the sick are cared for, when

hard-pressed individuals are helped out, when the distressed amongst us are encouraged.

The Christians at Thessalonica loved this way, and their love had spread out to others in the surrounding area (4:10). And again, Paul says, do more – more and more!

Then there's a final feature of Christian lifestyle Paul deals with...

3. A quiet lifestyle (4:11-12)

We exercise a *holy* lifestyle in our *sexual* ethics, a *loving* lifestyle in our *community* ethics, and a *quiet* lifestyle in our *work* ethics (4:11-12).

Christians cannot escape the routine of working life. We serve God in our jobs, leading a quiet life – not, in other words, being a busybody. 'Mind your own business', Paul says. Let's not become prone to collecting juicy titbits of information to pass around our circle of friends – all in confidence, of course! No, we get on with our work – which means, as well, that we're not layabouts. We work with our own hands.

Those who don't do this are not only burdensome to their fellow Christians, but build a bad reputation. 'If this is Christianity', non-Christians might say as they see those noisy busybodies or those lazy layabouts, 'we don't want anything to do with it.'

This means that the living out of our walk with God has no impact on outsiders, or worse, a *negative* impact. The world is used to squabbling and gossiping and laziness. 'Show them something different', says Paul. Show them that you live to please God, show them Christian character, Christian lifestyle.

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Here then is what Christian lifestyle looks like. And there are two important threads that run all the the way through the passage – a 'love for God' element and a 'love for neighbour' element.

A friend once described how he was driving through Wales in thick snow, and in the dark. As they were making their way through twisting country roads, they could hardly see the road ahead at all, there were no other cars

to be seen, and it was quite scary. Until they realised something – that even though they couldn't see the road, and even though they couldn't really see the way ahead, they could still stay on the right track because of the fences that ran alongside either side of the road. If they stayed between the fences they'd be safe and could keep going.

Paul lays down the instructions he gave the Thessalonians in order to please God, as he says in 4:1-2; things that were God's will, as he says in 4:3; things that were taught by God, as he says in 4:9. In fact, eight times in all, Paul refers to *God* or to *Jesus* as the source of these instructions. Because they come from God, to follow them is to follow God, to obey them is to obey God's will. That's a *fence* – a boundary – on one side of the road, not to be crossed over.

But the instructions are to be followed not just because they are the will of God, but because they determine our relationships within the Christian community. So, Paul tells them not to wrong their brothers or take advantage of each other (4:6), to love each other (4:9), and to live and work in such a way to win the respect of outsiders (4:12). We are brothers and sisters together; we all belong to the same family of God, and have been taught to love one another – and that forms a fence on the other side of the road.

When it comes to Christian lifestyle, then, this passage helps us, whether we're dealing with sex or work or anything else. We ask, If I go this way, will it please God? Will it honour him? Will it show I know him? And we ask, if I go this way, will I be taking advantage of my brother? Will I be loving towards my sister? Will I show I belong to the family of God?

Love of God, love of neighbour: the two fences between them provide the safest and best possible place for us to walk in our Christian lives. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 18 November 2007