

# 1 Thessalonians: Chapter 4

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Hello, I'm Wayne Dalrymple. We will be continuing our study of 1 Thessalonians. Today we're going to be looking at chapter four.

Paul has been writing to the Thessalonians, to encourage them and to correct some misunderstandings that they had. And so in chapter four, he begins in the first 12 verses by exhorting them to live godly lives. And specifically, in verses 1 through 8, he talks about righteous living. And so let's read verses one through eight together; 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4.

“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

So here at this point, Paul transitions from giving some general teachings in the first 3 chapters, to some more specific teaching and commendation, and to exhortation here in this passage. He uses more imperatives, or commands, in this section than in the previous chapters. And this is a common pattern for Paul. In Ephesians, for example, in the first 3 chapters, Paul deals with matters of doctrine, some general teaching matters, and then in the last three, chapters, chapters 4 through 6, he deals with more specific instruction that applies to the church there in Ephesus. And so he does something very similar here to for the church in Thessalonica. He gives them some specific instruction and exhortation here in these verses.

And he appeals here to the authority of the Lord Jesus. He says, “We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus.” While “ask” and “urge” may not be a command, per se, but when he says, “in the Lord Jesus,” that certainly provides authority for what he is saying. And he also then, he shows them, or alludes to the relationship, the connection, that they have in Jesus. And so, certainly, the urging that he gives them would hold more weight and have more power because of that connection.

Of course, he had, even though he had only spent a short time in Thessalonica, when he taught them the gospel and established the church there, he certainly had a strong connection, had a strong way of thinking of them, as he expressed in the first few verses of the letter.

And so he appeals to this authority here. And of course, he had preached to them about Jesus according to Acts 17, and verse three. And so he reminds them that they must follow Him, rather than give in to those who were persecuting them. There certainly were many who were persecuting them, especially many Jewish people in the city, that just like those who had run them out of town. And so Paul is saying, “You've got to keep at it. You've got to keep going, even though they are persecuting you. Don't give in.”

And so he says they are to walk in a way that pleases God, here. In verse two or verse three, rather, he says, "This is the will of God, your sanctification." Of course, in verse one, he said, "how you ought to walk and to please God." And notice, he said, "Just as you are doing." So, it's not that he is rebuking them, or criticizing them in any way; he is simply encouraging them to continue on, and to continue to grow in the way that they were doing. He's very high on them, he very much encouraging and praising them for what they've been doing, but he wants them to continue on, and to become even stronger in the Lord.

And so, the Christian life is in one sense, a restrictive life; in the sense that there are things from which we are forbidden. We are prohibited to do certain things. And he lists some of these here, beginning in verse three. He says that "you have abstain from sexual immorality."

Now, obviously, in another sense, the Christian life is a very liberating, it is the most free way of life, because we are free from guilt, and free from sin. And so I don't want to leave a wrong impression. But in the sense that there are things that we are forbidden to do, there is restriction in the Christian life. And so Paul deals with a few of these things here.

And so he says, again, to abstain from sexual immorality, and then he goes on and adds to that in verse 4. He says that "each one of you know how to control his own body." We each have control over ourselves. We are not being controlled by some outside force. Yes, we are, to submit ourselves to God and allow him to guide us and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. But that will not take place against our will. That will not take place in a way that would force us to live for God. We are not robots. God has not made us to be automatons, robots that will follow him no matter what. But it is our decision. We have freedom to choose. And we need to exercise that choice to serve Him. And so, Paul is continuing to encourage the Thessalonians to do just that.

Notice then, the word that's described here, that's given, the instructions in verse two: "You know what instructions we gave you, through the Lord Jesus." The word "instruction," or "commandment," as some versions have it, is the idea of, it's an imperative. And notice that it is the idea of a command passed along a line of soldiers, along the chain of command. And so, we have here, this idea that Paul is saying, "I've given you this command, these commands, that you need to pass on to others." And even imply, and that is, the fact that they did not originate with Paul himself, but rather they came from the Lord. And so this command, we have a similar idea for us today. Paul said in 2 Timothy 2, and verse 2, "The things that I've committed to you the same you commit to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." And so, we are to continue the chain of command, if you will. We are to continue the line of instruction that God has established, and continue to teach the next generation of people. And so, Paul certainly encourages them to do that here and reminds them of what he had taught them.

And so, Paul specifically addresses the sin of sexual immorality. Now, certainly, while this sin is not specifically mentioned as being prevalent in Thessalonica, certainly not in Scripture, and maybe not as much as in other places. But, it certainly, it stands to reason that there was sexual immorality going on, because there was idolatry in the city. This was a Roman city. And so it would have been a place where idolatry most likely would have taken place. And along with idolatry came sexual immorality. As we know from, certainly the city of Corinth, where this was a very common place. In fact, it was part of the worship of many of the idols, in Corinth. And so, we certainly could expect that at least some of that was going on in Thessalonica. And so Paul wants them to make sure to stay away from that, to not get involved in that sexual immorality, but rather to abstain from it.

Of course, he reminds them, they need to be holy, that they need to be separate. They need to be set apart by God and for God to live lives of holiness. And so, Paul reminds the Thessalonians to continue along that path. In Romans chapter six, and verse 19, Paul makes a similar statement. Romans six and verse 19. He says, "I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members of slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness. So now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification." And so, he says that they need to present themselves to God as slaves of righteousness. And so that's a similar thought to what he gives here to the Thessalonians.

Notice he calls the Lord an Avenger. He says that the Lord is an Avenger, verse 5 beginning, it says, talking about the sexual immorality. He says, "not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness."

The Lord is an Avenger. But an Avenger in the sense, not in that, well, we did something to him and so he's going to get us back. But rather, he is an Avenger in the legal sense, he is one who has the authority and the power to execute judgment upon those who do wrong. And so, we must understand that God is a just God, and that punishment must be given for sin. That is, unless we repent and God's mercy, and grace then is given to us. But God's justice demands that sin be punished. Paul said in Romans chapter 6, and verse 23, "The wages of sin, is death." And so God is this Avenger, who will take vengeance on those as he says in the next letter, the second letter that he writes to them, he takes vengeance on those who do not know God, and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so, we must make sure that we fear Lord the Lord properly and reverently.

Notice he also says, that we're called to be pure as Christians. We're not called to live a life of sin any longer, but rather, we're called to be separate from sin, to live, holy and pure lives. Paul, in Romans chapter 6, verses 1 and 2, says much the same thing. When he says, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" He says, "May it never be," or, "God forbid." "How shall we who are dead to sin, live any longer in it?" And so we are to live lives of holiness. We're not to live in sin any longer. And so Paul certainly encourages them in that way as well.

Notice also, that in verse 8, he says, "Whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God." When we reject God's commands, no matter who is telling us those commands, we are rejecting God. And so, we need to understand that those of us who are teaching the Word of God, that there will be people who will reject what we say. They're not rejecting us. They're rejecting God. And so, let's understand that idea. Let's understand that fact. And let that then not cause us to shrink back, cause us to be timid in the way that we present the Word of God, but rather let us be bold. Let us be strong in the way that we teach. Yes, speak the truth in love, always in love, but also in boldness. And so Paul tells us to remain true to teaching the word.

But, notice also in verses 9 through 12, Paul continues on to encourage the Thessalonians. And in this case, he's encouraging them in their brotherly love. Let's read verses 9 through 12 together. "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live

quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”

And so, Paul stresses the idea of brotherly love in this section, in this passage. “Brotherly love,” the word that's translated “brotherly love” here is the Greek word Philadelphia. And so, it is literally, “love of the brethren.” And so, Paul is encouraging them to love one another. This is a strong love that has, has at its core, a connection, that’s based upon our relationship with God. That brings us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. And so, when we have that love, he says that we are stronger. And so, he says he didn't have any need to write to them about it. They already knew about brotherly love, they already were practicing it.

And, he says they were doing so, they had been taught by God, to love one another. It says they were doing so throughout Macedonia, which would include Philippi and Berea, among others. And so, they were expanding out, and stretching out, reaching out to those in surrounding areas, and showing brotherly love to all of them. They loved all the brethren here, not just some of them, but all of them without partiality. They did not show favoritism, but rather, they loved everyone. And we certainly need to love all brethren, regardless of race, regardless of age, social status, wealth, or lack of wealth, or any other reason, we must show love to all.

And he says they need to continue to grow in this. We need to grow in our love as well. And this is something that Paul does over and over again, especially it seems, here in his writing to the Thessalonians, but in other places as well, that, he always encourages us to never think that we've reached the pinnacle, to think that we've reached the level that we need to in our Christian lives. We never should get to a point where we think we've accomplished everything we need to. We need to continue to grow, we need to continue to reach forward. Just like Paul said in Philippians chapter 3, when he said, “Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forward those things that are ahead. I press on.” So, Paul talked about in Philippians 3 about all those things that he could boast about and those things that he had done, but he said, “I forget those things that are behind, I reach forward. I can want to continue to grow, continue to reach toward heaven. And that means continuing to grow in our spiritual lives. And certainly we should do that.

Notice then, Paul continues in verse 11. He says, “To aspire to live quietly.” That is, Paul does not want them to be agitators. He does not want them to be people who stir up trouble, and put their nose in other people's business, so to speak, he wanted them to mind their own business. Now, that doesn't mean that we should not be involved in each other's lives. There are some people who take this to the extreme and say, “Well, what you do is your business. And what I do is my business, and I'm not going to get involved in anything you do, or try to tell you that anything you're doing is wrong.” That's not what Paul is talking about here. Paul is not saying that we should not be watching for each other. He's not saying that we should not talk to our brethren, if they are falling away or are struggling in their spiritual lives. That it's not what he's talking about here. What Paul is referring to is, there were those who had quit their jobs, who had decided that, “Well, the Lord is going to come back very soon. And so I don't need my earthly job anymore. I'm just going to just sit here, wait till the Lord returns. And I'm going to live off the help of others.”

And because they had all this free time, apparently, they began to get involved in other people's business when they should not have been doing that. And so, Paul says, “You need to live quietly, you need to mind your own business. Don't be sticking your nose in the affairs of others that you have no business in.” And he encourages them to work with their own hands. “As we instructed you,” he says.

If they worked themselves, they won't be tempted to put their nose in other people's business. That idea is true in a lot of ways. If we are busy, not only working to support ourselves, financially and physically, but if we are working doing the Lord's work, then we're not going to have time to stick our nose in other people's business in a way that we should not. That's certainly what Paul is encouraging them to do here to work, and to stay busy. And so, let us recognize that. Paul says he didn't want them to rely on others for their living. But to rely on themselves. There were those who were not able to work, for whatever reason, and not able to support themselves. Those could be helped, could be supported, by others. But those who were capable themselves should not rely upon others.

This, this phrase that's here that's translated "aspire to live quietly," in this version, literally has the idea of, "to work restlessly to be at rest." And so it's a play on words here, which I find very interesting.

Also, notice he says in verse 12, "So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." What others think of us matters. You know, sometimes people say, "Well, it doesn't matter what other people think about us, I'm just going to do what I'm going to do." In one sense, I understand that. There is one sense in which that it's true, that we shouldn't live our lives just based on what other people think. But in the sense that we should live lives of love and purity, so that when people from the outside, people outside the church, look at us, they don't have anything about which to blame us. They don't have anything to point out to say, "Well, if that's a Christian, I don't want to be one." We should live lives in a way that will be respected by others. Luke records in Acts 2, and verse 47, that the church had favor with all the people. That means they were well liked. That was because they lived lives that were sincere and genuine and loving toward others. And so what others think of us, in that sense, does matter. As a matter of fact, it matters more for their sakes, rather than for our sake.

Let's look then at the next verses, verses 13 through 18, where Paul deals with misunderstanding about the second coming. As a matter of fact, going on into chapter 5, Paul will deal with another misunderstanding concerning the second coming as well. But, here in chapter 4, Paul deals with misunderstanding about the manner of Jesus' coming.

So let's read verses 13 through 18. "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words."

And so, Jesus is described here as the way he's going to be coming back, to take us home to be with him in heaven. Notice that Paul said here that the Thessalonians apparently were uninformed about some aspects of the second coming. And so, remember how Paul was not able to stay in Thessalonica as long as he would have liked. And so, perhaps this is one of those things that he just was not able to teach them fully on, before he left. And so, they had some misunderstandings. And so, one of the main reasons for writing this letter was to clear up this misunderstanding.

And so, he says that they thought their brethren who had died, would not get to take part in this great event of the Second Coming, the “parousia,” as it is in Greek. And so, he didn't want them to grieve like those who have no hope. Now, this does not prohibit all sorrow over death. It is a sad occasion for us when a loved one dies, passes away. But certainly, we should not sorrow as those who have no hope. If we know that our loved one is a child of God, then we can recognize that that loved one is better off. We can recognize that that loved one is blessed now. And so we don't have to sorrow continually. Those who have no hope, they sorrow continually, because there is no hope for them. But those of us who have the hope of heaven, we don't have to continue to sorrow for those who have gone off.

But see, they didn't realize this. They thought that those who had died, even though they were Christians, they thought that they wouldn't even get to participate, that they wouldn't even get to take part in it. But Paul says that is not true. In fact, we know that the resurrection of Christ ensures the resurrection of all believers. Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 22 and 23. Paul's description of the resurrection in the following verses, shows that they will all join Jesus together.

And so notice, he talks about, or mentions here, the word of the Lord. In verse 15, “For this, we declare to you by a word from the Lord.” This is something that came directly from him. And so certainly, either this could be an unrecorded saying of Jesus while he was on the earth. Or it could just simply be a reference to Christ teaching through the apostles that was given to them by the Holy Spirit. And either way, it was inspired teaching. It was from God.

And notice here that Paul is not implying that some of them would definitely still be alive when Jesus came. What I mean by that is, in verse 15, when he says that “we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will not proceed those who've fallen asleep.” Some would take that to say, “Well, Paul thinks that he's still going to be alive when the Lord returns.” And obviously, that was not the case. And so he was wrong. And so they try to make this seem as if it's an inconsistency or discrepancy in the Bible. But Paul is not using this in this language in the sense of emphatically or factually stating that he would be alive when the Lord returns. He's simply including himself in the group, because he's the one writing. It's kind of similar to the idea of the “royal we,” or I call it the “authorial we,” the “we” that the author uses to identify himself with his readers or with those about whom he's talking about here.

And so, Paul does a very similar thing in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, in verse 14, on the opposite side of that. 1 Corinthians 6 and verse 14, he says, “And God raised the Lord and will also [also] raise us up by his power.” So there, he includes himself in the group of those who would be dead, and would be raised when the Lord returned. And so, in both cases, Paul is not saying that he would definitely be in one of those, either one of those groups. Obviously, he couldn't be in both groups, he's going to be in one of the other. But, he simply just identifying himself, for the sake of writing and teaching, the truth that he's trying to get across there.

The two groups who are being compared here in verses 15 through 17, in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, are the righteous dead, and the righteous living. We need to understand that those who are wicked are not in consideration in this passage at all, either the wicked dead, or the those who are still alive, who are wicked, who are not in Christ. And so, that's not a consideration here. But Paul is simply talking about those who are righteous, those who are in Christ.

Now, in John chapter 5, in verses 28 and 29, Jesus describes the idea, the fact, that all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth, in the same hour. And so, it even goes on to say those

who are dead and those who are alive, or excuse me, those who are righteous, and those who are wicked. And so, those all will be raised up. And so, when he, when Paul here, is talking about the righteous living and the righteous dead, he's not saying that there's going to be one resurrection, and then 1000 years later, there's going to be another resurrection. He's not saying, "Well, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then a 1,000 years later, the wicked dead will be raised." That's not what he has in mind here at all. He's contrasting the righteous dead with the righteous living, so the righteous dead will be raised from the dead, before the righteous living are caught up in the air, to meet the Lord with them.

And so, here he's describing the events of the second coming. And he says, "We will meet the Lord in the air," perhaps implying Christ's victory over Satan. In one place, Satan is called "the prince of the power of the air," Ephesians chapter 2, verse 2. And so, maybe that has some reference to that. But certainly, in a very more literal sense, he is going to meet us in the air, and then we are going to meet him up in the air. And that tells us there's never a place where we see that Jesus would set foot on the earth again when he returns. Contrary to those who would teach that he is going to return to the earth and reign in Jerusalem for 1,000 years. There's nowhere in Scripture that teaches anything like that. It is only the twisting and misunderstanding of the Scriptures that leads to that kind of thinking.

And so, then notice that he says they were to encourage or to comfort one another with these words. This was something they were, they were sorrowful; they were concerned that those who had died would not get to take part in the second coming. But Paul says, "Don't worry, be comforted, because they will get to take part in it." That's the main reason he's writing this. And so he wants to encourage and to comfort them, so that they do not have to sorrow as those who have no hope.

One other thing about this section of scripture that I want to mention is the fact that it says that Jesus will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. There has been discussion and disagreement as to whether this means Jesus will bring with him from heaven, those who have fallen asleep, to take part in the second coming, or that he will bring those who have fallen asleep with him from Earth to heaven, along with those who are still alive when he comes. The way I understand this is that the second option is the one that is being taught here. After all, if he was bringing them from heaven to earth, then it seems that the resurrection would be pointless. Here, Paul says that when the Lord comes back, the dead in Christ will rise first. And at that point, they will go up in the air. And then those of us who are still alive, will go up and meet them in the air and meet the Lord together. And then we will all go back to heaven at the same time. Or, go to heaven at the same time. And so, this is the way I understand what Paul is saying here concerning that. And so, Paul writes to clear out this misunderstanding about the Second Coming.

I hope that this has been helpful, and that it has been enlightening and encouraging. Thank you very much! And may God bless you!