

A Call to Sanctification

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There is a transition which occurs between chapters three and four of 1 Thessalonians. The first three chapters deal with Paul's relationship with the brethren and the persecution which separated them.

At the end of chapter three, Paul writes his prayer for these saints: *“Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints”* (1 Thess. 3:11-13).

In this prayer, Paul makes mention of three themes which he will discuss in chapters four and five. These themes are as follows:

- 1. Love:** *the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.*
- 2. Holiness:** *that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father.*
- 3. Hope:** *at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

A New Life

There is a common misconception that people have regarding being a Christian. People rightly want to be saved. They want their sins forgiven. They want a fresh start. However, they frequently approach salvation as something that happens once in life.

For example, people may think they “got saved” but then return to life as it was. I have seen too many people obey the Gospel and then go back to life as if nothing new had taken place. They got baptized, but that is all they did. There was no change in lifestyle after they were baptized. Such was not the case with the Christians in Thessalonica.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8, Paul commends these saints for their unwavering loyalty to God. Their commitment to God was without question. After obeying the Gospel, they did not return to their old lifestyles. They were converted.

The Thessalonians did not return to the pagan temples of idolatry. They did not return to immorality. Instead, they began to learn and grow into a new life. There were noticeable changes in their lives. As Paul stated in chapter one, they turned from idols to serve the living, true God and were waiting for His Son from Heaven (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

The Source of Instruction

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

In the opening lines of this section, Paul fervently appeals to the Thessalonians by the authority of the Lord, Jesus. Referring to Jesus as Lord was a bold and risky declaration in the Roman Empire. Remember, Paul was accused before Roman officials in Thessalonica for claiming there was another king (Acts 17:7). Claiming allegiance to King Jesus was bold and risky anywhere in the Roman Empire. The city of Thessalonica was no exception to this harsh reality for Christians.

The new life the Thessalonians began to experience was the result of what they had received from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They had received the Gospel; the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul was witnessing the Parable of the Sower come to life (Matt. 13). When the word of God is planted in an honest heart, it will grow. New life is an unstoppable force. Even if new life in Christ results in death, eternal life will loosen the chains of death.

Also, the methods of Paul's teaching are important to note. This teaching came in the form of instruction and example: 1. Teaching was done in the synagogue for three weeks (Acts 17:1-3). 2. Paul references his conduct/example while living among them (1 Thess. 2:1-12).

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had taught them about their new life. They were educated about a new way to worship, a new moral and ethical code, and a new hope. While Paul was forced to leave these saints in a state of spiritual infancy, Timothy brought good news of their flourishing faith and love. They were beginning to grow in their new life. In reaction to this news, Paul now urges the brethren to continue in what they were doing.

Learning to Walk

Like developing infants, the Thessalonians were learning to walk. They were learning to live pleasing to God. Paul certainly took personal satisfaction in seeing people he taught begin to grow. However, what the Thessalonians were doing was not about just bringing Paul joy. What the Thessalonians were doing was about pleasing God, the Creator. Pleasing God was Paul's motivation in his efforts to teach. This had been noticed by the Thessalonians. This pure motive influenced what they were trying to accomplish in their lives. Like Paul, they too wanted to please God.

We would be wise to learn from this admirable example. The Thessalonians were motivated to please God. Are we motivated to please God? Or, are we just trying to make someone else happy? Sometimes one's life is motivated by his or her spouse. Likewise, some are motivated by parents. If our service to God is motivated only by the people in our lives, there will come a day in which this weak foundation of faith is exposed (1 Cor. 3:11-14). Being motivated to make someone else happy is not enough to sustain a life pleasing to God.

Our Sanctification

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

Human sanctification is God's will. This was noted in the Beginning when God made Adam. To signify man was unique from the rest of creation, God gave man His image. Therefore, man

could reflect God's glory and engage in the wise stewardship of God's good world (Gen. 1:26-28).

Regrettably, man failed in his divinely appointed stewardship. Man sinned and defiled his divinely given image. Therefore, God punished man and expelled him from the Garden (Gen. 3). In a defiled condition, man could not be useful to God. They could not have a relationship. Ultimately, God would seek man's restoration through the Messiah. By faith in what God did through the Messiah, man could be forgiven, have his image renewed, and become useful in God's service.

Sanctification involves a process or act whereby an object, time, or person is consecrated or devoted to serve a specific purpose. Only by following divinely authored acts of consecration was an object, time, or person sanctified. For example, God selected a specific time for Israel to rest and reflect on His grace. The seventh day of the week became a sanctified day among the nation of Israel.

Today, our sanctification results when we obey divinely authored acts of consecration. In short, our sanctification commences when we are baptized (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-4). We are cleansed from sin and become equipped to be used in the service of God. Paul explained in a letter to Timothy, "*...if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work*" (2 Tim. 2:21).

Conclusion

Like Adam and Eve, we must honor our sanctification. Otherwise, we will be rejected by our holy God. Once we are devoted to the service of God, we must maintain our moral and ethical purity. We cannot return to live in sin. Sin impedes our ability to be useful to God. In the remainder of the letter, Paul explains the responsibilities of sanctification to the saints at Thessalonica.