

A Sanctified Life

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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 (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

In this part of the letter, as strongly as Paul can, he urges the saints at Thessalonica to conform to God's will by living a sanctified life. Such transformation of character comes by conforming to the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus.

For anyone who thinks Jesus is indifferent towards the details of morality needs to take a close look at this text. Paul's moral and ethical instructions ultimately reflect the manner of life prescribed and patterned by Jesus. When we live according to the instructions of Jesus, we live approved of God.

The Responsibilities of a Sanctified Life

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, Paul does not define sanctification. Instead, he articulates the responsibilities of a sanctified life. Consider the following aspects of a sanctified life.

First, Paul instructs the brethren to abstain from fornication or sexual immorality. In the pagan world, there are few moral restraints. Sexual immorality was glorified through the myths and legends they invented for their idols. For example, the Greek goddess for love, Aphrodite, was the patron goddess of prostitutes. Also, Zeus was venerated for how he could deceptively seduce women. Men aspired to be like Zeus.

The leaders of the Greco-Roman world were notorious for wanton sexual appetites. Generally, though, men objectified women. As far as men were concerned, sex was there for the taking. This unrestrained behavior could be attributed to the fact that pagans rejected the true and living God.

Christians were to disassociate themselves from this lifestyle. Ultimately, the Creator established the moral foundation for society through the bond of marriage.

Marriage is a sanctified relationship because it was authored by God. Adam and Eve were to subdue creation and reproduce through this relationship (Gen. 1:27-28, 2:24). Additionally, marriage was authored to fulfill the passionate desires of reproduction. Paul told the Corinthians that marriage was to be used as a means to avoid fornication (1 Cor. 7:1-5).

Abstinence from fornication is a much needed teaching today. Fornication is a product of unrestrained lust. It only fosters brokenness and instability of every variety. This act does not reflect the love and goodness of the Creator. For those living a sanctified life, fornication must be avoided.

Second, rather than being driven by lust, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to practice self-control. Practicing self-control leads to a holy and honorable life. Being self-disciplined will gain the approval of God and man. Self-control leads to having a good reputation within the Church and community.

Some translations use the word “vessel” in the place of the word “body.” The word “vessel” has an interesting connotation in reference to holiness. A vessel holds contents of some kind. As Christians, our vessels have been emptied and cleansed through baptism. Once emptied and cleansed, they are able to then be used and filled with something new.

Regarding the body as a vessel, Paul wrote 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). A sanctified life is about removing lust from the heart and filling the heart with God’s love.

Third, Paul draws a stark contrast between Christians and Gentiles. He states that Christians are not to live like Gentiles. Christians are not to live like those who are driven by lust and unrestrained.

God does not want us to be filled with lust, passion, evil desire, or inordinate affection. The reason the Gentiles live morally unrestrained is because they are idolaters: they do not know God (1 Thess. 4:7). The Thessalonians had learned better and so must we.

Fourth, Paul indicates the far reaching consequences of fornication. Not only is fornication a sin against God and one’s own body, but fornication is also a sin against another. Regarding fornication, Paul states one was not to wrong or defraud his brother (1 Thess. 4:6). He seems to be warning about the consequences of fornicating with another man’s wife.

Paul’s warning about hurting our brother taps into another critical aspect of being a Christian. Being a Christian is not just about God and ourselves. Being a Christian is about other people: loving our neighbor. Paul has already written about how they were abounding in love for each other. Fornicating with another man’s wife would only cause harm.

Sadly, when a man fornicates with another man’s wife, the act is often described as love. Love is not and cannot be expressed through fornication or any other sin. Love does not wreck marriages and families. Fornication does.

Fornication will break the bonds of brotherly love and harm the unity of a church. Paul is warning against this potential danger. The devil was already using an outside influence to harm the Thessalonians: Jewish persecution. At the same time, the devil could destroy this church by using its own members to act without moral discretion.

Conclusion

To emphasize the seriousness of sanctification, Paul reminds the brethren of what God will do to fornicators. God will avenge those who have been harmed by the sin of fornication. In a marriage, fornication is betrayal of the highest order. This is why God allows divorce and remarriage. Fornication disrupts the harmony God intends marriage to reflect into the world.

Ultimately, God will not allow such a betrayal to go unchecked. The write of Hebrews stated, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4).

Sanctification directly corresponds to God’s call. The Gospel calls us to have our image renewed and vocation restored. Answering this call will enable to us to reflect the Creator into the world. Like the

Thessalonians, sanctification is how we influence our community. But, be warned. If we disregard the responsibilities of a sanctified life, we disregard God and the Spirit. **DF**