



Excel in Holiness - A Necessity

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

1. The Necessity of Sanctification

2. The Need for Excelling

As I said last week, we are at the beginning of a new section in Paul's epistle. The first three chapters have dealt with pastoral concern. The last two chapters will deal with pastoral instruction. We know that we are headed into the home stretch when Paul begins this section with the word, "Finally." (4:1). It is sort of like Paul is saying, "In conclusion" (as any good preacher might do). However, he isn't going to finish his epistle anytime soon, he continues on for two more chapters. In Philippians, he did the same thing, saying "finally" in chapter three verse one and continued on for two chapters in discussing practical matters with respect to the Philippians.

In many ways, he only begins to get to the point in the epistle to address the issues that he feels are necessary for the Thessalonians to hear. Though he says, "Finally," let me tell you, Paul is only beginning to bear the burden of his heart. He is going to be immensely practical! In writing this epistle, Paul will finally give any practical exhortations to the people of Thessalonica. The first command (i.e. instruction) in the entire epistle comes in 4:1.

Let me read our passage this evening.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

(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 may 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) Consequently, 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 may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

Within these words, there are two over-riding concerns in the heart of Paul (and thus, in the heart of God). The first concern of this text is ...

1. For Holiness (or Sanctification)

Several times in this text, Paul mentions something about holiness or sanctification, which, in the Greek text, are really the same word -- *hagiazō* (*agiazw*) or *hagiasmos* (*agiasmoV*). This word means, "to make holy, consecrate, sanctify, dedicate, separate, set apart for God, to purity."

To illustrate this word, let me show you this wedding picture of my wife and I. We don't throw this picture into a drawer and hide it. We don't put it with in garage, where it would get all dirty and grungy. We display it proudly. We dust it periodically, so that it is kept in a very nice condition. We have set our wedding picture apart and have given it a separate and honorable place. If you will, we have "made it holy."

Let me illustrate it again. We have some fine china at home, mostly as a result of our wedding presents. We have a china cabinet, where the china goes. It doesn't mix with our normal plates and dishes. We have set it apart. If you will, we have "made it holy."

So God calls us to be sanctified and set apart. He calls us to be holy and pure vessels for His honor and glory! The holiness and purity of the Thessalonians is Paul's heart. Look at how often this word, "holiness" or "sanctification" occurs in this passage

"This is the will of God, your **sanctification**" (verse 3).

"... that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in **sanctification** and honor" (verse 4)

"For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in **sanctification**" (verse 7).

"Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His **Holy** Spirit to you" (Verse 8).

Much of this flows from Paul's prayer in 3:13, "So that he may establish your hearts unblamable in **holiness** [this is the same word as repeated above] before our God and Father." God's intentions for his people are that they would be sanctified -- set apart -- holy.

Particularly (in this text), this holiness extends to two areas of life....

1. With regard to sexual purity (:3 - "that you abstain from sexual immorality.")
2. With regard to love of the brethren (:9 - "now as to the love of the brethren".

The personal holiness of the Thessalonians is Paul's first concern in this text. The second over-riding concern is that they might "excel still more" in their fight to be holy.

2. For Excelling

This second point comes from two verses in this section: Verses 1 and 10.

Look at verse 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 may excel still more.**" My constant urging in my teaching and preaching is that we would always keep the main point the main point. We need to understand the simple sentence, let us divert our attention away from the main point. We need to constantly ask ourselves, "what is the simple sentence in verse 1?" "We request and exhort you ... that you excel still more." As the NKJV says, "... that you abound more and more." All of the other phrases in this verse all focus upon this simple sentence -- that you excel still more. "You received from us instruction as to how to walk and please God"? Good! **Excel still more!** "You actually are walking this way"? Good! **Excel still more!**

Look at verse 10 - "for indeed you do practice [love] toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more." Again, the NKJV says, "But we urge you brethren, that you increase more and more." Paul, in effect, says, "Dear Thessalonians, you are walking in a manner that is pleasing to God. But, I tell you, press on! Do it better!" Paul says, "Dear Thessalonians, you are loving each other. But, I tell you, keep it up! Love even more! May your love toward one another increase and abound!"

What Paul is telling the Thessalonians ought to be true of us as well. I can say with Paul completely. People of Rock Valley Bible Church, "just as you have heard from me, Steve Brandon, one of your own, how you ought to walk, you are actually walking in that way. But I tell you, as one of your pastors, to excel in this. Keep it up! Go beyond!"

In business, the catch phrase today is, "to exceed the expectations of our customers." Or simply "exceeding expectations." In fact, this is the very vision of Kishwaukee Community Hospital where I work is this, "to exceed the expectations of our customers." The business world understands this with respect to business. May we as well, with respect to our holiness before the Lord. May we excel in our holiness.

It is appropriate tonight, that I have entitled my message, "Excel in Holiness." Paul's two concerns are my two concerns: (1) For Holiness and (2) For Excelling.

I would like to press both of these thoughts home to your minds tonight. We will speak in general this week, and next time, we will talk the specifics about abstaining from sexual immorality and about abounding in love for one another. I would like first to address this issue of holiness (or sanctification). Then I would like to address you with regard to excelling still more. Let's look first tonight at ...

1. The Necessity of Sanctification

In an effort to understand this necessity, I would like to ask a simple question. "Why is our sanctification necessary?"

1. Because obedience follows conversion (verses 1-2).

Look at verse 1, "you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk)." Notice this word, translated, "ought." This is so translated in most modern translations (the NIV being the exception here). "Ought" is a very weak word. "Ought" is a word of moral obligation (as in 2 Thess. 1:3, "we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as it only is fitting, ..." i.e. it is the right thing to do. But this word perhaps could be better translated, "it is necessary." The word in the Greek is a word, not of moral obligation, but a word of consequential activity (i.e. cause and effect). The idea is that **it will happen**, not that it should happen. Verse 1 is better translated, "you received from us instruction as to how **it is necessary** for you to walk and please God ..."

When Paul was with the Thessalonians, certainly there were practices that they needed to abandon. They turned to God from idols. There were things that they, by necessity, needed to do. As we have argued in the past, this was probably a predominantly Gentile church. Thus, for the most part, they previously had no moral code of conduct by which to follow. At least the Jews had the law to follow. But with the Gentiles, they had certain practices, which were anti-Christian and must be abandoned. There were Christian practices, which must be commenced. That is what Paul was saying, "You received from us instructions as to how it was necessary for you to live."

Sanctification is the result of the union with Christ. "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Paul says in verse 2, "You know what commandments we gave you by [the authority of] the Lord Jesus." He is saying the same thing. We told you of the things that are consequential to conversion. Your life will and must change. Simply put, obedience follows conversion.

I have heard this put several ways....

- "No change, no Jesus. No Jesus, no change."
- "You are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone."
- "The faith which has not a sanctifying influence on the character is no better than the faith of devils. It is a 'dead faith,'

because it is alone" (J. C. Ryle).

"Why is our sanctification necessary?"

2. Because it is God's will (verse 3)

Verse 3 says, "This is the will of God, your sanctification." In other words, "It is God's will for your life that you be sanctified, that you be holy." As the law prescribed, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). This is the foundation of many of the regulations that God put upon the nation Israel. He wanted them to be different from the other nations, so that they might be an object lesson to the nations to explain God's holiness to them.

Peter repeated the same theme, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts, which were yours in your ignorance, 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" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

It is God's will that we live a sanctified and holy life. Put another way, the saved person will be a sanctified person. Dear church family, we are saved for the purpose of holiness. Consider 2 Thess. 2:13, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth." God has chosen us for salvation through sanctification.

In other words, when God saves a man, God sanctifies a man. This is His will for a believer's life. This is what he purposes and this is what He desires and that is what He will accomplish. Theologically, there are two aspects to sanctification.

1. Positional sanctification. We are clean and pure in God's sight. The blood of Jesus cleanses the believer from his sin. When the scripture identifies Christians as "saints," scripture speaks in this "positional" sense. The saints are holy, separated, "to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called as saints" (Romans 1:6).

You remember when I spoke last week about our standing before God ultimately. Christians will be blameless before the Father, because they have been washed clean in the blood of Jesus. Eph. 5 is the picture of this, when Christ will present the church to Himself "without any spot or wrinkle or any such thing."

2. Practical (or progressive) sanctification. This is the process of the believer being brought closer to the standing which is positionally enjoyed through justification. To quote our own doctrinal statement: "Through obedience to the Word of God (Psalm 119:9-11; John 17:17,19) and the empowering of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18), the believer is able to live a life of increasing holiness in conformity to the will of God becoming more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1-22; 1 Thess. 4:3-4; 5:23)."

If that doesn't satisfy you, perhaps Louis Berkhof will, "Sanctification ... is that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works."

Now, there is a doctrine, which is believed by **many** today, that says that when somebody becomes a Christian, it matters not what their life entails. There is a teaching, which says that people can "accept Jesus into their heart" and experience no practical holiness in their lives, and yet, they will still be saved from the eternal punishments of hell. I have even heard it said from a "Bible Church" (not liberals), that once someone professes belief, he is saved -- even if that same person denounces the faith and goes and lives a lifestyle that is even worse than before he ever believed. This man called it the doctrine of "Reversionism" (i.e. reverting back to his old ways).

Listen, when God saves somebody, God doesn't merely change their eternal destiny (of whether or not they will go to heaven or hell). No, God will work a great work in their life and transform them. God will change them! God will transform the people he has called.

Long ago, Jeremiah, the prophet prophesied that God would so transform His people that they would have the Law of God within them and upon their hearts He will write it. (Jer. 31) Jesus says that a man must be born again to enter heaven. (John 3). Paul says that a believer in Christ is a new creature. (2 Cor. 5:17). The Bible clearly declares that when God saves a person, he will transform him/her.

In recent months, John MacArthur has addressed his church body concerning "the doctrine of deliverance." His argument is simply this point that I am now making to you: a saved person is not only saved from God's future wrath, but is also delivered (i.e. rescued) from sin today, in experience. That is, a saved person, is a delivered person - one who has been delivered (literally, rescued) out of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

What has happened in our Christian culture today is that we have so overused the word, "Saved," that it no longer has the full import of its meaning anymore! What does the word "saved" mean? We need to look no further than this week's news. There were 35 people aboard a Japanese trawler off the coast of Hawaii, when the USS Greenville broke its hull and quickly submerged the boat. Who was saved? It is the 26 of the 35 people aboard the Japanese trawler off the coast of Hawaii, who were "saved" from death by drowning. The 9 have drowned were not "saved." There is a dramatic difference!!!

Those who have been saved from their sin have been rescued! They were deep in the ocean, wallowing in their sin and impending doom. But then, God saves them from that experience and puts them on a rescue boat. Or, to use Biblical language, ...

- The believer in Jesus Christ was once dead to God and alive to sin (as Eph. 2 speaks), but now, the true Christian has

become "dead to sin, but alive to God" (Romans 6:11).

- "The mind set on the flesh is (not will be) death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6).

There is a teaching that says that a person merely needs to "pray a prayer" and they are a Christian, regardless of the way they live. It has propagated to great degrees. I even spoke yesterday on the phone with a gentlemen, who explained that on a missions trip last summer, a man went out one evening and spoke with several groups of people, all of whom "accepted Christ." They all prayed together with him. In his mind, he was convinced that they became believers, because they "accepted Christ" (i.e. they believed). But in my mind, I wondered whether or not these people who "accepted Christ" had been converted (i.e. changed, transformed).

Listen, in the Bible, we know people become Christians by watching the transformation that God does in their hearts. As Jesus says, "You will know a tree by its fruits." Even the apostle Paul didn't take the Thessalonian's initial "conversion experience" -- as great as it was -- as an indication that they were true believers. He wrote, "I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain" (1 Thess. 3:5). Paul feared that their faith wasn't a true faith!

Personally, I am concerned whenever I hear reports of the multitudes of people who have "accepted Christ" through some type of ministry. I would like to hear of reports of multitudes of people who have "been transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ." The language of the Russians is good, they speak of "repenters." We ought to speak in terms of "conversions" (i.e. "transformations").

John Piper has pointed out how these are really two different "gospels." The first "gospel" offers salvation for those who would believe in Jesus, the Savior. This "gospel" proclaims that they will be saved from hell and that they need not concern themselves with their battle with sin -- it is inconsequential. **In so protecting against works, they have lost their fruit.** The second "gospel" offers salvation and the resultant transformation of those who believe in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord! Commenting on the second gospel, John Piper says, "I hope you can see that this is a greater gospel than the other one. It's the gospel of God's victory over sin, not just his tolerance of sin. It is the gospel of Romans 6:14: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Almighty grace! Sovereign grace!

He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.

The gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim is a gospel of transformation. It is not a gospel merely of destination. I even had the opportunity this week to direct someone to the delivering power of Jesus Christ. He will deliver from sin today and he will deliver from the judgment to come.

Why is our sanctification necessary?

3. Because God has called us to purity (verse 7)

(Though these reasons apply particularly in this context to the matters of sexual purity, they are general enough to apply to all of our Christian lives. We will examine verses 4-6 next time to demonstrate this.)

Look at verse 7, "For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification." The word here translated, "sanctification" is the same word used in verse 3. The word here translated impurity, means simply, "any impurity or uncleanness." Though perhaps referring to sexual impurity (as the previous 3 verses indicate), it has a much broader meaning. Paul was accused of having a ministry among the Thessalonians, which was characterized by "impurity" (2:3).

When God calls a man for salvation, he is called for sanctification as well. As J. C. Ryle has said, "Sanctification is that inward spiritual work which the Lord Jesus Christ works in a man by the Holy Ghost, when He calls him to be a true believer. He not only washes him from his sins in His own blood, but He also separates him from his natural love of sin and the world, puts a new principle in his heart and makes him practically godly in life."

As we touched upon last week, the activity of God in sanctification is no less than the activity of God in salvation. God calls to salvation. God calls to sanctification. God calls us to a pure life. And so, I ask you this evening, ...

"Is your life a life of purity?"

What is your reputation among others?

Does your spouse think that you walk in purity?

Do your children think that you walk in purity?

Do your co-workers think that you walk in purity?

What do you think about your life? You can deceive many. What do you think?

Is there any area in your life in which you think yourself to be unsanctified?

Most importantly, what does God think?

He's the one that knows your heart.

A. W. Tozer has said, "Until we have seen ourselves as God sees us, we are not likely to be much disturbed over conditions around us as long as they do not get so far out of hand as to threaten our comfortable way of life. We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing."

Suppose that your heart was a tootsie pop. You lick and lick and lick until you get to the core. At the core is luscious chocolate -- a good thing. When you dig deep into your heart to see what is there, you will find, not a purity that is trying to express itself through a sinful flesh,

but you will find a corruptness seeking to express itself through a sinful flesh. (You won't find sweet chocolate, you will find bad-tasting dirt). Yet, the believer has within him the desire to do good, though the heart is bad.

"I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, ... But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (Rom. 7:21-23).

The fight of sanctification is a war. Notice the words above, "waging war," and "prisoner." It is a battle that we must fight. It is a battle we will never conquer totally. And yet, there is an experiential and practical holiness, which pleases God (4:1). "For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men (:12) instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

What steps are you going to take to live a life pleasing to God? (4:1).

Listen, there is a day and a time for us to come to the point when we realize that our life isn't matching up to what we know it ought! The first thing that we ought to do is to pray to God for the strength to walk according to His will -- in sanctification. The second thing that we ought to do is to seek with all of our effort to mortify the sin within us. Make every attempt. Strive with your whole heart to combat the sin.

I remember the days when I was in college, I was a part of a fraternity. When I sought to live a sanctified life within and surrounded by the sin, there came a day, when I said enough is enough, and I purposefully distanced myself from the sin. I just couldn't be around it any longer. I remember having a conversation with a non-Christian friend. He said, "You really hate some of those fraternity meetings, don't you?" I replied, "Yeah, the blasphemy and sin is too much for me to take."

Perhaps there are things in your life that you simply need to **stop** doing. Perhaps there are things in your life that you need to **start** doing. May I suggest two means to this end? Bible reading and prayer, by yourself and with your family.

We have our children sing, ...

Read your Bible, pray every day, pray every day, pray every day,
Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow.
And you'll grow, grow, grow, and you'll grow, grow, grow
Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow.

Neglect your Bible, forget to pray, forget to pray, forget to pray,
Neglect your Bible, forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink, shrink
And you'll shrink, shrink, shrink, and you'll shrink, shrink, shrink.
Neglect your Bible, forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink, shrink

You say, Steve, that's not so profound. Well, John Owen, a man far brighter than I, one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time, put forth two means of sanctification: meditation and prayer. He simply took "Bible reading" to the realm of "thinking about the truths of the Bible"

The same themes come in a hymn we sing, ...

(prayer) Take time to be holy, Speak oft with thy Lord;
(scripture reading) Abide in Him always, And feed on His Word.
(fellowship; service) Make friends of God's children; Help those who are weak;
Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.

Take time to be holy, The world rushes on;
(prayer) Spend much time in secret With Jesus alone;
(meditation) By looking to Jesus, Like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.

Take time to be holy, Let Him be thy guide,
And run not before Him Whatever be'tide;
(trust) In joy or in sorrow Still follow thy Lord,
(trust) And, looking to Jesus, Still trust in His Word.

Take time to be holy, Be calm in thy soul;
(thoughts) Each thought and each motive Beneath His control;
(trust) Thus led by His Spirit To fountains of love,
Thou soon shalt be fitted For service above

2. The Need for Excelling

We see this point in verse 1, "that you excel still more."

I simply urge you to fight the fight of faith. I urge you, as Paul did Timothy to be the soldier, who is engaged in the war. I urge you, as Paul did Timothy, to work hard like the farmer and athlete. I urge you, according to Heb. 12:1-4, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance

the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;" I urge you to press on.

In the late 1800's, J. C. Ryle once wrote a book called "Holiness." His purpose in writing to was to combat an error propagating through England at the time, which had at its root, the belief that one's sanctification comes about through no effort of his own. The founder of this movement, Robert Pearsall Smith, wrote in 1870, "You received a finished salvation through a crucified Saviour by simple faith in Him. You did nothing except take the gift. Works, effort, exertion did not enter into it. So with sanctification: you must stop striving and trust Christ to do all **in** you as he has done all **for** you. Just abide in him, as a branch in the vine, living by the sap, the life-energy, that flows from the parent stem. Let Christ life in you. How easy it is, once you know the secret! How peaceful! How joyful and triumphant! Instability and sinful stumblings become things of the past; it is like a second conversion, a complete renewing of your life."

The same idea is still around in our American culture. I have heard people talking about how we need to "let go and let God" as if we have no need to press on toward holiness. A few words of practical advice....

Watch your minds...

We are to be renewed in our minds. Simply look at verses like Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23; 1 Pet. 1:14. Realize that whatever we expose ourselves to will all have an effect on our minds. So take care what you watch on television, what you listen to on the radio, what you read in books.

Make efforts....

The name, "Holy Club" was mockingly given to the group of earnest "Methodists," who, in the early 1730s, met in John Wesley's room at Lincoln College, Oxford, and included Charles Wesley, Benjamin Ingham, and George Whitefield. The practices and discipline of the Holy Club became the model for later bands, classes, and societies of the Methodist revival, and the inspiration for the movement's social concern. These questions were used to promote personal holiness. As we close, I present these for you to ask yourself. These questions fit well on bathroom mirrors to be pondered each morning.

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am a better man than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
- Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
- Do I confidently pass on to another what was told to me in confidence? Can I be trusted?
- Am I slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
- Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?
- Did the Bible live to me today? Do I give it time to speak to me every day? Am I enjoying prayer?
- When did I last speak to somebody else with the object of trying to win that person for Christ?
- Am I making contacts with other people and using them for the Master's glory?
- Do I pray about the money I spend?
- Do I get to bed in time and get up in time?
- Do I disobey God in anything?
- Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
- Am I defeated in any part of my life, jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
- How do I spend my spare time?
- Am I proud?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 18, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.