

Sermon

Holiness: To walk rightly and to please God (1 Thess. 4:1-8)

Pastor Jerry Truex; July 17, 2011

A. Introduction

Walking has become a popular exercise. Every day, Vangie and I take our dog for a walk around a little lake near our house. Many of you routinely walk. You make it part of your life. It's a healthy habit. In the ancient world of Paul, walking was not just a healthy habit. It was the primary way to travel from place to place, even town to town.

The Christian life is compared to walking.

- Eph. 4:1 – “walk in a manner worthy of your calling”
- 1 John 2:6 – “Whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked”; in other words, if you call yourself a Christian, then imitate Jesus

Walking suggests effort and progress. Similarly, spiritual life requires effort and progress.

Paul describes the Christian life as a three-fold walk involving:

1. Holiness (4:1-8)
2. Community (4:9-10)
3. Integrity (4:11-12)

Today, we are going to look at the issue of *holiness* and next week we will look at the *community* and *integrity*.

B. Paul's Reminder (4:1-2)

NRSV. ¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

GNT. ¹ Λοιπὸν οὖν, ἀδελφοί, ἐρωτῶμεν ὑμᾶς καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ, ἵνα καθὼς παρελάβετε παρ' ἡμῶν τὸ πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀρέσκειν θεῷ, καθὼς καὶ περιπατεῖτε, ἵνα περισσεύητε μᾶλλον. ² οἴδατε γὰρ τίνας παραγγελίας ἐδώκαμεν ὑμῖν διὰ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ.

At this point in the letter, Paul is shifting focus. Up to this point in the letter, Paul has been more-or-less praising the Thessalonians and addressing them using features common in letters of friendship. But now, Paul shifts to moral exhortation.¹

¹ Gordon D Fee. *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament (Kindle Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009) 236.

Notice Paul is not demanding. He is actually reminding the Thessalonians about what they had already learned from him (4:1 "as you learned from us").

1. Walk/live (rightly)

What he reminds them about concerns how to live and to please God:

Greek: πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀρέσκειν θεῷ

Literal: how it is necessary for you to walk and to please God

NRSV: how you ought to live and to please God

Both in 4:1 and in 4:12 Paul uses the term "walk". In between, in 4:2-11, Paul presents ethical teaching regarding how Christians ought to live, focusing especially on conduct related to human sexuality.

This is the main point. Paul's preaching was not just about "faith," in the sense of trusting God, but about loyalty to God expressed in concrete moral behavior.

2. Please God

Notice that the aim of our moral conduct is to please God.

People live to please somebody. Many people simply live to please themselves. They lack sensitivity to other people's needs.

In contrast, followers of Jesus cannot go through life pleasing only themselves; we are created to serve, help, and welcome other people (Rom. 15:1).

However, we need to be careful in how we please other people. It's possible to please other people and not please God. Pleasing God is our primary task:

1 Thess. 2:4. ... even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. (NRSV)

Gal. 1:10 ... If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (NRSV)

Pleasing God should the major motive in our lives. If we think of ourselves as actors, then we have an audience of only One!

This is the beauty and simplicity of monotheism.

- Have no other gods before you.
- Seek to please only one God.
- Have only One center, One ultimate allegiance, an audience of One.

a. Are we capable of pleasing God?

Consider what Jesus said in John 8:29.

John 8:29 And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for (ὅτι) I always do what is pleasing to him. (NRSV)

We are to imitate Jesus and Jesus said God is with him—present with him, which is empowerment language—because (ὅτι) he does what pleases God.

There is a connection between experiencing God’s empowering presence and doing what is pleasing to God. They go together.

Do you want more of God’s empowering presence? Then seek out and do what is pleasing to God.

Eph. 5:10. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. (NRSV)

b. How do we know what pleases God?

Consider *again* what Jesus said in John 8:29.

John 8:29 And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for (ὅτι) I always do what is pleasing to him. (NRSV)

The surest way to please God is to imitate Jesus. Jesus pleased God. When we walk as he walked, we please God. This means we need to read the Gospels, which contain the teachings and stories of Jesus, and then, to the best of our ability, we should try to reenact (revivify, recapitulate) his life in our own unique circumstances. That would be pleasing to God.

3. Abounding (Gk. *perisseuō*) more and more

Notice how Paul ends verse 1. Walking rightly and pleasing God results (ἵνα) in *abounding more and more* (περισσεύητε μᾶλλον). This follows the basic “law” that the more we practice anything the better we get at it.

The word Paul uses here is *perisseuō* (περισσεύω), which means more than enough, abundance, overflowing. The more we practice walking rightly and pleasing God, the more we will overflow.

C. The Will of God: Holiness (4:3-6a)

<p>³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter ...</p>	<p>³ Τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ ἁγιασμός ὑμῶν, ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, ⁴ εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, ⁵ μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν, ⁶ τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ...</p>
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1. Holiness or sanctification (Gk. *hagiasmos*)

Sometimes we wonder: What is the will of God? What does God want from us? In verse 3, Paul gives us a direct answer. In verse 1, Paul “characterized Christian conduct as that which pleases God,” now, in verse 3, he “defines it in terms of *the will of God*.”² The will of God is our “holiness” or *hagiasmos* (ἁγιασμός).

Hagiasmos can also be translated “sanctification”. It refers to a process of being “set apart” by God for a special purpose. Usually, it means being set apart to live a certain way that glorifies God. It is living the way God wants and not some other way, such as human culture seems to dictate.

Sanctification, then, is none other than taking on the character of Christ. In other terms, it is *theōsis*, taking on the divine character or deification. It is to become what God has intended us to become. Although everyone is created in the *image of God*, sanctification is the process whereby we take on the *likeness of God*. It is a process whereby we become whole and complete.

Later in 1 Thess. 5:23, Paul says:

1 Thess. 5:23. “May the God of peace sanctify you to be whole” (Elias)³

1 Thess. 5:23. “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely” (NRSV)

² Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 138.

³ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 138.

The purpose of sanctification is to glorify God, which is the *same thing* as becoming “whole” or “complete” (5:23 *holotelēs*; ὅλοτελής) in reflecting the image and likeness of God.

Next, Paul identifies three very specific behaviors that can glorify God or demonstrate holiness.

1. Abstaining from sexual immorality
2. Controlling the body
3. Not wronging or exploiting

2. Abstaining from “sexual immorality” (*porneia*)

First, Paul says, “abstain from *porneia*.” The word, *porneia*, can refer to (a) *fornication*, which is sexual intercourse between a man and a woman not married to each other, and (b) any other type of illicit sexual relationship (1 Cor. 6:13, 18; 7:2; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5).

Excursus: Sexual immorality was probably a problem for the Thessalonians, because Paul could have talked about many other issues. “Because Thessalonica had a seaport, we can guess that prostitution and other forms of illicit sexual activity might have been a temptation for recent converts.⁴ There were also well known religious cults (e.g., Dionysus) that promised ecstatic union with deities though intercourse with temple prostitutes.

I think the issue is this: Faithfulness. Being faithful to other people—in our sexual relationships, in our family, in our work, or any other relationship—is a primary in which human beings demonstrate the character of God. God is faithful to human being; specifically, God has been and always will be faithful to the covenants that God has made with human beings. Being faithful, then, is a primary way in which humans demonstrate they are created in the image and likeness of God, which glorifies God.

3. Controlling your own body (*skeuos*)

Second, Paul says, “know how to control your own body.” Verse 4 has a wide variety of translations. It probably means “learn to control your own body” (NRSV), but it can also mean “learn to live with your own wife.” And there are others depending on how certain terms are interpreted.

εἰδέναι = to know how, know (sexually), respect
 σκεῦος = vessel, wife, body, sexual organ
 κτᾶσθαι = to control, obtain, possess

⁴ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 136.

The biggest debate is over how to translate the word *skeuos*, which the NRSV translated “body”. *Skeuos* literally means a vessel, a jar, or a thing, but metaphorically it can be body, wife, or sexual organ.

- Control your own body (NRSV; NIV)
- Control/obtain your own wife (RSV; TEV)
- Control your own sexual organ (NAB)
- Control/possess your own vessel (KJV)

Based on my reading, the NRSV—“learn/know how to control your own body”—is the most persuasive translation.⁵ Paul is not just writing to married people, but to everyone who has a body.

- **Not with lustful passion (*epithumia*)**

And there is one more thing. Paul says control your own body and adds “not with lustful passion” (μη ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας). The word “passion” is a translation of the Greek word, *epithumai*. It refers to a strong desire or craving. It matches our use of the terms attachment, addiction, or cravings in the Buddhist sense—an uncontrolled passion that eventually steals our freedom and destroys us.

What is an attachment?

- An attachment (addiction) is a harmful behavior, attitude, or thought that a person is unable to break (compulsion).
- An attachment (addiction) is an emotionally backed demand—“I must have what I want and I will not be happy unless I have it.”⁶
- An attachment (addiction) can be a behavior, an emotion, a substance, or anything else a person is not willing or able to give up.
- An attachment (addiction) controls us and harms us.

So Paul is warning us about not getting attached to anything. Attachments feed our narcissistic egos or false self. They turn us toward self-gratification (sensation), self-promotion (power), and self-protection at all cost (security).

Attachments prevent us from loving other people

⁵ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 140-1.

⁶ Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (1988) 24-25 states that addictions are “caused by attachments, or nailing, of desire to specific objects. The word *behavior* is especially important in this definition, for it indicates that *action* is essential to addiction.” However, May goes on to say that “thinking is also a behavior, a ‘doing.’ Thus images, memories, fantasies, ideas, concepts, and even certain feeling states can become objects of attachment, and one can become fully addicted to them.... Some of us might even admit to having been addicted to certain moods—depression, shyness, cynicism, and the like.”

- Our narcissistic ego sees itself as separate from all others, and knows nothing of any spiritual bond between humans, nature, or God

Important Note: Some people use the word “attachment” as a synonym of “love,” as in “I’m attached to my children.” However, I am using the word “attachment” in the sense of clinging to thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that *aim* at self-gratification, self-protection, and self-promotion. My belief is that such attachments *prevent* one from “loving” in the self-sacrificial way of Jesus. Reducing attachments actually helps us love ourselves, others, and God.

4. Not wronging or exploiting

Third, Paul says, “Do not wrong or exploit a brother or sister.” Some think that Paul has shifted focus at this point and is now talking about transgressing or exploiting a fellow Christian in business.

However, Paul uses the phrase, “in this matter,” so he seems to be continuing the matter of sexual misconduct. The word translated “wrong” is *huperbainen* (ὑπερβαίνειν), which literally mean to “overstep” the boundaries or to “go over” someone and thus “take advantage of” or “exploit” fellow believers. Although it probably refers to transgressing the boundaries of proper sexual relationships, I think we can also form a generalization that we should not to take advantage of anyone in any matter.

D. Motivations for Ethical Conduct

⁶ ... because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁶ ... διότι ἔκδικος κύριος περὶ πάντων τούτων, καθὼς καὶ προείπαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ διεμαρτυράμεθα. ⁷ οὐ γὰρ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ ἀλλ’ ἐν ἁγιασμῷ. ⁸ τοιγαροῦν ὁ ἀθετῶν οὐκ ἄνθρωπον ἀθετεῖ ἀλλὰ τὸν θεὸν τὸν [καὶ] διδόντα τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ τὸ ἅγιον εἰς ὑμᾶς.

Finally, Paul gives three motivations for walking rightly and pleasing God.

1. Warning: The Lord is the executor of justice

The first motivation is to consider that the Lord is the “avenger” in all this things or that the Lord is the executor of justice. “God in Christ will ultimately judge people who act immorally or abusively in their sexual relationships.”⁷

2. Human Potential: God calls us to holiness

⁷ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 143.

The second motivation for walking rightly and pleasing God is our call to holiness or to realize our human potential. We are called to bear the image and likeness of God.

We are called to glorify God by becoming what God has intended us to become, namely, Christlike. We are called to become fulfilled and actualized human beings as defined by Jesus.

3. Grace: God gives us the Holy Spirit

Paul's final motivation to walk rightly and please God is the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a note of grace. Just as Jesus taught, God's empowering presence is with us as we do what is pleasing to God.

E. Reflections

To sum up: In this section of 1 Thessalonians, Paul is reminding the readers how to live upright and moral lives that pleases and glorifies God.

He uses the metaphor of walking, which suggests effort and progress. Jesus taught that we can please God. God's will is that we grow in holiness, which is to live in such a way that we realize our human potential in bearing the image and likeness of God, which is Christlikeness and glorifies God.

Paul gives specific guidance regarding sexual conduct as an example of holy living. It is a call to imitate God's faithfulness in all our relationships.