

Surveying the Text: 1 Thessalonians

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INTRODUCTION:

Thessalonica was a principal city in Macedonia, the region that was the home of Philip and the great Alexander. This letter was written around 50 A.D. which would make it, with the exception of Galatians, the earliest record of Paul's writing. While the Jews in Berea were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica (Acts 17:11), the *church* in Thessalonica was in many respects one of Paul's success stories. The Christians there were noble.

THE TEXT:

“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

The three great emphases of 1 Thessalonians would have to be *chastity* in sexual matters, *diligence* in work, and intelligent fervency in eschatological *hope*. Overarching everything else in these letters are the questions of a surrounding eschatology, and we can see that however fervent Paul was in his eschatological hope, he was unbending in his understanding that such hope had ethical corollaries—do *not* be unchaste and do *not* be lazy.

He concludes the letter with a benediction, calling upon the God of peace to sanctify the Thessalonians entirely. He prays that this sanctification unto blamelessness would be extensive in their persons (spirit, soul, body), which would include their sexual behavior, and also extensive in time (until the *parousia* of the Lord Jesus).

DILIGENCE:

The church at Thessalonica was a thriving one, and like many busy places there were a number of free riders. This letter and the next letter to the Thessalonians addresses the problem of shiftlessness—slackers and sponges had to be dealt with firmly.

Paul began by setting a good example. “For ye remember, brethren, our *labour and travail*: for *labouring night and day*, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God” (1 Thess. 2:9).

Second, he had established a leadership in the church there who would continue with that same good example. “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them *which labour among you*, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in

love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

And then last, in that context of example, he delivered a command to them. "And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, *and to work with your own hands*, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing" (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

CHASTITY:

The exhortation on chastity is also hard hitting.

"For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 4:3–8).

There are at least three things to be taken away from this. The first is that Paul is not offering Christian sexlessness over against pagan sexuality. He says that Christians must learn how to possess their own bodies in *this* way, not in *that* way. The way we are to avoid is the sexuality of atheism.

Second, we are to know what we are rejecting—i.e. the passion of lust as exhibited by those who do not know God. That means we need to know the contrast. Now the world's approach to sex is demented, but it is a demented caricature of certain creational realities. This means that men and women are convex and concave in their desires. Men want to possess and women want to be possessed. Men want to want and women want to be wanted. Men want baubles and women want to be baubles.

The third point is that to reject God's pattern here is not to despise men, but rather to despise God. You might *defraud* your brother in this, but it *God* you are despising.

HOPE:

As we consider the apocalyptic component to all this, we need to divide the subject in two. The Bible teaches that there is a general resurrection at the end of the world—which is what we see described in chapter 4:13-18. Whenever you see the resurrection of the dead being discussed, that is a strong indicator that we are talking about the end of the world. This is the last day that Martha knew about when talking to Jesus about Lazarus (John 11:24).

"To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our

Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.” (1 Thess. 3:13). “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (1 Thess. 4:14).

We are plainly not talking about the destruction of Jerusalem—it is way too noisy. One verse pretty much sums it up (1 Thess. 4:16).

But this does not mean that the destruction of Jerusalem is not discussed in this letter. No, it is. “And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). Paul compares the persecution that the Thessalonian Christians received to the treatment that the Christians in Judea received, and then he says this: “Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Thess. 2:16). That wrath is just around the corner—the day of the Lord, which should be distinguished from the *Parousia*.

When Paul turns to the “times and seasons” (1 Thess. 5:1), he is turning to what we might call “current events.”

And so what does this mean? It means that we must return to our text. We pray to God that we would be made *holy and blameless*, being fashioned after the image of Jesus Christ.



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