

1 Thessalonians 4 • Characteristics of the Christian Life

Introduction

Paul set the tone of this letter in 1:3-4, "...bearing in mind your work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you..." This is a familiar theme in some of Paul's other letters, and here in chapter 4 he provides an expanded sermon, so to speak, providing more detail for each point.

¹Finally 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 excel still more. ²For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

[Read v.1-2]

Q: What is the nature of Paul's appeal here? Is he imparting something new that they should be paying special attention to for the first time?

A: He's encouraging us to put into practice more and more of what we **ALREADY** know.

Application: Consider your personal walk with Christ; are the issues the Spirit brings to your mind unknown things for which you need to seek answers or the conviction that you may not be following all the things you already know? After all, it's a relationship – not a quest for knowledge.

^{3a}For this is the will of God, your sanctification;

Sermon Point 1: "...your work of faith..."

[Read v.3a]

Q: What is "sanctification"?

A: It is continuing to perfection the work first begun when we became a new person in Christ, bringing all parts of our mind, heart and soul into obedience and devotion to Him.

Q: Scripture teaches us that God had a plan for us before we were even born and has a plan beyond this life. What part of God's plan for us is sanctification?

A: It's the plan for this **PRESENT** life.

Application: Consider for a moment what you currently believe to be the criteria for living a successful spiritual life, for doing God's will in your life. Are those things mostly achieving specific goals (i.e., witnessing to 100 people, giving \$1,000, etc.)? That's the way the world thinks. God assesses us based on our commitment to be set apart and devoted to Him. Do you see the difference?

^{3b}that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶and 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. ⁷For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. ⁸So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

[Read 3b-8]

Q: Why does it make sense that within the overall context of the Bible that the antithesis of sanctification is sexual immorality?

A: From Genesis through Revelation the most repeatedly used symbol of a bad spiritual relationship is adultery; good spiritual relationships are characterized by marital faithfulness.

Q: What is sexual immorality equated to throughout Scripture? How is that contrasted to sanctification?

A: Idolatry. It's the contrast of devotion to the One True God or devotion to a replacement false god. It's the picture of either being faithful or cheating in a relationship.

Q: How is this explained in v.7?

A: Keeping ourselves pure for God. Sanctification is our behavior, our willingness to be devoted and faithful to Christ rather than subject to our earthly desires.

Q: What is Paul's point in v.8?

A: These are not "moral guidelines" but God's command. It's an issue of personal obedience.

Application: Sanctification is the sum of our choices to behave according to God's commandments rather than our own desire, typified as either a faithful or adulterous relationship. Have you considered that a key measurement of "...your work of faith..." is faithfulness? Can you see why the acceptance/rejection of sexual immorality – whether personally or within the church at large – corresponds to the nature and quality of your spiritual relationship?

Sermon Point #2: "...labor of love..."

⁹Now 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; ¹⁰for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, ¹¹and 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, ¹²so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

[Read v.9-12]

Q: Is Paul preaching something new?

A: No. Just as he opened this chapter stating that they already know what they need to be obedient, he extends the same thought regarding their love.

Q: What is Paul urging?

A: "...to excel still more." (v.10) It's taking what is already known, what has been put into practice already, and taking it to an even deeper level.

Q: What are the 2 different groups Paul identifies in v.10 and v.12?

A: Believers and non-Believers.

Q: What is the difference in how we are to show love for Believers vs. non-Believers?

A: In v.9-10 Paul is stating that we already know how to love each other within the church and should strive to excel even more at it; in v.11-12 Paul is saying that the example of our life will be the conduit of love towards non-Believers.

Application: Just as "...your work of faith..." is aligning our behavior – in this case to be wholly devoted and pure unto Christ – so is our "...labor of love..." a result of the choices we make in how to live and conduct ourselves.

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Sermon Point #3: "...steadfastness of hope..."

[Read v.13-18]

Q: What is the biggest difference between this point and the previous two regarding faith and love?

A: Whereas the previous teachings were affirmation to excel in what they already knew, here Paul is conveying something new.

Q: What makes this teaching different? What is the human perspective?

A: Whereas the work of faith and labor of love are activities that consume us during this present life, the hope elaborated here is future-focused.

Q: How does hope for something that won't occur until AFTER this life in all practicality help the "work" and "labor" of this life?

A: It justifies our devotion to a pure relationship with Christ and our obedience to Him in all things – our behavior on earth will result in eternal benefits. Also, "life" is not limited to just our time on earth.

Q: According to v.18, what does our hope result in for THIS life?

A: Comfort for each other.

Application: Our "hope" is not to make a grand commotion about End Times events but to point towards them through our steady, quiet, confident lives. For Believers, it's a tool of unity and reassurance – not anticipation of a fireworks show.

Conclusion

Note that within each of these points there are both **personal** and **group** implications. Our behavioral choices have both personal and group benefits and responsibilities.

Personal

- The "work of faith" is sanctification, being personally obedient as in a faithful marital relationship with Christ.
- The "labor of love" is loving deeper, not being satisfied with the status quo.
- The "steadfastness of hope" is the knowledge that this life's behavior and choices are an extension of the next.

Group

- The "work of faith" is maintaining sexually pure relationships with others.
- The "labor of love" is living a visibly exemplary life as a witness to others, being neither an emotional nor physical burden to others.
- The "steadfastness of hope" is mutual comfort of our future life in Christ.

[Note: Each aspect of personal application is the first commandment to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. Each aspect of group application fulfills the second, to love our neighbor as our self.]