

Holy Living - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Sermon objective: To give people confidence that they can aspire to, and live, holy lives.

Sermon

Start prayer: Jesus, help to hear what you want us to hear, to take it into our minds; to take into our hearts; to take it into our whole being, so that you will be pleased with us. Amen.

1. Key verse(s)

What is the significant verse? Or verses?

- 3a It is God's will that you should be sanctified.
- 7b For God calls us 'to live a holy life.'

Supported by 1b and 10b – do this 'more and more.'

2. Sanctity/Holy

Sanctified. What does this mean? It is a word I know in the sense I have heard it, but what does it actually mean? I couldn't say when I read this. The authorised version also uses sanctified – so not much help there! The New English Bible uses 'holy.' I am a lot more comfortable with the word holy – with the concept of holiness. Wikipedia defines sanctity as the general state of being holy. So I am going to assume they mean the same with apologies to literary and theological purists.

So, when would you use the word holy?

- Holy man
- Holy communion
- Holy grail
- Holy well
- Holy days – from where we get holidays

Holy then, is associated with people, with processes – the things we do, and with places and objects. Holiness in this letter from Paul, is about people.

In the scriptures that Paul read – what we now call the Old Testament – holiness has connotations of separateness. The temple in Jerusalem demonstrates this well. The temple was thought of as having concentric circles of holiness; Holy of Holies; Temple Sanctuary; Temple Vestibule; Court of Priests; Court of Israelites; Court of Women; and then the circles went out further to the Temple Mount; the walled city of Jerusalem; the walled cities of Israel; the Land of Israel. Very hierarchical. Jesus abolished such detailed distinctions, but kept the basic concept of Holiness. Do we in our own lives have our own hierarchies that should be abolished? Do we practice hierarchy here in Christ Church? Does Jesus call us to do holy hierarchy?

To finish looking at the OT, the basic tenet in the OT is that the encounter with the holy is eminently desirable, but at the same time fearful and awesome.

How has holiness been taken in the Christian world. Much of the Jewish vision of holiness has been incorporated in our churches – the altar, the bread, the candles and lamps, incense, the font etc. All these things have been and are used to emphasise the extreme holiness of the Eucharist, the Breaking of Bread – many parallels to the Tabernacle. And then we have rosaries, crucifixes – and the empty cross – statues and icons of saints and Mary. And many places are regarded as holy and places of pilgrimage. We are protestants, evangelicals, so we don't go in for much of these, but it is important for us to know that the Roman Catholic Church condemns worshipping the object itself, as any worship given to something other than God, is considered idolatry. Quite right! But practice, even our own corporate and personal practice, can be somewhat different.

Paul reminds us that we should live to please God. Something we should dwell. Trying to please God is surely a sign of holiness, at the very least it is a move towards holiness.

3. Working Definition

At the Reformation, protestant scholars recognised that *holiness is an attribute of God*, and that *holiness is always part of the presence of God*. Practical Holiness is the evidence of the presence of God in the converted believer. That is all very well as a concept, but how do we do 'holy' in our daily lives?

4. Commandments

In considering how we can be holy, let us first look at the ten commandments. In Mark 12, Jesus says that we should love God with all our heart, our soul, our mind and with all our strength. He also said to love our neighbours as ourselves. There is no other commandment greater than these.

Jesus gives us a very clear objective, a very clear picture of how we should live our lives. All the other commandments are about NOT doing things – don't steal, don't kill. These are very much the outer limits of acceptable 'Godly' living. If we get anywhere close to these then we are hardly pleasing God.

5. Daily Challenges

What are the challenges we face in our daily lives. Isabel asked me this week what I wanted from the shop. Oh! I said, can you go to the newspapers shop and count how many girlie magazines are on the shelves? She did!

Did she find: up to 10
 10 – 20
 20 - 30
 More than 30

She found 37!

This was her research:

Girlie magazines	37
Films, computers etc	25 in-door sports!
Sport - outdoor	25+
Home	4 shelves
Railways and canals	ZERO!

We have a digi box – no Sky card and no Sky contract. Even so, a weekday lunchtime had 6-10 girlie free channels – scantily dressed young women.

It is no wonder that Paul highlights sexual morality, or immorality, as the most significant challenge to the church in Thessalonica. Whether our society is better or worse than the general Thessalonians is hardly worth wondering. We most definitely have the challenge of sexual immorality on our doorstep and in our homes – easily accessible to our children and young people.

Paul obviously does not approve of it, but did he urge the Thessalonian Church to run a public campaign against the practices. No, he simply urged, he instructed, the followers to live clean lives. To do so more and more. In other words, keep working on it.

Enough of sex, what other things can make us *less than pure, less than holy*?

I have written down a list that applies to me – AND it is not complete:

Driving
Rail Commuting
Expenses
Gossiping
Not being there
Indulgence
Swearing

Driving. Do we drive to considerably? Men need to be first, women have their make-up to get right. Both need to be chatting on their mobiles. Do we drive at the limit of safety, or do we keep well within limits?

Rail Commuting. When I first started travelling to London, my train stopped at Hook, Winchfield, Fleet and Farnborough. All the commuters were polite and reasonable except the ones from Fleet. Fleet commuters were rude, pushy, nasty people! Why Fleet? Before Fleet there were seats for everyone. At Farnborough there were no seats, but at Fleet there were seats for half the people on the platform. Pointed elbows and umbrellas at the charge!

Expenses. Are our expense sheets fact or fiction? Were they appropriate expenses? Breakfast in bed?

Gossiping. Is this a women's vice? No, men just gossip in a different way.

Not being there - for others.

Not being there – for ourselves. Not giving time and energy and thought to our own well being. Spending time with God.

Indulgence. Anything in excess. Drinking, eating, over spending.

Swearing. Misusing our language, often pornographic or anti God.

6. Getting things wrong.

That was an awful lot of 'getting things wrong.' Let us remind ourselves of what Holiness is about. *Holiness is always part of the presence of God.*

Will we always be holy? No!

We all get things wrong – I have outlined some of them. When we realise we've got something wrong, what should we do? Say 'sorry!' Easy answer. How do we apologise.?

There is the child's *Sorry*.....

And then there is the schoolboy's:

- I wasn't there.
- When I was: I didn't touch it.
- When I did: It broke in my hand.
- Honest: It wasn't my fault.
- Anyway: I didn't mean any harm

We can say *sorry* but not admit to putting things right.

Surely, if we get it wrong we need to say: I got it wrong – I am sorry.

We may say it with flowers, but the essential thing is we need to be sorry in our hearts.

This is an opportune time for me to say sorry. Sometime ago in a sermon I was explaining how the bible is viewed differently by people within the church. I told of a formal gathering of church leaders – one cleric held that the bible was our basic authority, an orthodox view, and the other person saw it as a 'work in progress.' In my sermon, I wanted to emphasise that the people making these presentations were senior people in the church, so I named them. The latter view, not believing the bible is our foundation, so exasperated me that I went on to make a personal comment on them. Naming them and making a personal comment on one of them had nothing to do with the point of the sermon. It was a distraction, it was unhelpful. What is more, the sermon was then placed on our website, so the comment was in the public domain. I got it wrong.

I have been thinking and praying on this, and I realised that in Paul's letters, the only people he names are the ones he especially wants to commend. Even the people leading congregations astray, the false teachers, the people Paul specifically condemns, are not named. So in my sermon, not only do I think I got it wrong, Paul's examples also condemn me. So I am writing to the person to say, sorry – unreservedly.

In looking at how we say sorry, we also need to consider how we accept apologies from others. This week's saga about Gordon Brown and 'the apology.' I mention this NOT to make any political statement, nor to go into the details of the saga, but to take a broad view. It just seems to me, we should consider how we say sorry, AND, we should consider how we accept other people's apologies.

7. The good things

Is this passage we are looking at in Thessalonians about our failings. No! Paul says **he instructed the Thessalonians how to live, as in fact they were living.** Paul just urges them to it **more and more.** About brotherly love, to love each other, to love all the brothers throughout the land, *no need to write to them.* Yet Paul *urges them to do so more and more.*

I would like to think that this is the sort of letter Paul would write to us here at Christ Church. If you think it doesn't apply to you personally, I say to you **but it can – only believe. Turn to Jesus.**

The centre page spread of this weeks Church of England newspaper has this article: My life was consumed with hatred and anger, but that has all gone now.... Gary Chapman, just down the road in Chichester prayed ***I've had enough, please take this away from me...***

Paul talks about leading a quiet life. – so that your **daily life may win the respect of outsiders.** How do we do this? Holy Spirit. A couple of images that might help you.

8. End prayer

Let us finish as little children on our father's lap.

Father, through this day and tomorrow, in work and in play, please bless each thing I do. May I be honest, loving and kind, doing the things you want me to do. Amen.