

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Justice

Pray today for international justice. All manner of criminal activity takes places across international borders, and few of us ever see the full extent of this or the efforts to challenge it, so pray ...

For myself

Lord Jesus Christ, You have guided Your people for centuries through the perils of life, and more than that, You have guided them through the ultimate trial of death, and given them the gift of life eternal. As I now experience the ups and downs of daily life, keep before me the evidence of Your great work and the victories of Your eternal work. Remind us that eventually, we face our journey through death either with You or without You. May we therefore chose to keep close to You in every circumstance of life, and remain mindful of our eternal destiny. AMEN

For others

Pray today for people in parts of the world where dictators offer no hope of a 'better life' to which people aspire. Pray for the churches that exist in such countries.

Meditation

We have been created for love
So let us demonstrate care for one another

We have been created for passion
So let us experience life to the full

We have been created for fellowship
So let us value each other's company

We have been created to be fruitful
So let us use the gifts we have been given

We have been created for fulfilment
So let us live our lives with purpose

We have been created to be productive

So let us be dynamic and fully employed

We have been created to be spiritual

So let us give ourselves for the purposes of God.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

¹ Fellow believers, it remains for us to urge and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that just as you learned from us how you should live to please God, as you are in fact doing, you should do so more and more; ² for you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

³ It is the will of God and your sanctification,

that you abstain from sexual immorality, ⁴ and that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, ⁵ not with the passions of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

⁶ that no one wrong or exploit a fellow believer in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger for all these things, just as we have already told you and emphatically warned you.

⁷ For God did not call us to impurity but into holiness. ⁸ So whoever rejects this does not reject people, but rejects God who gives you His Holy Spirit.

Review

After three chapters of homely conversation with the Thessalonians about their circumstance and his desire to go back to them, Paul now launches into some forthright advice about Christian living, or what we might call discipleship. As we read this passage we should remember that these words are the first thing Paul thought it right to say to the Thessalonians, having just evangelised there and established the church. We must therefore recognise that as far as he was concerned, his advice about '*sexual immorality*' (4:3), '*controlling the body*' (4:4), and making judgements about others (4:6), was of the highest priority. He wanted newly converted Christians to know these things precisely, lest they fall prey to the enemy in the early days of their discipleship!

Put like this, we must look at these verses with renewed vigour! Paul begins by addressing these young Christians as '*fellow believers*'. Remarkably, he does not doubt their conversion or question their faith, and welcomes them as equals in the Kingdom of God. He continues by stating a principle of true discipleship which too often goes unrecognised, which is to '*please God*' (4:1). The Christian is never commissioned to please church leaders, whether apostles, preachers, bishops, elders or any other leader. Scripture does call on God's people to pay due respect to their leaders (see Romans 13:1f.), to maintain the good order necessary for the peaceful proclamation of the Gospel (Titus 3:1). But still, each disciple is called to please God, and no other. Without exception.

Going Deeper

The importance of this teaching

We can be in no doubt. Paul was pleased by the report Timothy brought him about the Thessalonian Christians and their desire to please God. He urges them to continue to do what pleases God, as they have been doing, but then in verse 2 adds this, '*for you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus*', and the following verses list further instructions. What is going on here?

There are two possibilities. The first is that Paul is simply repeating in verses 3 to 7 the instructions he gave earlier to reinforce their importance; his words about having '*already told you*' in verse 6 suggest this interpretation. The second is that whatever instructions were given earlier, what follows is new teaching for the Thessalonians. Fortunately, no serious understanding of God's will hangs on which way we view this, but I prefer the second. I reckon that Paul's comment in verse 6 simply refers to the point that God is 'avenger' (or 'judge'), a point Paul makes frequently in his teaching (e.g. Romans 2:1-3)

If we look at Acts and Paul's other writings, we find that he tended to give instructions to new Christians about keeping the Cross central in every aspect of life (e.g. 1 Cor 2), about trusting Christ for salvation (Acts 16:31) and about receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1f.). We should imagine he did the same to the Thessalonians when he had to leave them in a hurry (Acts 17:10). We must therefore view the moral instructions he gives here as his priority in teaching new Christians.

Morality and holy living

Paul's teaches (4:3-8) that those who claim God has changed their lives can hardly live as they used to do before conversion, or their claims mean nothing. Principally, one of the most potent forces of human nature is sex. People today often include in this money, power or politics, but sex is always there. The maxim that prostitution is the oldest profession also reminds us, though in a demeaning and sexist manner, that sex remains the one power the devil can use at will to create havoc. Moreover, the one place he most wishes to attack is the church. Headlines in recent years have revealed the most sordid scandals of sexual abuse within even the church, and committed precisely by those who are most trusted. Any branch of God's church that has not faced its obligations to handle this most difficult of problems let alone root it out, has failed to grasp God's mission in today's world. They allow the devil his foothold amongst God's people here on earth.

So what does Paul say here? He urges, consistent with his other writings, '*abstain from sexual immorality*' (4:3, also 1 Cor 5:1, 7:2 etc.), and by '*sexual immorality*', Paul means any temptations to sexual activity outside of the marriage blessing of God. He adds now a phrase that is perhaps more helpful; '*that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, not with the passion of lust ...*' (4:4,5). Paul is speaking here of the manner in which the Holy Spirit, received normally at baptism (Acts 19:1-7) changes the heart, including feelings, emotions and attitudes, and He works to redirect all these things godward. Left alone, a person will pick up on all the sexual signals available in today's world, unless the Holy Spirit cuts across this human nature and diverts the workings of the soul within the brain (to be specific), so God replaces inappropriate sexual desire. This is not conjecture, it is the experience of many who have been saved, and it is a testimony that needs to be heard because of the many problems people experience even today.

Exploiting fellow believers

Paul then adds a further comment tied to his warning about sexual temptation, and it is wise advice pertinent to every age. He urges that, '*no one wrong or exploit a fellow believer in this*

matter, because the Lord is the avenger' (4:6). How important it is that when sexual immorality takes places, and it most certainly does, that people in the church refrain from making personal judgements about fault or blame.

The message of the Gospel is about repentance and redemption, not about blame and punishment, and even if sin has been committed then God has a way to deal with this, just as He will be the healer for all who are willing to receive His mercy and love. It may be hard to see this when faced with accusations of sexual misconduct that affects the life of the church, but we lose sight of this at our peril. The church is not a body in which the common justice which makes a sinner rot in jail can be allowed to even pass our thoughts, and principally because those who have been abused can never find peace by filling themselves with the desires of hate or vengeance. These are routes to hell not heaven. No eternal purpose is achieved by exploiting what the world calls the 'rights' of a case, but true healing for both the sinner and the wronged is found in the same God.

True holiness and the guidance of the Holy Spirit

Before we conclude this study, there is one thing we should not miss. Most of the advice, although it is about sex and vengeance, is described by Paul as about holiness! He says that this instruction is '*the will of God for your sanctification*' (4:3), and the word 'sanctification' is one of the Greek words meaning 'holy'; then in the very next verse he speaks of controlling the body '*in holiness and honour*' (4:4). Lastly, Paul sums up his advice here by saying '*God did not call us to impurity but into holiness*' (4:7), and states that those who reject this advice reject '*God who gives you His Holy Spirit*' (4:8).

Taken together, all this gives a clear impression of what Paul thinks of the misuse of sex. Sexual immorality and the consequences of such sin are close to being the primary distraction from the call of godliness and holiness placed on each Christian.

Discipleship

Application

The message of this text in brief

We should therefore not be shy to recognise the importance of what Paul says here. The Christian is urged to accept the guidance and help of God's Holy Spirit in order to control immoral sexual urges. This will enable life to be focussed on God and not on the pursuit of personal gratification.

Secondly, playing the blame game with the difficult situations that can develop when sex is alleged to have been a part of some misdeed, is to play with fire and put oneself in the place of God. We only have one avenger of sin and one healer of all, and this is Jesus Christ, who does these things in us by means of His Holy Spirit.

The importance of the Holy Spirit

Paul called all Christians to live by the 'holiness' of God, and by this he did not mean some higher spirituality, but the practical courage to say 'no' to sexual misdemeanour. Paul was profoundly clear in his teaching that holiness is a matter of the choices we make about how to live; do we do things God's way, or our own way? Of course, the only way that any of us can maintain the Christian lifestyle is to accept the touch of God's Holy Spirit, who can lovingly help us make tough choices at those moments when we feel hard pressed (4:8). By giving us the Holy Spirit, God has provided us with a way to live according to His laws and

His morality, and we would be foolish to turn away from His provision. The Holy Spirit is given to God's people for a purpose!

Ideas for what to do

- Ask yourself the very difficult question, have you succumbed to inappropriate sexual temptations. It may be that you will not feel comfortable to deal with such issues with anyone else, so do your best to seek the Lord's guidance about how you should deal with any issues that arise as you pray and reflect.
- Pray for those who have been the victims of sexual abuse within the life of the church, and pray that the church authorities will deal with the matter properly.
- If you are touched by this because you have personal experience of abuse ask God to bring you to a place of healing and wholeness and perhaps to guide you to those who can minister His healing and grace to you.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways does sexual temptation make life difficult for people today? How can the church fight against this social trend?
2. Apart from sexual temptation, what other key moral issues are important for the life of God's people today?
3. How may God's people be helped to receive the Holy Spirit if they have never known that such help is at hand?

Final Prayer

Teach me, great Lord and Master, all that I need to learn in order to serve You properly. Show me the things I need to learn, the things I need to explore, the things I need to work at, and the things I need to ask You about. Be my teacher, and encourage me in my learning, I pray; AMEN