

○ In his book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," Neil Postman writes, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion." I'd seek to correct him by stating that true Christianity is not a religion but a relationship with God. But beyond that I think that he makes a valid point, that we do need to recognise that Christianity is demanding and serious. And I think this is the point that Paul is seeking to make today.

The Thessalonians were doing well in their Christian walk, but Paul was concerned that they may plateau because they were content to sit back and wait for Jesus return. It was not long since Jesus ascension and there was an expectation of His imminent return. And Paul goes on to speak about that, but in acknowledging that Christianity is a joyful experience, filled with peace and freedom, under no condemnation; it is also quite demanding, and we do need to be serious about our personal holiness and not being a burden on others.

And I think this is an appropriate passage for us today in the western world. It's easy to sit back and wait for Jesus return – in a sense trying to get the best out of both worlds, and by doing so, we plateau, or we come to a standstill in our spiritual development and holiness.

So, ○ Paul gets very practical in chapter 4 with the church in Thessalonica. V.1-2, **"Finally, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."**

Pleasing God is not a matter of choice. Will I, or will I not? Seeking to please God should come as a natural consequence and from our hearts desire – we want to please the One who has saved us; set us free and brought us into eternal life. "...live in a way that pleases God."

And Paul has already stated in a number of ways, how grateful he is, for the way that these new believers were living; persevering under times of trial and fruitful in their love for one another. He says, "you're doing well, but don't become complacent thinking that you have arrived, or that "near enough is good enough," that now saved, you can sit back and wait.

○ V.3-6, **"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before."**

Remembering that the Thessalonians were very much a part of the Roman Empire; a pagan society where numerous gods were worshipped or sought to be appeased, and some involved temple prostitution. This was a society of low morality. I think it's safe to say that affairs were acceptable and fulfilling the sexual drive was forefront in many people's mind. But these new believers were called to live differently and leave this behind.

You see, there are many things involved concerning God's will for us, and v.3 states that one of those is that we be sanctified; or set apart and living with a purity that blesses others and gives us peace through a clear conscience. Paul knew the pull, and the power of the pagan world, and how easy it would be to slip back into it or justify sexual sin.

○ And our society today is no different. Ours is a pagan society; quick to pursue that which is anti-Christian, and follow after the selfish ways of the heart, and lust of the flesh; the pride of life. Sexuality drives much of what we see in the media; adds on TV; in the movies; on talk back shows; radio; online, and on social chat lines. We are constantly bombarded by alternative views on gender, affairs, and that sleeping around is OK. Is our society any different to the world of the Roman Empire?

Christians however are called to be holy because He is holy; to live God's way. We may not be perfect in holiness, but we are called to do away with the old ways and old habits and live in a God pleasing way. And that as a process takes time but should always have forward momentum; being sanctified.

○ Now, I just want to pick up on a number of words throughout these verses as to how we pursue holiness. V.3, "avoid." V.4, "control." V.5, "passionate." We'll start there. The word "passion" is linked with suffering; that's why we talk of the passion of Christ as he goes to the Cross. If you are passionate about something, then it means more than keen, but that you are zealous to the point of being obsessed; you suffer in your mind in desperation to see your desire fulfilled. If you are passionate concerning sexuality, it fills your mind and almost torments you.

So, Paul says, "avoid sexual immorality, by controlling your mind and therefore your body. By doing so, you will not bring dishonour or shame upon yourself or any other." This comes out in v.6, "No one should wrong a brother or sister, or take advantage of them."

You see, the pursuit of passionate lust is never just about self. Sexual immorality brings shame, guilt and dishonour; not just to us, but to the other; they carry shame, remorse, guilt and disgrace. And in seeking not to wrong a brother or sister, we should also avoid flirting with one another, or leading one another on, or playing with one another's emotions. Are you avoiding immorality? Are you taking advantage of someone else? Are you taking control of your mind? Are you pursuing holiness?

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian & philosopher, told this parable; he called it "The Wild Duck of Denmark." ○

There was once a wild duck that was flying north with his mates across Europe during the springtime. On route, he happened to land in a barnyard in Denmark, where he quickly made friends with the tame ducks that lived there. The wild duck enjoyed the corn and fresh water. He decided to stay for an hour, then for a day, then for a week, and finally, for a month.

At the end of that time, he contemplated flying to join his friends in the vast North land, but he'd begun to enjoy the safety of the barnyard, and the tame ducks had made him feel so welcome. So he stayed for the summer.

One autumn day, when his old mates were flying south, he heard their call. It stirred him with delight, and he enthusiastically flapped his wings and rose into the air to join them. Much to his dismay, he found that he could rise no higher than the top of the barn. As he waddled back to the safety of the barnyard, he muttered to himself, "Mmmm, I'm satisfied here, I have plenty of food, and the area is good. Why should I leave?" So, he spent the winter on the farm.

In the spring, when the wild ducks flew overhead again, he felt a strange stirring within his heart, but he didn't try to meet up with them. When they returned in the fall, they again invited him to re-join them, but this time, the duck didn't even notice them. There was no stirring within his heart. He simply kept on eating corn which made him fat.

The culture that the Thessalonian Christians were living in, was not a godly one. And Paul knew that if they didn't keep moving; if they stopped growing; if they stayed too long in the barnyard eating corn - that they might get used to it there and decide to stay.

Paul's experience had taught him that as Christians we never stop growing and being transformed. Paul knew that it's one thing to know something, and another to do it; to follow it through. He understood that a Christian must keep moving forward, or else they will end up going backwards... He knew that if a Christian did not move forward - that they would be influenced by the world's value system and be drawn back into its ways.

For us, to live in this world, and not have its values affect us – that takes deliberate effort. You see it is hard to stay clean while living in a rubbish tip.

○ Back in 2015 there was a documentary on a young lad in America by the name of Kevin Inciyaki. Kevin's story was one of a love for trash. At 9 years old, he was fixated on garbage. He not only liked garbage, but he also liked garbage containers, garbage trucks, garbage books and garbage videos.

Early family photos included him inspecting trash cans at Sea World. He had a photo album of “garbage trucks from around the world.” His mother Marsha said, “It’s been garbage since he was 2 years old. You have no idea what it is like having a child who has a passion for trash...”

“You have no idea, what it is like, living with someone who has a passion for trash...” What a statement! And I wonder if that’s how God feels about us at times. Far too often our minds are not focused on the things of God; purity, holiness, and sanctification; but rather on the things of this world. If we are honest, some of us would have to admit, that at times even though we are children of God, like Kevin we pursue trash. We read trashy books & magazines; we watch trashy shows on TV. We go to trashy movies or play trash video games. We use trash language and tell trash jokes. Roman Empire? Western world? It can be really hard to live in a garbage dump without picking something up.

○ Therefore we need to keep on moving, we need to keep on growing. Be holy. Avoid sexual immorality. Control your mind. Why, because when we do, it is harder for the world to get its grip on us. And as many have experienced, a foothold soon becomes a stronghold. For you see, the longer we stay in the garbage dump, the longer we hang out in the barnyard... the greater is the effect the world has on us.... And we will begin to get used to it and not even notice the difference anymore.

Paul speaks to the Thessalonians, but is God speaking to you today? Confess. Ask for forgiveness. And Repent – turn away from it. And maybe today you need to confide in someone you trust so that there is some accountability.

In v.9 +10, Paul then applauds them again for their love for one another, but then in 11 + 12 commends them to “make it their ambition to lead a quiet life; to mind their own business (not to be busy bodies or gossips) but to work hard with their hands so that they may not be a burden to anyone.” In this way they would gain even greater respect from those outside the church family.

The church is never meant to be a place for the gossip or the busy body, but a place where struggles, burdens, sin can be shared in confidence, and support gained to stand firm in the face of great temptation or fierce opposition.

And so the Christian walk is demanding and is serious. We are urged to live more and more, in order to please our loving Father God. We are to walk in a way that is worthy of Him and brings Him glory.