

LESSON 5

HOLY LOVE WINS (1 THESS. 4:1-12)

The Place of the Passage

Paul has commended the Thessalonians for their faith and witness (1 Thess. 1:2–10), defended his own conduct and ministry (1 Thess. 2:1–16), explained his absence (1 Thess. 2:17–3:5), and rejoiced in Timothy’s report (1 Thess. 3:6–13). He now turns to consider a few specific pastoral issues, beginning with holiness (1 Thess. 4:1–8), love (1 Thess. 4:9–10), and work (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

The Big Picture

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12 we see that a God-pleasing life has both moral and social dimensions, characterized by holiness and love.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12. Then review the following questions concerning this section of 1 Thessalonians and record your own responses.

What is the relationship between Paul’s prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:12–13 and his instructions in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12?

Take a moment to ponder what it means to “please God” (1 Thess. 4:1; see also 1 Thess. 2:4). What does this simple yet profound truth—that we can bring pleasure to our Maker’s heart—imply about who he is and what he is like?

Have you ever wanted to know the will of God for your life? Thankfully, this passage offers a definitive answer. What is God’s expressed will for you, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:3? We find ourselves amid a sexualized culture, even a sexual revolution, in the West. Words like “abstain” (1 Thess. 4:3) and “control” (1 Thess. 4:4) in reference to sexual expression sound prudish, even intolerant, to many. But in what ways does our culture misunderstand the Bible’s sexual ethic? How is God’s design for sexuality both counterculturally beautiful and counterintuitively freeing?

If Paul were writing to the church today, what do you think he would say regarding sexuality? According to 1 Thessalonians 4:5, the “passion of lust” marks those who “do not know God.” In what ways does giving in to lust constitute—or reveal—functional atheism?

Which persons of the Trinity make an appearance in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8, and why is this significant? Why do you think the Holy Spirit in particular is mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:8?

According to Paul, one reason we should work faithfully is so that we may “walk properly before outsiders” (1 Thess. 4:12). Indeed, to be “well thought of by outsiders” is a qualification for church elders (1 Tim. 3:7). Nevertheless, did not Jesus say, “Woe to you, when all people

“speak well of you” (Luke 6:26), and “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Luke 21:17)? How do we reconcile such texts?

How do you think unbelieving “outsiders” view your local church, and why? How do you think “outsiders” in your own life—whether family or friends or neighbors or coworkers—view you, and why?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Definition: Eschatology

The study of “last things,” typically referring to the events surrounding Jesus’ return at the end of time.

Gospel Glimpses

DESTINED FOR SALVATION. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10, we encounter gospel treasure shrink-wrapped in one sentence (see also 1 Thess. 4:14). Paul presents divine salvation as the divine alternative to divine wrath. We are rescued from God by God—from his justice, by his mercy. And this is not accidental; this was not “Plan B.” Before the beginning, the triune God “destined” a specific people for a specific end: salvation. If you are a repenting believer in Jesus, judgment will not have the last word in your life. It is not your destiny. God destined his Son for wrath instead of you. On the cross, Jesus was treated as if he had lived your (sinful) life so that, through faith in him, you could be treated as if you have lived his (sinless) life.

SUBSTITUTE AND FRIEND. In 1 Thessalonians 5:10, Paul declares that Jesus died for us so that we might live with him. Consider the order of those two prepositions and the relationship between them. What would happen if they were reversed? The declaration would become, “Jesus died with us that we might live for him.” Why would that be bad news? Here is why: If Jesus had only died with us (as our example), we might have been enabled to live for him (as his servant), but that would have been all. But because he also died for us (as our substitute), we can also live with him (as his friend). Praise God for the gospel!

Whole-Bible Connections

LIGHT AND DARKNESS. From God’s light-creating word in Genesis 1:3 to his light-engulfing glory in Revelation 22:5, the theme of light and darkness pervades Scripture. Whereas light often represents God’s holiness (1 John 1:5) or guidance (Ps. 43:3; 119:105), darkness often signifies human rebellion (John 3:19) or confusion (Prov. 4:19). Indeed, God’s own character is marked by moral purity—light without any trace of darkness (1 John 1:5; see also Ps. 27:1; 104:2; Dan. 2:22; 1 Tim. 6:16). Most significantly, Jesus himself is the light of the world (John 1:4–9; 8:12), and his redeemed people—those who have been transferred from darkness to light (Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9) by seeing the light of his glory streaming through the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4, 6)—are called to live as shining witnesses in a dark and hostile world (Matt. 5:14–16; John

12:36; Phil. 2:14–16). The children of light (Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5) must dress themselves daily in the armor of light (Rom. 13:12).

DEATH AS SLEEP. Because of the certainty of our resurrection hope, the New Testament often likens Christian death to a long nap. Such “sleep” is temporary, for Jesus will soon return to raise the dead. Paul uses sleep language no less than four times in this passage (1 Thess. 4:13, 14, 15; 5:10) to underscore the impermanence of death and the certainty of resurrection life. And this way of speaking is not anomalous; we encounter the same hope-filled assurance on the lips of Jesus (John 11:11–13) and in the words of Matthew (Matt. 27:52); Luke (Acts 7:60; 13:36); Peter (2 Pet. 3:4); and, again, Paul (1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20).

Definition: Glory

The beauty of God gone public. The Scriptures are saturated with the theme of God’s glory—a glory that shines brightest in the person and work of Jesus. The Bible testifies to the glory of God in eternity past (John 17:1, 4–5), in creation (Ps. 19:1; Isa. 43:6–7, 21; Col. 1:16–18), in redemption (Ps. 79:9; Jer. 14:7, 21; Rom. 3:23–26; 2 Cor. 4:4), and in eternity future (2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 5:9; 21:23). The Lord Jesus is magnified in our lives as we humbly follow (Ps. 23:3; Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:10–11) and boldly proclaim him (1 Pet. 2:9).

Theological Soundings

THE RETURN OF CHRIST. One day, heaven’s risen and reigning King will return—suddenly, physically, triumphantly—to the earth he made. He will extend justice to his enemies and mercy to his ex-enemies. All things will be made new. So Christians have always hoped and believed. But here the consensus screeches to a halt. Will Jesus secretly snatch away his church seven years prior to his climactic return? Will his return launch a thousand-year earthly rule before the final judgment and eternal state? Or is the so-called millennium happening now via his heavenly reign? These and other questions concerning the timing and sequence of events associated with Christ’s return abound. Some who espouse a “pretribulational rapture” believe that he will return twice—first in secret for his church and again seven years later publicly to inaugurate his millennial reign. Putting 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 alongside 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, however, this theory becomes difficult to sustain, for it appears that the return of the Lord (described in 1 Thess. 4:13–18) and the day of the Lord (described in 1 Thess. 5:1–11) are the same event. This becomes even clearer at the outset of 2 Thessalonians, where the coming of Christ to save believers and to punish unbelievers is a single, simultaneous event. In fact, in contrast to the notion that Christ’s return to save precedes his return to judge by a period of seven years, in 2 Thessalonians his punitive action is mentioned first (see 2 Thess. 1:6–7).

SOBER-MINDEDNESS. Twice in this passage, Paul summons Christians to be sober, for we belong to the day rather than to the night (1 Thess. 5:6, 8). What does this mean? Throughout the New Testament, moral and spiritual sobriety—clear-headedness—is held forth as an indispensable virtue for believers (Rom. 12:3; 2 Tim. 4:5; Titus 2:2; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8) and a basic qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8, compare 1 Tim. 3:11). Such sobriety is often associated with a posture of alertness—of watchfulness—since the enemy is

fierce (1 Pet. 5:8) and the end is near (1 Pet. 4:7; see also 1 Thess. 5:6–8). Rather than being drunk with worldly wisdom or substances such as wine, then, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), controlled and led by him (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord based on the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

As you Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of 1 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

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