

God Wants Your Holiness

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[0 : 00] Holy Spirit, let's pray now that by His Spirit He would speak to us and teach us by His Word. Our Father, we thank You for Your written Word. We thank You for Your Holy Spirit.

And how we pray, Lord, that as we look at Your Word tonight, we would be sanctified, that our inward life would be set apart for You. Our thoughts, desires, the use of our bodies would be conformed to Your instruction. Our Father, we confess we need Your Holy Spirit to apply Your living Word to us. And so we ask You to do so now. Speak, Lord, and leave us changed. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, if you've been a Christian for longer than five minutes, you will have struggled with this question. What does God want for my life? What does God want for my life? Perhaps that's what you've come in wondering tonight. What does God want for my life? We want His guidance and direction. We want to know how to live to please Him, don't we? And so how do we know what that is?

I knew someone once. He told me as a new Christian he'd been trying to work out what he should do next, and he was delighted then when he found a book in his Bible called Job.

To his surprise, he did not find in the book of Job quite what he was looking for. There is, of course, no book of the Bible where God gives us a life plan. The diversity of the people he calls to himself shows us, doesn't it? There's no one life plan or career path that Christians have. He calls people in all walks of life. But that doesn't mean that he hasn't told you what he wants for you.

[2 : 08] Clearly and unmistakably, in black and white, right there on the page, just look at verse 3 of our passage. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, or more willingly in the original, for this is God's will, your holiness. Over and above what you do with your life, God cares who you are in life. Interesting, isn't it, that we can speak past God thinking he hasn't answered our question, when in fact he has answered it, but just not quite in the way that we wanted.

What does God want for your life, for my life? He wants us, brothers and sisters, to be holy. That's how Paul starts the second part of his letter to the newborn church in Thessalonica.

Donald showed us last time in 3 verse 10, that there is something lacking in their faith. And that is what Paul now begins to deal with in chapters 4 and 5. But as we hear Paul's instructions in these last two chapters of the letter, we have to remember that in the first three chapters, he has sung over this church. He has just gushed, hasn't he, over the faith, hope, and love that he sees in them in the furnace of persecution. Almost the first thing he says is, we always thank God for all of you. He desperately wants them to know that what they have right now is a genuine saving faith in Christ. Despite the fact that they're suffering terribly for being Christians, he knows without a doubt that they are chosen and loved by God. Despite the fact that they've only been Christians for a matter of weeks or months, he knows that their faith has its origin in eternity past and its destination in eternity future because he knows who and what their faith is in. It's in the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. So what is our hope, our joy, or the crown, he says, in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

So brothers and sisters, whatever Paul says next comes in the context of that rich, deep, rock-solid assurance that they are saved. He's gone out of his way, hasn't he, not to crush them as he supplies what is lacking still in their faith. Indeed, he says in verse 1, none of what he's saying is new to them, and it's not as if they haven't made a good start on it. As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.

[5 : 14] So what's the point? Well, now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. So understand, he's not correcting them in what they don't know, so much as he's stretching them further in what they do know, and in so many ways they're already getting right. And so as we begin part two of this letter, I hope and I pray that you do not go away feeling like the love

and assurance of part one has been ripped out from under your feet. Paul assured us that we were really Christians, but now we're not so sure. No, we should go away feeling challenged and stretched by this, but for most of us that challenge will be to live more fully for Christ, not to begin obeying him as if we weren't before. If that is you, well, all the better that you're hearing this, but if it's not, you don't think there's nothing for me here. We can all live, can't we, more and more as Paul instructs. We can all grow in holiness. In fact, the instructions in chapters four and five are speaking to us about those same three dimensions of our relationship with God that we've seen before, our faith, our love, and our hope. We already have that if we're united with Christ.

How do we grow in those things? What does sexual sin have to do with loving the church or the return of Jesus? Well, Paul is stretching us in those three directions, faith, love, and hope, so that just as he prayed at the end of chapter three, our love would increase so that we would live out our faith in light of the hope of the coming of the Lord Jesus. Tonight, then, as we begin part two, how does Paul stretch our faith? Well, he reminds us that God wants us to live holy lives and, in particular, to use our bodies in a holy way. Those are our two points this evening, holy lives and then zooming in on the holy use of our bodies. Firstly, then, let's see God's call to live holy lives. One writer I read this week made the point that this section works a little bit like a photo in a frame because where are our eyes drawn to in this passage?

Our eyes are sucked straight into the middle, aren't they? Verses four, five, and six, that really uncomfortably detailed snapshot of what life was like in Thessalonica and the struggle that the Christians had in the church. But Paul has framed that photo in the verses before and after it. In verse three, it is God's will you should be sanctified. And verse seven, for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. So that while he is, and we'll see he is, zooming in on a big way, not the way that the Christians of Thessalonica were struggling to live holy lives, holiness as perhaps some of we are. That's framed by a bigger point about God's overall desire and will for us to be holy people. So what does it mean to be holy? Well, holiness at its most basic is to do with being set apart. And the best picture we have of that in the Bible actually comes from the Old Testament, the tent that God came to live in, in the desert with his people called the tabernacle.

We find that in the second half of the book of Exodus. God himself is holy. He is most set apart in his very being. There is nothing like him. And so the place where he came to live with his people had to be set apart for him. And those who served him there also had to be set apart for that purpose, holy to him. But not everything could be holy in that special sense. God said some things could make you religiously unclean and unfit for his presence and worship. The average Israelite would spend quite a lot of time a lot of time being unclean in that way a lot of time being unclean in that way. But what you wanted, the average person, was to be clean. You fit to stand before the tent to bring an offering, to bring your worship to God. But only something better than clean could go into the tent and stand in God's presence, only those that were holy. And that was only the priests. And even then, only the high priest was set apart one time every year to go into the deepest part of the tent, the most holy place. So being holy is to do with being set apart for the service and worship of the set apart one, the holy one.

[10:48] We know that's what Paul has in mind because he tells us the opposite of holy there in verse 7. Well, wouldn't he again? For God has not called us to uncleanness, but into holiness. And so straight away, something should strike us about the way that Paul speaks about holiness, that Paul is speaking about the baby Christians in Thessalonica in a way that generations of Israelites could never have dreamed would be true of them. If you had said to the average Israelite, the ordinary person, why don't you just pop into the tent and worship God? They would have laughed you out of the room.

You did not come into God's presence if you were not holy, and only the priests were holy. And it didn't matter how well you lived. You could not earn that status. There was not a test to pass or an application to put in, and you would get a certificate of holiness. You were either in that category or you were not. You could be a faithful Israelite all your life, love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, but never be set apart for God in that special way.

You could not be that close to God unless God said that you could be. But Paul says of the whole church that it is God's will that we all be set apart in that special way for his presence and worship. It is God's will that you be holy. God has called us, the whole church, every Christian, not to be impure, not even to live a clean life, but a holy life. And so behind that word, behind this instruction, we have to see what God has done for us in Christ, that he has set us apart for his worship and

service in a way that only a very, very few had ever known before. Do you see, when Paul calls Christians to holiness, he can't be saying that if we live in the right way, then we will become holy. That isn't possible. He's saying now God has set you apart as holy. Now he has called you holy. Live as holy people.

I have to throw in some theological words, perhaps especially for the note-takers. Our definitive sanctification is the grounds of our progressive sanctification. The definitive, God declares we are holy in his sight, and then progressive, he gradually makes us holy in ourselves. And it is not the other way around. You do not have to meet the standard for God to call you holy.

[13:49] So perhaps as we read that, as you've heard the readings tonight, as you've thought about the holiness of God, that word holy, it just scares you. Maybe you find that instruction, that call intimidating. Maybe you're not sure what to make of it. But in the context of the whole Bible, it's actually one of the most exciting and thrilling things that God could ever call us to on the back of Christ's finished work. The Reformers spoke really radically of the priesthood of all believers, because they found in the Bible that what could only be said of priests in the Old Testament, can now be said of ordinary Christians in the New Testament, me and you.

Because God has set us apart for himself in his Son, and verse 8, he has given us someone to apply that holiness to us. See him there? Verse 8, he is the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. A helpful question to ask whenever we study the Bible is, where else does the writer use this word or these words? Well, the only other place in this letter Paul speaks about the work of the Holy Spirit is in chapter 1, verses 5 and 6. Our gospel came to you, he says, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You welcome the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. So when did God give them his Holy Spirit at the point of their conversion? They could only turn to Jesus because of the Spirit's power, and now chapter 4, Paul ties the coming of the Holy Spirit to their holiness. So, question, at what point did these Christians become holy? When did they become holy?

The moment that the Holy Spirit came to them, the Holy Spirit, and they turned from serving idols to serve, serve the living and true God. You know, that's why I think this call to live holy lives, it's instructing them and us in our faith, because us being holy, me and you, it's not about our lives and behaviour. We are made holy in God's sight through faith in Christ. And it is only by trusting and relying upon the work of his Holy Spirit in our lives that we can ever answer the call to live as holy people.

From the day that you became a Christian, you went into the tent, so to speak. You went into the presence of the living God to serve him as a holy people. So now you are in the holy place as holy people. Well, serve and worship God as holy people. That is the call of these verses.

And remember, Paul is not talking to seasoned saints. He is talking to baby believers. They had known Christ weeks, perhaps. And if this is true of them, that they are holy, well, it is true then of anyone who has turned to Christ and put their faith in him. Understand, if you are a Christian, it doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian, you are holy right now.

[17:27] Now, you are not unclean. You might feel unclean because of your past, because of the past week.

But if your trust is in Jesus, you are not unclean. You are holy because you have been purified by the blood of Christ and you are lived in now by the Holy Spirit. And so you are fit for God's service and worship. And so says Paul, live and breathe now to worship and serve him as a holy people with holy lives. I hope we can see how encouraging and comforting then these words are, even as Paul urges us to live more and more into our holy lives. And I hope we can appreciate why Paul's framed these verses with that instruction. Because unless we hear where that call to live a holy life comes from, unless we understand how we can do that, well, verses 4, 5, and 6, we just can't do anything with them. They're just lost in us. The picture needs to be in the frame. And Paul hasn't hung this picture only for us to admire the frame, has he? As beautiful as it is. Now he wants the frame to draw our eyes into the center, which is the holy use of our bodies. So zooming in then, let's put the picture back in the frame and read those verses again from verse 3. 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 honorable, 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. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Now those words were no less

shocking when Paul wrote them than they are today. It's a really common mistake to make to think that our 21st century world must be so different from Paul's world in the first century, that what he has to say, especially about sex and relationships, just can't possibly be relevant to us. But the reason he's having to say this at all is that his world was so much like our world. Your sex was everywhere, dominated so much of society, anything really did go, especially if you were powerful. And that was as confusing for the Christians then as it is for us today.

And as uncomfortable as it is to talk about, well, we need to, because God speaks to us about it in his words. And as we've seen, this is all in the context, isn't it, of us being set apart for him in his world.

And so Paul draws a line, doesn't he, between Christians and the pagans who do not know God. And if we're not clear as Christians where that line is, then we have no hope to be living a holy life. Yeah, okay, sex is only one part of life, but as it was then, so it is now. It's a huge way that we are tempted to blur the line between what is unclean and what is holy. So what are some of the ways we're tempted to do that, brothers and sisters? The world that the Thessalonians lived in celebrated carrying out every desire of the heart in passionate lust to deny your own feelings was seen as unhealthy, damaging. And that is the air that we breathe today, isn't it? Perhaps especially if you're young.

[21 : 34] That doctrine, doing what you want with your body is not only fine, but even to doubt whether you should follow through on it, or for someone to question whether it's right, is seen as oppressive and a denial of not only what I want, but fundamentally who I am. So that for me to be who I truly am, means not controlling my body. And if I have inhibitions or try to control my feelings or I'm told I shouldn't be in this relationship or use my body for that, well, I am not free to be really me.

Now, Paul points out how that uncontrolled lust can be so harmful in verse 6, which we'll come to in a minute. But his big point isn't to do with how bad the big bad world is out there.

He's holding up a mirror to the church and saying, you Christians should be the mirror image of that, the total opposite. See, how do we as Christians really be ourselves?

Is God's call to learn to control our bodies, is that a rejection of who we really are? Is it that the world says, be yourself, and we say, don't be yourself?

Well, in some ways, yes. But in the truest sense, no. Because God has set us apart in Christ as holy people, so, verse 4, each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable. So understand, brothers and sisters, when you use your body in a pure and holy way that pleases God, you are being your true self.

[23 : 20] God has called you holy. And so if you don't bring your body under holy desires, well, then you are denying who you really are. The desires that you have for sexual intimacy and pleasure outside of God's will, they belong to the you who died when you turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

And to be really clear, the Bible calls sin any sexual gratification outside of the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. And that is true of what we do with our bodies, also what we imagine in our minds and what we feel in our hearts. But the passion and the desire that you have, if you're a Christian, to please God and live as he calls you to live, well, that desire belongs to the you that came alive when you turn to Christ. And so if I was to ask you, brothers and sisters, which you is the real you? What would you say? Is your life simply trying to resist sexual desires that you think express who you really are? If that's it, well, you will be crushed and you will be damaged and you will fail. But if you are resisting sexual desires which you know don't express the real you, the you who serves the living and true God, well, then there is a deep joy and fulfillment in the holy and honorable use of your body. And let's not pretend there is a death to die to ourselves, isn't there? More often than we would like to crucify those old desires.

We do need to learn to control our bodies, to submit what we do with our bodies to the will of the Holy Spirit living in us. But there is a resurrection to new life which we deny ourselves when we only tell ourselves through gritted teeth what we're not and don't sing to our souls who we now are, a holy people living a holy life. And that's just not a nice theory. I'm not telling you only how to think about yourself. Here's where the rubber hits the road. Verse 6, it paints a really grim portrait, doesn't it, of some of what was going on in the church in Thessalonica. And he says, in this matter, in this matter, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. Literally, he says, none of you should overstep the boundaries or exploit a brother or sister.

And this, I think, is where Paul's whole point comes together. Because in the grittiest sense, this is where the way that their society would have taught them to behave towards others was tainting their relationships in the church. So that in a situation like this, the line between the unclean and the holy was being blurred. In the first century, it wasn't seen as a problem for men to use servants in the house for sex, or for women to prostitute themselves in the pagan temple as an act of worship. It does not take much to imagine, doesn't it, the exploitation that was built into that way of life. Again, Paul is so clear that is an evil thing, an evil thing for one person's lust to override another person's will. And friends, if Paul could see half the content on the internet, or the scale of the global traffic in human beings today, he would see his own world writ large. A study was carried out recently that suggested as many as one in ten searches on the internet was pornographic in nature. And that it's not just a guy problem.

The exploitation and the coercion involved in producing those images is shocking. And that is before we even scratch the surface of sexual violence, rape.

[27 : 49] But again, he's not so much pointing out there, as he is holding a mirror up to the church, and asking, does that carry over or taint in any way the way that you relate to each other?

Again, it's super uncomfortable, isn't it, that the Bible pushes us to ask the question, when we come together like this, how do we see each other? Are we only bodies to gaze at and be gratified by one another's physical appearance?

Who do you hope will be at church for that reason? Could that be what you want when you come? As you get ready to go out, why do you wear what you wear?

Some of you are in budding relationships, or you're engaged. That's a wonderful thing. I know you care deeply about God's will for you, and the boundaries he's put in place.

But do you realize, do you realize, if you cross those boundaries before you've covenanted yourself to this person, on your wedding day, that you are wronging your brother and sister in Christ, even if you're both fine with it?

[29 : 14] That you are taking from your brother or sister something you have no right to, without having promised your love and devotion to them for the rest of your life?

In a church family like this, we grow close, don't we? We work together. We enjoy being together. That's a great thing. It's a wonderful thing. We have great relationships. Men and women, we are free in Christ to be friends in a way that is so rare outside of the church.

We are free from the need to sexualize one another. That's a wonderful thing. But especially between men and women, there are still boundaries, aren't there?

Emotional intimacy that is not to be crossed, interest and care that should not be taken advantage of. We live in a society like the Thessalonians did, where even the most innocent things can be tainted, sexualized.

[30 : 19] And that does happen in churches. And it can end so horribly. But Paul says that should not be true of your life as a Christian.

And if we don't think it is such a big deal to objectify one another, to test the boundaries with each other, well, verse 6 should leave us in no doubt about how seriously the Lord takes it.

He will punish all those who commit such sins. As we told you and warned you before, he is seriously jealous for the purity of his bride.

And if we care about each other's purity and our own holiness, we will not try and work out how close to the line we can get without sinning. We will, as Paul said in our reading earlier, flee.

Flee from sexual immorality and strive for holiness. And when people hear that, especially young couples, sometimes they say, you thanks, that's such good advice.

[31 : 26] Or that's really wise. But listen, friends, it is not good advice and it is not wisdom. It is instruction that comes, verse 2, by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

It is instruction that if we reject it, we are not rejecting human opinion, but God, who gives us his Holy Spirit.

Now, it will be a struggle in our hearts. I don't know what hearing this has stirred in you, challenged in you, provoked in you.

Some of us will feel that more or less strongly tonight. But let's be clear, all of us, that if we indulge that, use our bodies to overstep the line, and in truth, it's not a struggle anymore because we've given in.

While Paul has told us and warned us that the Lord will repay the wrong done to his bride, he will not stand for it. It is such a stark warning that we should take to heart.

[32 : 35] But it comes in the context of a glorious calling. Remember, brothers and sisters, God is not calling us to live an impossible life, but to live a life that he has given us by giving us his Son and giving us his Holy Spirit.

He has brought us into his presence. He has washed us clean by his word. He set us apart by his Spirit. He is sanctifying us day by day by day as we turn from idols to serve him.

And he has made us part of a family of people just like that, a family of sinners saved and sanctified by his grace alone. And in this family, he calls us to live a holy life.

and to use our bodies in holy ways. So let's now come to him and pray for ourselves, for each other, that we would be in a relationship with the Holy God that is seen in the way that we use our bodies.

Let's pray together now. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 52] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. mercy towards us in Christ. Lord, we marvel as we look at our own lives, our inner life and our outer life, that he knew no sin, and he was tempted in every way as we are, and yet was without sin.

And Father, how we pray, and we thank you for our union with him, by your Holy Spirit, that we are one with the risen Christ, and how we pray by your Holy Spirit that we would grow more like him, that we would be sanctified, that our hearts, our minds, our bodies would be pure, that we would use our whole being to serve and to worship you. And Lord, we pray that you would guard this family of your people. Lord, our hearts break to see your bride transgress, to see lines overstepped. And Father, we pray that you would protect us from that, by guarding our hearts, and by growing us in Christ. Lord, help us to relate to one another in a pure and a holy way, that we might serve and worship you. We pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen.