

## **STANDING FIRM**

### **VI. “Distinctly Different”**

7-1-07  
Ken Peterson

1 Thess. 3:12-4:12

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Beethoven’s symphonies are some of my favorites. I can only wish that he had written more before his death in 1827 at the age of 57. There has often been speculation of the cause of his death. But in 2000, an Illinois scientist, William Walsh, obtained a few strands of Beethoven’s hair for analysis and found Beethoven had 100 times the normal amount of lead in his body. He apparently died from lead poisoning. Also, Walsh thinks he knows how it happened. In order to relax, Beethoven often visited a mineral spa, which among the many high concentrations of minerals was also a high concentration of lead. So, the very thing he was doing to help his life was ultimately slowly poisoning him.

Sin is a lot like that in our spiritual life. The effects are often not noticeable or immediate. A little of it here and there hardly seems a big deal. A bit of gossip here, a little unforgiveness there, a bit of lust, a little pride, and some selfishness. It all can seem rather inconsequential. And, sometimes things like looking out for self and materialistic pursuits feel like the right thing to do. We joke about sin and in general rather enjoy our little sin excursions— as long as they are secret and/or among the generally accepted, “Boys will be boys” categories. Recent polls show that many self-described evangelical Christian’s moral lives reflect little difference from our mainstream American culture. Rates of divorce, extramarital sex and premarital sex, pornography, materialism, to mention just a few issues, show that for far too many Christians, their moral lives are indistinguishable from the culture that surrounds us.

But, we must not listen to our culture on this. The Bible treats sin as a big deal and is strong in its call for our being purified of all sin. “Sanctification” and “holiness” are the big Biblical words describing this process. God’s call to us is clear when he declares in Lev. 11:44, *Be holy, because I am holy*. There are no “little” sins in God’s eyes.

That’s where our Scripture takes us this morning. I’m including the last two verses from last week, Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians, for it segues right into this subject of sanctification in chapter 4.

#### **READ TEXT**

#### **LIVE IN ORDER TO PLEASE GOD**

First of all, I want us to notice that Paul is describing a process here. These Thessalonian Christians are rather new to the faith, but are certainly exemplary in many ways. They have remained true to the faith in spite of intense persecution. Now, after praying for them to be strengthened to be “blameless and holy in the presence of our God,”

*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* (1 Thess 4:1).

He uses that phrase, “more and more” twice in this section. It reflects a growth in obedience, doing what God wants us to in more and more of our lives and situations. We never arrive at perfection in our walk with Christ. There is always more and more to be dealt with in our natures. The process by which this happens is termed “sanctification” in the Bible. It comes from the same Greek root word for “holy” or “holiness.” So, vs. 3 in our text begins, *It is God's will that you should be sanctified....* “Holy and pure,” “without sin” are words other translations use.

As I mentioned last Sunday, “holy” may not have a very positive connotation to us as in “holier than thou.” Likewise, “sanctification” may sound “churchy” and out of touch with real life and real fun. But sanctification is a process through which the Holy Spirit transforms our character into being more and more like Christ. Jesus Christ is the perfect human expression of what it means to be holy. And sanctification is the Biblical word used to describe our being changed into His likeness.

So Paul, in unmistakable terms, is telling these new Christians that while they’ve been born again, there is still lots of growth and transformation to take place in them. Is there anyone here who would not like to be like Jesus in nature and character? Then, this verse is wonderful news, *It is God's will that you should be sanctified....* That’s what God is actively working to do in you.

Now, Paul goes on to apply this to at least three broad areas:

1. Sexual morality (3-8);
2. Brotherly love (9-10);
3. Work (11-12).

### **SEXUAL MORALITY**

*3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;* (1 Thess 4:3-5)

Certainly sex is a big topic in our day, as it obviously was in Paul’s day. In our text, six verses are devoted to sex and two verses each to the other two topics. I was reading a commentary on this passage by Leon Morris written in 1959. As I read his first sentence, it brought home how things have changed since then. He writes:

*It comes as something of a surprise to modern men to find an exhortation to sexual purity in the forefront of practical directions to a Christian church.*

Certainly today in our sex-saturated culture we shouldn’t be surprised that the first topic Paul selects in being sanctified is sexual purity— yes, even for the church.

The Greek word used here for “sexual immorality” is translated “fornication” in the KJV. It is a noun used to cover all forms of illicit sexual intercourse. Paul is writing to a church immersed in a culture in which chastity was considered an unreasonable restriction. Sexual practice outside the bonds of marriage was considered the norm. Demosthenes, the Greek orator and statesman

captured the prevailing attitude of the day saying,

*“We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”*

Against such attitudes, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God has called us to live distinctly different lives. He says that God wants us to control our bodies *in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.*

God’s direction for the gift of sex is that it is too wonderful and too important to be squandered. It belongs only in the commitment of marriage– no premarital sex and no extramarital sex, period. Paul explains it best, I think, in 1 Cor. 6:12-20. The crux of his argument there is that our bodies belong to God, *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...?* (19). Sex is a life-uniting act (15-17), making us “one flesh.” God designed it only for the life long commitment of marriage.

And there’s this. Sexual sin is actually much worse than many other sins. Paul says,

*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.* (1 Cor 6:18).

Sexual sin is more serious than a lot of other sins because Paul has just said, *your bodies are members of Christ himself* (15). In sexual sin, you drag Christ into it as well– and that has deep, soul-affecting consequences. I sometimes hear people minimizing the seriousness of their sexual sins by saying, “Hey, nobody’s perfect. We all sin a lot in various ways, little lies, lose our tempers. God forgives.” Scripture clearly puts sexual immorality in a category of special seriousness.

And, Paul goes on in vs. 6 of our text warning that *in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.* This speaks of getting interested in another person’s wife or husband, leading to adultery. The legal term that only a few states still have on the books as reason for a lawsuit is “alienation of affection.” This is the Biblical call for trust and integrity in all our male/ female dealings.

## **BROTHERLY LOVE**

*Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.* (9)

I’ve often mentioned the three Greek words used for love, with *agape* being the highest kind of love, the unilateral love expressed in Christ where He loves us whether we love Him or not. That is not the word for love here. It is the word from which we get Philadelphia– brotherly love. This is human affection for one another. And here, Paul repeats this expression “more and more.” We are to continue to grow in this.

This speaks of relationships with one another. Sanctification, our growth in being like Christ means that our human relationships will also grow in love. And, I don’t need to tell you, loving others in general or loving the world in general is not nearly as difficult as growing in love for Ernie, Mildred, Sam, and Henry in the church family. (Those are hypothetical names in case

you're trying to figure out who I mean). Our being sanctified is a process the Holy Spirit works in us through specific people. So, the next time you want to avoid someone or have nothing to do with them, just think, "This might be a tool of the Spirit in my sanctification!" And, that's why Christianity cut-off from the church doesn't have much credibility. The church is the medium in which God forms holy lives.

## **WORK HARD**

*11 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (11-12)*

A good work ethic is promoted in the New Testament. Paul reminds them that working hard and producing quality work win people's respect. Those who are dependent, moochers, taking more than they give, in general, are not admired. Here is an opportunity to give a witness to our faith through the excellence and integrity that we bring to our work place.

There were some in Thessalonica who, as we'll see later, were quitting work to just get ready for the Lord's return. Their thinking was, "If the Lord's coming back any day now, why waste time at work? I'm better-off spending my days in worship, Bible study, prayer, and talking about spiritual things."

Also, Paul counsels them *to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business*. This denotes tranquility and peace. Do you know people like that? It is refreshing, isn't it? You like to be around them and it is a good Christian witness.

This year, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jamestown, our first permanent English settlement in America, is being celebrated. Jon Meacham in his book, American Gospel, point out that the beginnings were very dismal largely due to the fact they "arrived in search of gold, not God." The work ethic was sadly lacking. No one wanted to work, only get rich. For the nobility, manual labor was beneath them. Those first years, the colony survived only by a continual infusion of more and more settlers from England replacing those who died. Many of the early problems were simply due to laziness, not planting crops, and not preparing proper defenses and shelter.

In contrast, when the first Pilgrims arrived in 1620 at Plymouth, they came with a profound sense of being under God's rule. This included a humility that involved everyone as equal in work and sacrifice. Hard work was a Christian calling. They knew they brought glory to God in their work. They immediately plunged into work. And, while this colony too had a *very* rough beginning, it was soon doing well through its hard working residents.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Paul has mentioned three of the biggest areas of our living here in talking about this process of sanctification, remember it involves everything for us. To be holy, to be sanctified, means that all that we are and all we have belongs to God and every aspect of our lives is being shaped and directed toward God.

Remember, sanctification is not our effort, our doing. It is a Spirit work. All we do is offer ourselves to Him and then cooperate in what He leads us to do. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, open your heart to Him. Invite His evaluation of ways you need,

*to live in order to please God.... Now...[He] ask[s] you and urge[s] you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (1).*