

Study Three - Living to please God

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Prayer Gracious God, we thank you for the opportunity to read, discuss and learn from Scripture's words, and ask that you will open our hearts and minds to all that you would have us understand from the wisdom of your servant Paul. Amen

Comment Paul has a bit of a reputation when it comes to love and sex, at least in the views he expresses, so as we find ourselves at Chapter 4, here's Paul back on what appears to us to be a familiar theme. In asking why that is, it is good to examine a little the context of life within Thessalonica.

Demosthenes (384-322BC) wrote: '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.'

The Greeks generally enjoyed a lifestyle that was both promiscuous and permissive, where pagan temples often doubled up as brothels and sexual practices of all sorts were tolerated. The believers in Thessalonica had come out of such a society. Even among the Jewish population, marriage does not seem to have been regarded as highly as it was intended by God. Divorce had become relatively easy, not confined simply to the allowable charges of adultery or 'a matter of shame'. Liberal Rabbis used the phrase 'a matter of shame' very loosely (for example, talking with men in the street, or going into town with head uncovered) as reasonable grounds for the dissolution of a marriage.

In Rome it was no better, with the writer Seneca telling us, 'Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married'. It is reported that some of the fashionable ladies identified the passing years by the names of their husbands, and the Roman poet Juvenal talks of one woman having eight husbands in five years.

It might be worth considering how attitudes to sexuality when Paul was writing compare to those in today's society, where sexuality and sexual freedom continue to be important topics within the Church. We do not have to go back too far in our own history to find a society which conveniently looked the other way when a husband took a mistress, and yet female infidelity could lead to a lifetime of disgrace.

We have to look at Paul's teaching in the light of the society into which he was introducing Christian concepts of holiness and purity. It was very challenging teaching and certain to find opposition - self-control within marriage, no cheating on each other, honouring the marriage vows.

Discuss

It is generally thought that there was a sexual revolution in the West during the 1960s and 1970s. Is 'revolution' the right word, and what do you consider to be the positives and negatives of this movement?

Key Verse

'For God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life.'

(1 Thessalonians 4:7)

Discussion

- Q1** Paul's has had an encouraging report from Timothy (Chapter 3:6ff). If verse one of chapter four was summed up in a short comment within an end of term report, what would it say?
- Q2** Thinking about your own experience of Church life, can you think of aspects that might please God (v1) and perhaps even one or two that might not?
- Q3** We find the word 'Holy' in verse 4 in relation to how the human body is used and respected. How big an ask is that of believers?
- Q4** Children growing up today are likely, whilst still very young, to being exposed to pornographic images, often via mobile devices given by their parents. This can be via peer pressure and the sharing of images, or through use of social media such as Twitter. How serious a problem is this in your opinion, and what could the Church do to raise awareness?
- Q5** Barclay in his commentary quotes an unnamed economist as saying, 'Contraception is the most important event since the discovery of fire.' Is that a fair comment, or too simplistic?

- Q6** There was an obvious clash between the prevailing Greek and Roman cultures and that of God's kingdom when it came to relationships and particularly marriage. Those living in a multicultural community will know of times when friction is caused because of differences in beliefs and customs. Was Paul right in taking a hard line here, or should he have taken a softer approach so as not cause disagreement?
- Q7** The Church is naturally looking to bring a message that is both challenging and attractive to those who are searching for spiritual answers. Paul in Romans 12 says, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world'. Jesus' own words suggest that we should be 'in' the world, but not 'of' it. The Church has at times been accused of trying to close the gap to increase its popularity, but how could this sense of 'being different' be seen as a positive and indeed attractive lifestyle choice to those on a spiritual journey?
- Q8** Verse 9 talks of 'Brotherly love' or 'love for one another' and there was an expectation here that 'love' would have a practical expression in a generosity of giving that included self as well as money. This is seen with the early believers in Acts 2:44,45. The emphasis was on supporting the Christian 'family' and extending this care into the community. How might the Church today better reflect this approach, and what examples are there locally of this happening?
- Q9** Some of the Thessalonians had given up work to eagerly await the Second Coming. In their defence, the Greeks lived for leisure and there was an underlying belief that manual work was degrading, better done by slaves where possible. In contrast, Hebrew thinking saw work as a part of worship and service to God (verse 11).
- How does your attitude to work affect your enthusiasm for getting up in a morning and beginning the morning commute?
- Q10** How might Paul's encouragement in verses 9-12 impact on the mission of the Church in a city that was a major financial and business centre and trading port, with a large mixed population, and could it have the same effect today?

Takeaway

Is there anything your church can do to help families, maybe by hosting a Mother and Toddler group, or one where fathers can bring youngsters and enjoy a bit of fellowship (these are sometimes called 'Who Let The Dads Out?' - www.wholetthedadsout.org.uk)?

Prayer

Pray for all those in your community whose work involves the help and support of families.

'Revenge, lust, ambition, pride, and self-will are too often exalted as the gods of man's idolatry; while holiness, peace, contentment, and humility are viewed as unworthy of a serious thought.'

(Charles Spurgeon)

'The desert has its holiness of silence, the crowd its holiness of conversation.'

(Walter Elliot)

'If a country is to be corruption free and become a nation of beautiful minds, I strongly feel there are three key societal members who can make a difference. They are the father, the mother and the teacher.'

(A. P. J. Abdul Kalam)

'Together with a culture of work, there must be a culture of leisure as gratification. To put it another way: people who work must take the time to relax, to be with their families, to enjoy themselves, read, listen to music, play a sport.'

(Pope Francis)

'This, and this alone, is Christianity, a universal holiness in every part of life, a heavenly wisdom in all our actions, not conforming to the spirit and temper of the world but turning all worldly enjoyments into means of piety and devotion to God.'

(William Law)

'About the idea of a clash between cultures, between civilisations, I don't believe in it. It's something some political leaders tried to use, and that the media tried and are still trying to sell us, in order to simplify the world and their work.'

(Paulo Coelho)