

“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ

Among the Gentiles:

A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 10:

1 Thessalonians 4:1-18:

Encouraging One Another

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1 Thessalonians 4:1 Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus that, just as you learned from us how you ought to “walk” and to please God (as, indeed, you are “walking”), you should abound in this practice more and more. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3** For this is the will of God: your growth in holiness. You are to abstain from fornication; **4** each one of you is to know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, **5** not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6** no one is to wrong or exploit a fellow believer in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and fully testified to you. **7** For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. **8** Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not a human, but God—the one who is also giving his Holy Spirit to you.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Walking. Again, Paul uses the Jewish term “walking” to describe a person’s day-to-day practices of faithful living.

- Paul commends the way that the Thessalonians have been “walking,” and he encourages them to overflow, to abound in the way of life that they have learned from him.

God’s will: the believers’ growth in holiness. Notice that the evidence of the community’s holiness is not so much in their worship as it is in how they treat one another.

- While having very close relationships with one another as fellow Christians, they are to take special care not to exploit this closeness, especially in sexual relationships.
- God’s purpose for Christian communities is their growth in holiness, their sanctification, literally their process of becoming “saints.”
- Holiness does not happen all at once when one is baptized, but rather occurs over time, as we grasp at a deeper and deeper level what it means to follow Jesus in our daily lives.

The Lord is an avenger. This sounds like a harsh way to speak of how God corrects a believer’s wrong-doing.

- The word means, literally, a “seeker of justice,” though commonly a person who seeks justice is an avenger.
- Paul frequently makes the point that it is not human judgment or justice that we should fear, but *God’s* judgment and justice.

We are empowered in holiness by the gift of the Holy Spirit. God does not merely require us to be holy, and then leave us on our own.

- God empowers our holiness through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s own life poured out among us.

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

4:9 Now concerning brotherly love, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves are God-taught to love one another. **10** And indeed you do love all the “brothers” throughout Macedonia. But we encourage you, beloved, to overflow even more in this practice, **11** and to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own practice, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, **12** so that you may “walk” properly toward outsiders and may not be in need.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Philadelphia: “brotherly love.” In verse 9, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their “brotherly love” (in Greek, *philadelphia*, just like the name of the city!).

- “Brother” is Paul’s customary way of talking about a fellow believer.
- He clearly meant to refer to both men and women in the Christian community, so the NRSV usually translates “brother” and “brother and sister.”
- Here, we thought it was important for you to see that there is a particular Greek word for the love that Paul commends: *Philadelphia*.

The Thessalonians are God-taught. Again, Paul can use a single word for a concept that would take us several words to translate: *theodidaktos*.

- The single word emphasizes the direct way in which God has taught the Thessalonians.
- The use of this word may underscore Paul’s point above, that the Holy Spirit is powerfully present among the Thessalonians, teaching and guiding them in holiness of life.

Overflow in the practice of loving. Paul encourages of the Thessalonians, to “overflow” in their practices of loving both those who are near and those who are far away.

- The word “overflow,” or “abound” suggests the generosity of spirit that Paul sees as essential to Christian life.

Work with your hands. It would appear that some members of the community do not think that they need to work for a living (see also 5:14), whether because members of the community share what they have with one another, or whether because they think that the imminent appearance of Christ makes it unnecessary to work.

- Note that in his response, Paul evidences a concern for what outsiders think about the Christian community.
- Note, too, Paul’s characterization of daily Christian life as quiet and unpretentious.

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

4:13 But we do not want you to be in ignorance, brothers and sisters, about those who die, lest you grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God bring with Jesus those who have died believing in him. 15 For this we declare to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are remaining until the appearance of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with an archangel’s shout, and with God’s trumpet-call, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are living, who remain, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Consolation. In this passage, Paul seeks to console the Thessalonians in their concern over those who have died.

- Paul extrapolates from belief in the rising of Jesus to belief in the rising of those who are, as he says elsewhere, “in Christ,” or as he says literally here, “*through* Christ.” The word “through” seems to point to the ways in which Christians derive true life “through” Christ.

Paul imagines the arrival of Jesus like the triumphal entry of a monarch into a Greco-Roman city.

- Major ancient cities were constructed with a *necropolis* (or “city of the dead”) on the outskirts.
- Anyone entering the city would encounter the dead first.
- Paul describes a vivid, heavenly version of such an encounter, with all the believers meeting up with their Lord “in the air.”
- Paul’s purpose in this dramatic picture is, as he says, to encourage the Thessalonian community, and to give them an unforgettable image that will help them to encourage one another in the future.

We will be with the Lord forever. See also Romans 8:38. Those who have made Jesus the Lord of their lives belong with him forever.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the most important elements in your “walk” as a Christian (4:1)? What are the most important elements in the “walk” of your Christian community?
2. Paul says that the will of God is that the Thessalonians grow in holiness (4:3). Have you experienced a growth in holiness over

- the course of your life as a Christian? What have been your most significant times of growth? Did certain events provoke your growth?
3. Very often, we tend to worry about what other people will think of us, but God's view of us seems rather abstract and far away. Paul calls God a "seeker of justice" (4:6). What do you think is the most important thing that God is asking of you right now? Are there signs that the Holy Spirit is actually empowering you to do what God is asking of you?
 4. What do you think Paul means when he says that the Thessalonians are "God-taught to love one another" (4:9)? How does God teach us directly in this way? Have you ever experienced a Christian community that overflowed in love for one another? Can you tell a story about how that love impacted you?
 5. Paul mentions outsiders in 4:12. What, in your opinion, *should* be the relationship between a Christian community and the outside world? What is the role of daily work in Christian practice?