

THE SPIRIT AND SANCTIFICATION

1 Thessalonians 4:1-10 and John 16:5-15

Well we've come to the end of our sermon series on the book of Daniel and this morning we start on a new sermon series on the Christian life. This morning I'm going to be looking at our sanctification, or our being made holy and righteous, with the aid of the Holy Spirit from the perspective of both of our readings and you can find these on pages [***] and [***] of the church Bibles and all the verses I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

In our reading from Thessalonians Paul pleads with us to lead pure Christian lives, look at verses 1 and 2:

“Finally, brothers, 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. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2 NIV)

Actually, the Greek word *loipon* translated by the NIV as 'finally' could be better rendered as 'furthermore'. Paul isn't trying to bring his letter to an abrupt end. He's reminding the Thessalonians of the instructions he's already given them and telling them that some of them need correction about the way they're living. Paul is writing to them in friendly terms because it seems from Timothy's reports (1 Thessalonians 1:6) that most of the Thessalonians *are* trying to heed Paul's instructions and he's reminding them that he instructed them how to live Godly lives. Paul's real meaning is that we make a mockery of the gospel and of our Christian faith when we don't lead lives which are fully in keeping with that faith.

Paul first of all zeroes in on behaviour which was generally thought acceptable in the Greco Roman world – licentious sexual behaviour. It sounds just like today's world doesn't it where sexual license is regarded as natural and the only concern is for sex to be safe. Look at verses 3-8:

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no-one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 NIV)

As I said licentious sexual behaviour was regarded as not merely acceptable but perfectly normal in the ancient pagan world. As the Greek statesman Demosthenes said:

"Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children."

Also, far from prohibiting sexual immorality, the pagan cults of Dionysus, Aphrodite, Osiris and Isis, the Cabirus, and Priapas all promoted sexual license. The Gentile members of the Thessalonian church would have found it difficult to understand how their conversion to Christianity necessitated abandoning those pleasures that their previous pagan faiths had approved or ignored. Moreover, the social norms of the day permitted those practices that the Christian ethic prohibited.

But, that's not the way we're called to live as Christians, and that's why Paul refers to sexual immorality so often in his letters. As Christians we should only engage in sexual relations within marriage.

Paul begins those verses by saying that we need be sanctified, or made holy, indeed he says that it's God's will that we should be sanctified, and he finishes by saying that those who reject his teaching about sexual immorality reject God who gives His Holy Spirit. What Paul is alluding to here is that we can only be sanctified, made truly holy, righteous people, through the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. We need to allow that work of the Holy Spirit within us and co-operate with that work as much as we possibly can. We mustn't reject God and His Holy Spirit.

For the Thessalonians, the gifting of the Holy Spirit which they had received when they first turned to Christ in faith, put an end to their pagan excuse that they had no power to resist impure desires. Paul is saying that the indwelling of the Spirit should effectively make sexual impurity impossible. For Paul the Spirit is not only the key to our becoming believers (1 Thessalonians 1:6), but is the power for truly Christian behaviour. This makes disobedience on the part of the Thessalonians a difficult thing to accept or argue for.

Nowhere in known pagan literature is anyone concerned with holiness or holy living. The noun holiness derives from the adjective “holy,” which means 'set apart' and speaks of the separateness or otherness of God. The word 'holy' takes its meaning in the biblical revelation from God's pronouncement in Leviticus 19:2: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy,” In this chapter of Leviticus that finds expression in a whole variety of ways, including the ten commandments. In our reading from Thessalonians, Paul is referring to being holy purely in terms of our abstention from sexual sin. Of course, that's important, sexual purity is an important part of holiness. But, God calls us to be sanctified and be holy in all aspects of our lives, as the quote from Leviticus implies.

Turning now to our other reading from the gospel of John, we see that Jesus regarded the sending of the Holy Spirit as so important that it was good he should go away in order that we might have the Holy Spirit – look at verse 7:

“But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7 NIV)

The problem is not that Jesus and the Holy Spirit cannot be present in the world at the same time, but that the coming of the Holy Spirit will characterise the age of the kingdom of God (*e.g.* Isaiah 11:1–10; 32:14–18; 42:1–4; 44:1–5; Ezekiel 11:17–20; 36:24–27; 37:1–14; Joel 2:28–32). BUT, this saving reign of God, God's kingdom, could not be fully inaugurated until Jesus had died, risen from the dead, and

been exalted to this Father's right hand, returned to the glory he enjoyed with the Father before the world began. That's why Jesus says the Holy Spirit will not come to us unless he goes away. The gift of the Holy Spirit is so valuable that it will be good for the disciples and indeed for all believers.

Jesus then goes on to say what the Holy Spirit was going to do, look at verses 8-11:

“When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.” (John 16:8-11 NIV)

Just as Jesus has brought about a division in the world by showing that what it does is evil, so the Holy Spirit will continue this work. The Holy Spirit will convict the world with regard to sin because the people who constitute the world do not believe in Jesus (v. 9). If they did believe in Jesus, they would believe his statements about their guilt and turn to him. As it is, their unbelief brings not only condemnation but wilful ignorance of their need. The world's unbelief not only ensures that it will not receive life, it ensures that it cannot perceive that it walks in death and *needs* life. The Holy Spirit presses home the world's sin *despite* the world's unbelief; he convicts the world of sin *because* they do not believe in Jesus. So the convicting work of the Spirit is gracious: it is designed to bring men and women of the world to recognize their need, and so turn to Jesus, and thus stop being of 'the world'.

Once Jesus had re-ascended to the Father, the Holy Spirit continued to present the revelation of Jesus himself. This same though is presented slightly differently in Hebrews chapter 1 (Hebrews 1:1, 14).

In verse 13 of the reading from John we see that the Holy Spirit is a spirit of truth:

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” (John 16:13 NIV)

So the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth, the truth that the disciples had not at this time yet grasped. This same spirit will bring glory to Jesus by taking Jesus' knowledge and revelation and making it known to us – look at verse 14:

“He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” (John 16:14 NIV)

In our reading from Thessalonians, we saw that God calls us to be sanctified. Now Sanctification is the means by which God makes those who have been made holy or righteous legally (and only legally) through the justification provided to us through Christ's death and resurrection, holy or righteous in actuality. The work of leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit which we were looking at in John's gospel is part of the process of our being sanctified with the help and assistance of that same Holy Spirit.

At the beginning, I said that we make a mockery of the gospel when we don't live lives which are in accordance with our Christian faith, and of course that's true. God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7). BUT we can only do that in and through the power and work of the Holy Spirit indwelling us and helping to shape us and mould us so that we become more Christlike AND the Holy Spirit can only indwell us because through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross we have been justified and made Holy in God's sight. That's why the Holy Spirit was not sent to the disciples, or to us, until after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. Prior to those events the Holy Spirit would not have been able to indwell the disciples because they had not yet been justified.

We cannot live the true Christian life in our own strength, but with the help, guidance and power of the Holy Spirit we can come to live true Christian lives. That's essentially what Paul was saying to the

Thessalonians – although admittedly with a special focus on their sexual behaviour.

Of course, our sanctification, the transformation brought about within us by and through the power of the Holy Spirit, is not an instantaneous process which reaches completion immediately we turn to Christ in faith and the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. Rather our transformation, our sanctification, is a gradual process of being made more and more holy, more and more Christlike as we co-operate with the Holy Spirit working in us. This is why many of the greatest figures in scripture, such as Abraham and David were beset with weakness and uncleanness. Their sanctification had not yet been completed.

Peter commanded Christians to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) and Paul wrote "Inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16) and:

“ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18).
So, as we are reshaped into the likeness of Christ, we increasingly reflect or display his glory.

The process of sanctification will not be completed in this life, but it will take place – I believe instantaneously – at the second coming. John wrote:

“ Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2).

As Christians we need to firmly put aside any notion that we can continue to sin just as we did before our conversion. That completely devalues what Christ achieved for us on the cross. We will never achieve sinless perfection in this life, but we do need to enlist the power of the Holy Spirit to move ever closer to that goal.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father we pray for a new and powerful indwelling of your Holy Spirit for each and every one of us right here right now today, so that we may be empowered to overcome all sinfulness in our lives and that we may be increasingly transformed day by day to become more and more like your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen