

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Pure and Simple

Notes from a Sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Big idea: The Christian life is lived to please God. Inappropriate financial and sexual relationships displease God because they wrong other Christians.

Big application: Believe that all illicit sexual and financial dealings rob other Christians, so treat money and sex differently to pagans, thus avoiding terrible judgment.

How is it going with the church? What is the spiritual progress of the brothers and sisters here at Christ Church Liverpool like?

I have to say I think that, on the whole, it's going pretty well. Week by week my experience as a church leader is that I preach to people who have received the good news about Jesus with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

I see before me a room full of people who have turned from idols to serve the living and true God and who are waiting for his Son to return from heaven in glory.

My experience of ministry amongst you is that this is a church of faith, of people who give generously of their time and money to gospel ministry, who have a vision for seeing friends and colleagues come to know Christ, who want to see our church grow so more people join the family of God and who want to plant new churches so people who live in other parts of the city can have the opportunity to hear of Christ and join living congregations.

If you are here this morning as a guest you might feel, based on that description, that you have walked into some sort of earthly paradise. I'll be honest with you – you haven't. Because the description I have just given is not universally true. Some of the people here at Christ Church Liverpool are mean. Some of us are lazy. Some of us come to church for solely for reasons of consumption not because we have a vision for the lost and for the city. And all of us are far from perfect.

But, I say again, as I look around our church family you are an encouragement to me. The more I have studied this letter of 1 Thessalonians the more I have realised that, on the whole, you, we, are like the church in this letter.

If you read Paul's letter to the Corinthians that church was, frankly, a basket case. They were openly committing gross sexual immorality, they were suing each other, the rich people were having meetings the poor people couldn't come to. It was nuts. Now that letter still has many important things to say to us.

Partly because we don't want to become a church like that!

But it is a source of joy to my heart that our church is much more like the church in Thessalonica. As a body it seems to me that God is graciously working amongst us so that we are living as people who follow Jesus.

There is no space or room for pride in that. It is not our work that has brought that about. The gospel fruitfulness I see as I look around Christ Church is genuinely no reflection on the brilliance of the preaching or the vision of the elders or the impressiveness of the LifeGroup leaders or the fact that you are some sort of morally superior group of people. We are all a bunch of terrible sinners.

The things I see that encourage me that people are living as followers of Christ are the fruit of the message about Jesus. I look around and I see God at work by his grace in the lives of people who are not merely ordinary, but who, because we are ordinary, are, like everyone else, by nature wicked and selfish.

Without at all being proud, without being in any way self-congratulatory, I think we can honestly say that, as a church family, it is on the whole going well with people's spiritual growth. Praise God!

So the inevitable question is, what next?

If we are a church where there are many people who are following Jesus, who are seeking to live for him, who are trying to avoid making the idols of work or money or family the centre of our lives, who are genuinely looking forward to Christ's return and to eternity, what do we do next?

What to do when it's going well? If you've been with us over the six weeks of this series so far you'll probably be able to guess what the answer to that question is:

More and More Paul's advice to a church like ours, advice that really summarises the whole of chapters 4 and 5 that we will be looking at over the next few weeks, is in v1: *We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are doing. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.*

Maturing in the Christian life is never about a fancy new teaching. It is never about some secret key that only one church or one preacher can give you. It is always more of the same. Becoming a Christian is about turning from idols to serve the living and true God. It is about pleasing God, worshipping him, making him and

not yourself, something or someone else the centre of your life.

Growing as a Christian is about exactly the same thing. It is about worshipping God. About understanding more and more profoundly that you were made to please him not to please yourself. About seeing that you cannot be properly human, you cannot be who you were made to be, if the God who created you is not at the centre of your desires.

So in a church which is, for the most part, full of people who are living for Christ the advice for life is basically simple: more of the same. But the fact that Paul's advice to the Thessalonians, and to our church, is simple doesn't, however, mean that it's simplistic. In fact living to please God "more and more" sometimes involves challenging questioning, hard choices and major alterations in lifestyle.

In this passage we're going to see two different types of "more and more" growth for Christians, explained using three important (and related) aspects of the Christian life. Two types of growth using three important examples.

1 More love (and less sex) (v2-8).

For the Thessalonian Christians, certainly for the men and probably for many of the women too, living according to the instructions Paul gave them about sex meant, frankly, having less sex.

Because they lived in a sex saturated society. In a society where it was considered perfectly normal, indeed healthy, for young men before marriage to refine their sexual technique with prostitutes.

Here's how the Roman writer Cicero put it:
"If there is anyone who holds the opinion that young men should be forbidden from intrigues with the women of the town, he is indeed austere! That, ethically, he would be right, I cannot deny. But he is at loggerheads... with the... present age.... For when was this not done? When was it rebuked? When found fault with."

Married men too, especially wealthy ones, were generally expected to sleep with people other than their wives so that Roman writers used to say that wives were for heirs, mistresses to be sexual and intellectual equals and prostitutes for pleasure.

It will not have escaped your notice that this was a particularly bad arrangement for women. But it was also a pretty rubbish arrangement for men because, as much as it seems like fun to sleep with another man's wife it's not so much fun when the other guy cuckolds you.

But, Paul says, he taught quite clearly that Christians must not live like that. In fact, he says, pleasing God means avoiding sexual immorality. The Greek word

here is *porneia*, from whence we get our word pornography. It's a wide word meaning any sexual activity outside marriage. If you read through the rest of the New Testament it's clear that it covers sex before marriage, adultery and homosexual sex.

Every follower of Jesus, Paul says, everyone who desires to live their life to please God not themselves, needs to control themselves sexually. In a Christian church there will be less sex than most people have in the kind of society that we, and the Thessalonians live in. Let's be quite clear about that. For most Christians pleasing God means having less sex. Either because you are single and don't have sex with anyone. Or because you are married and have sex only with each other.

For some people in our society, and perhaps some here this morning, I might have well just have said "being a Christian means ruining your life."

Now it's not in the passage but I think this is such an important issue that it's worth taking a couple of moments just to explore it a bit. Because it seems to me that the assumption that more sex is better, indeed the assumption that more is better generally, is one of the greatest lies of our culture that we need to take down.

It's actually easy to show that this is a lie. Take money. Why do more people buy EuroMillions tickets when the jackpot is bigger? Do they have any better chance of winning it? No. Does it really make any actual conceivable difference to buying anything you could possibly need whether you win £10 million or £100 million? Of course not. Is there any evidence at all that having more money improves your life? None. In fact the evidence seems to be that people with significantly more than average household income are actually more miserable.

Or take sex. Did you know that in terms of both the number of short-term sexual partners and attitudes to casual sex Britain is now one of the most liberal nations in the world – more than France, the Netherlands, Italy and the US. Are we noticeably happier?

Within our society are people who have sex before they get married more likely to stick together having proved they are 'sexually compatible'? No, actually, they aren't. They are more likely to divorce. Are adulterers happier than faithful people? No. Are homosexuals happy? No, rates of depression, anxiety, ODC, self-harm, alcohol and drug dependence are all higher amongst homosexual people. They would say that's because of discrimination. I'm not convinced that's the only reason.

There is basically no reason to believe, however much you want to do it, that having sex with another man or woman, or with someone you are not married to will make you any happier or more fulfilled. And there is plenty of evidence that by far the best sex, from a

psychological point of view, is sex with the person you are married to.

So admitting that walking with Jesus in this area will mean less sex is NOT the same as saying that being a Christian will ruin your life.

The reason Paul gives for abstinence, for self-control is nothing to do with the fact that it will make you happier (though on average it probably will). It's to do with love. Not love for God. That is very important, because the Bible teaches that our sexual fidelity is a reflection of the nature of our relationship with him. But what Paul has in mind here is love for people. You're here this morning. You're a Christian. Why should you be chaste? Why be pure? Because if you are not you wrong your brother and take advantage of him. You could translate that phrase as do not defraud your brother. Don't rob him. When you are sexually immoral you defraud other Christians.

There are some ways that's obvious. If you sleep with another woman's husband you are defrauding her. You are also stealing something precious from him, and he from you. It's not just them though. Because you are beginning a relationship of deceit that eats like rust and decays the relationships of the church family.

If you are unmarried and sleep with someone in the church you are a thief too. You might be defrauding them of the virginity that should be for their future wife or husband. You are stealing away the power of others in your situation to resist temptation and leading them down a path of destruction.

If you watch porn you are setting up ridiculous and impossible expectations of your current or future spouse, you are wasting your life on a fantasy and you are disqualifying yourself from usefully serving the church; who wants a LifeGroup leader, an elder or a kids worker who goes home and surfs the internet for filth?

That might sound harsh. But I'm not sorry. It's right here in the Bible. Passionate heathen lust, treating sex like our culture treats it, shows you do not love your brothers and sisters. You can say you are loving to other Christians all you want. But if you are sleeping with anyone you are not married to, even if they are just on your laptop screen, or in your head then you are not loving your brothers and sisters, you are robbing them.

It's pretty much certain that there are some people here right now who are feeling totally deflated and crushed by what I have just said, because you are acutely aware of your failure in this area. In fact, as one minister I know is fond of saying, we are all sexual deviants - we are all impure.

If you feel crushed by sexual guilt this morning you need to know that your sin is covered by the cross of

Christ. That your guilt is taken away and your wrongdoing atoned for. You need to know that you **can** live free from one night stands, adultery, porn, prostitution or whatever it is you've done.

But you need to heed the God given repent. You need to believe what Paul says in v8, that sexual purity really is the command of God, who gives his Holy Spirit to us.

You need to recognise that the conviction you feel is a blessing from God who longs for you to repent and lay your sins on Christ rather than, v6, face the punishment yourself.

2 More love (and less dependence) (v11-12).

Paul's second example of a place where the Christians in Thessalonica need to grow more and more is also a key area in which Christians are to stand out from the surrounding culture.

Back in C1st Thessalonica the ideal career move was to be the kept client of a wealthy patron. You might be a poet, philosopher, someone who made conversation. But whatever you were the trick was to avoid having to go out and do hard manual labour; working leather, farming fields, building or baking.

The trouble was that being the client to a wealthy patron meant that you were obliged to them. You couldn't afford to disagree with them. You couldn't make any moral judgment about how they lived their life. If they asked you to get them a prostitute or fiddle their taxes you couldn't really refuse. You were, inevitably, mixed up in their affairs and intrigues. And if they were an influential and powerful person those affairs might well be pretty dark places that you wouldn't want to be.

So, Paul says, the Christians in the church in Thessalonica need to think carefully about what kind of work they do. What should be their aspiration? Not success. Not high pay. Not influence in their society.

Their aspiration should be to live quietly, and to work with their hands, in regular ordinary jobs, so that they are not dependent on anyone.

I think that is a massive challenge to our church family here at Christ Church. Because it seems to me that the norm in our church is that people aspire to jobs where who you know is more important than what you know. It seems to me that there are very many amongst us who live in dependence on people in their workplace.

Now obviously Paul doesn't mean that Christians should be completely independent of the rest of the world. Paul very clearly wants the Christians to be visible in the world to, v12, walk before outsiders. The baker is dependent on his customers to buy the bread. The tentmaker, like Paul, on people who want tents.

But for many of us the state of dependency on others goes way beyond that. How many people here would never say “no” to their headteacher? How many people here would never say “no” to their consultant? How many people here would never say “no” to the senior partner?

I don't mean if they asked you to kill somebody or steal £1,000 or something. But if they made a request which was legal, but unreasonable. If they asked for something that was not essential to the business but would really spoil your family life or your church commitment.

I think, in fact I know because I see it, that quite a lot of us always say yes to those requests. You always do the extra planning or PPA cover. You always fill in that extra clinic. Because you are afraid that the boss will ruin your career if you cross them.

If that is you, you have become dependent in the sense Paul is talking about. And once you are there you lose any moral authority. You can no longer challenge that person. You will be mixed up in their affairs, their intrigues, their political manoeuvres in the organisation.

And once you are in that place you will lose your ability to walk properly before outsiders. You will not be able to please God, because your boss is another god. A god you hate and serve out of fear but a god nonetheless.

Brothers and sisters if that's you this morning, you need to change your aspiration. You need to make it your ambition to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands – not manual labour necessarily – though there's nothing wrong with manual labour – but a work where your obligation is to do your work not to serve your patron. Maybe for some here this morning that means you need to say “no” to your boss this week. Maybe for some it means you urgently need to change your job, not to another school, hospital or company but to a different job altogether.

For the Thessalonian Christians both these areas – sex and dependence – represent one type of more and more growth as Christians. They are areas of their lives where implications of knowing Christ, of living to please God not yourself, have not yet really penetrated their lives.

In lots of areas of the Christian life they are doing great. They have seen what genuine satisfaction looks like. They have come to understand what it looks like to be truly human, to be the people God has created them to be.

But in the areas of sex and work many of the Thessalonians have not understood that. Now Paul didn't choose sex and work as random examples. They are areas where, over the last 20 centuries, Christians have consistently been slow to live out the implications

of having Jesus as our loving king. That means they will be areas which are relatively untouched for many here; areas where you still live like you are a heathen not a beloved child of God.

But they may not be the big issues for everyone. There is also a more general question Paul raises here. Are there parts of your life in which you are not walking to please God?

You may be doing well in loads of areas. That's great. It's a sign of the gospel of grace at work in your life. Praise God. But if there are places that are not under that umbrella of walking with Christ you need to submit them to the will of God. You need to become the person God wants you to be in those areas.

- Maybe it's how you use your money.
- Maybe it's turning from individualism to loving the church.
- Maybe it's breaking a dependency on drink or drugs.
- Maybe it's repenting of an attitude that says it's alright to complain to get what you want.
- Maybe it's telling other people you are a Christian.

However well you are doing as a Christian it's always good to ask if there are part of your life that are not being included in places you seek to please God. You need more and more.

How can that happen? Well mostly if we want it to happen. If we are so struck by the wonder of the God who loves us. If we are really convinced that he wants to give us freedom to be who we were made to be. If we believe that our eternal destiny is holiness and delight in that purity. If those things are real to us then we will want to bring our whole lives under the umbrella of walking with Christ.

But there's a third example Paul gives here, which demonstrates a slightly different type of more and more growth, so let's finish with that...

3 More love (for all Christians) (v9-10).

If the Christian life was just about bring more stuff under the umbrella it would be an invitation to smugness.

After a while most of us would see some change in every area of our life. Our sexuality, finances, involvement with church, work life, family life would all be included in the things that have been impacted by believing that what God says is both true and a word of love to me.

But Paul won't let the Thessalonians, or us, get away with that. His third example of a way that these Christians need to live to please God not themselves isn't an area they have been missing. Quite the opposite. It's the one place they have been doing really

well. Their love for one another as a group of Christian people is exemplary.

In fact they don't just love the other people in their own church, they are affectionate towards Christians throughout the whole region of Macedonia. We don't know exactly what this involved. Perhaps they sent money to other poorer Christians. Perhaps they showed amazing hospitality to Christians visiting their city. Perhaps they were particularly faithful in prayer for other believers. Probably all of those things and more. This is, perhaps, the thing about their church life that is the very best aspect of their church.

So what does Paul do? He urges them, it's a strong word, he **urges** them to do that more and more. What they have achieved so far isn't a mark of their own greatness – they have been taught by God to love one another. But that doesn't mean there's no contribution for the Thessalonian Christians to make. Paul urges them. They are to apply effort and thought and energy to greater and greater love for other Christians.

Spiritually speaking Christians, you see, are more like trees than cats. I don't mean we just stay in the same place all the time and shed our leaves in winter. The thing about a cat, or pretty much any other animal, is that it grows and reaches a certain size and then stops growing. Your cat might get fatter if you give it massive quantities of lams and Whiskas. But it's skeleton will remain the same size. It will, in all meaningful sense, stop growing. Christians are not to be like that in our spiritual lives. But if you leave an oak tree for 1,000 years it will just keep getting bigger every single year. That's what Christians are to be like.

Yes bring more areas of your life under the umbrella of being pleasing to God. But also think about the places where you have seen the most growth in your life. Think about the things we do best as a church and do them more and more.

I think that, as a church, we are really good at explaining what God has revealed to people. The people who lead LifeGroups teach the Scriptures faithfully. The guys who lead children's work don't just give nice moral lessons; they introduce people to the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ. The elders work really hard at their sermons. What would Paul say? "Well you've got that boxed off, just work on something else for a bit." I don't think so. He would say, "we urge you to do this more and more."

I think that, as a church, we are very welcoming to new people and very tolerant of people who are different to most of us – different social backgrounds, different ethnicities, different ages, different beliefs. What would Paul say? "Good job welcome team, you've made it. Well done internationals team, you've arrived. Top work Christ Church, pat yourselves on the back." I don't think so. He would say, "we urge you to do this more and more."

And why would he say that? Not because any Christian in this room has to earn their salvation. Not at all. If you have trusted Jesus you are safe forever. Your failures, my failures, are not things that will disqualify us from eternal life.

Paul urges us this morning to bring some more things under the umbrella and to grow in the things where gospel change has started because that's where Jesus is taking us.

It's hidden a bit in the NIV translation we're using but this passage begins and ends with the idea of walking.

In v1 the Thessalonians are reminded how they "ought to walk to please God." In v12 Paul says he gives these instructions so that they will "walk properly."

There is a destination in view. A place where Christ is taking us. The motivation for a holy life is, v7, God's calling. If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus, it is your destiny to please God. It is what you were made for. It is what you will find joy and delight in for all eternity. That's where Jesus is taking you. Why wouldn't you want to go with him?

But perhaps you are here this morning and you're not a Christian. Perhaps you've come as a guest of one of the people getting baptised in a few minutes time. What does any of this mean for you?

Well I hope you see that Christians are not the smug self-righteous people that the western world's media elite would have you think we are. Every real Christian is painfully aware that for all the things that are great about any living church we are all a long, long way from perfection and need God's constant grace and mercy.

But I hope too you have begun to see that the way of life the world says is freedom is actually profoundly selfish, destructive and dishonourable.

I hope you have begun to see that the death symbolised by our friends going down into the water is death to a self-centred life and resurrection to a life of love for God and love for others. It is a resurrection in the power of Jesus Christ to a new life, the life we were made to live.

If that life is a life you would like too why not come and talk to me, or one of the other church leaders at the end of the meeting and we will gladly explain to you how Jesus Christ can be your saviour too and how he will walk with you, as he walks with us, to glory.

Andrew Evans, 6th Novemebr 2011.