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Old Testament

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Context: Paul urges a young Christian community to let its faith become visible in ordinary life—through self-control, love for others, responsible work, and a quiet life that earns the respect of those around them.

A LIFE PLEASING TO GOD

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore, whoever rejects this, rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.

But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

OVERVIEW

Paul is writing to believers in Thessalonica whom he already respects. He is not scolding a congregation that has completely lost its way. He acknowledges that they are already living in ways that please God and asks them to “do so more and more.” Christian maturity, for Paul, is not a finish line but continuing growth.

Verses 3–8 focus particularly on sexual conduct and self-control. Paul describes this as part of “sanctification”—the process of becoming increasingly shaped by God. His concern is broader than simply prohibiting certain sexual behavior. He connects holiness with learning to control one’s own body, treating others honorably, and refusing to exploit another person for personal desire.

Then Paul broadens the picture. The Thessalonians already demonstrate love for fellow believers, but again he tells them to do so “more and more.” Finally comes an intriguing description of Christian life: “aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands.” Faith is demonstrated not merely through religious language but through the character of everyday life.

The central theological question is: **If we belong to God, what should that actually look like in the ordinary way we live and treat other people?**



BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes immediately before

Chapter 3 concludes with Timothy returning from Thessalonica with encouraging news about the congregation's faith and love. Paul expresses enormous relief and prays that God will strengthen their hearts "in holiness" (3:13). That word provides a direct bridge into Chapter 4.

What comes immediately after

Beginning in 4:13, Paul turns to a major concern among the Thessalonians: what happens to believers who die before Christ returns? This leads into Paul's discussion of resurrection and the coming of the Lord.

The major theological movement

Paul does not separate "spiritual" life from ordinary life. Sexual behavior, relationships, employment, reputation, and how we deal with our neighbors all belong to discipleship.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Thessalonica was a prosperous and important Roman city in Macedonia, located along a major Roman trade route. It was commercially active, religiously diverse, and thoroughly embedded in Greco-Roman culture.

Physical expectations in that culture differed considerably from those Paul was teaching. Roman society commonly operated with different standards depending upon gender and social status, and powerful men often enjoyed privileges unavailable to women, enslaved people, and those of lower status. Paul's instruction that Christians exercise self-control and not "exploit" another person therefore has an important relational dimension: **another human being is not an object for satisfying one's desires.**

The instruction to "work with your hands" also matters historically. Manual labor was often regarded as socially inferior by wealthier Greeks and Romans. Paul himself worked with his hands, probably as a leatherworker or tentmaker, and treated productive labor as honorable.

There is also a subtle social element in Paul's call to "live quietly." He does not appear to be encouraging withdrawal from society. Rather, Christians should live in a way that does not unnecessarily create disorder or bring disrepute upon the community.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

A short timeline helps here because 1 Thessalonians is unusually early:

- c. AD 30–33 — Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus
- c. AD 49–50 — Paul arrives in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17)
- c. AD 50–51 — Paul likely writes 1 Thessalonians from Corinth
- c. AD 50–51 — The Thessalonian church is probably only months old

Paul is writing to very new Christians who are learning what following Jesus means while still living inside the culture they have always known.

1 Thessalonians is also generally considered one of Paul's earliest surviving letters and quite possibly the earliest book of the New Testament to have been written.



TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION NOTES

“Sanctification”

This means being made holy or set apart for God. Paul presents sanctification as an ongoing way of living rather than simply a religious status.

“Control your own body”

The Greek literally refers to possessing or controlling one’s own “vessel.” Translators and scholars differ over whether Paul means one’s own body or, possibly, one’s wife. The NRSVUE’s “control your own body” reflects the interpretation that Paul is emphasizing sexual self-control.

“Brotherly love”

The Greek is—literally familial affection. Paul takes the language of biological family and applies it to the Christian community.

WHAT DOES THIS SCRIPTURE MEAN IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

It would be easy to turn this passage primarily into a lesson about sex. Paul certainly addresses sexual conduct, but doing only that would miss his larger argument.

The repeated phrase is more revealing: “**More and more.**” Paul says it twice—once concerning how they live and please God (v. 1), and again concerning love (v. 10).

Christianity, in this passage, is not primarily about reaching the point where we can say, “I believe the right things; therefore, I’m finished.” Paul describes a faith that keeps developing. We can become more loving, more disciplined, more honorable, more peaceful, and more considerate of others.

His teaching also contains a principle that extends far beyond sexuality: **Do not use another human being for your own purposes.** That applies to marriage also, but it can apply to business, friendships, families, churches, workplaces, and communities. People are not objects to manipulate for our pleasure, advantage, status, or power.

And then Paul gives us an unexpectedly modern-sounding piece of advice: “**Aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs.**”

In a world of social media, cable television, political outrage, gossip, instant commentary, and constant demands that we have an opinion about everything, Paul’s words can sound almost radical.

Living quietly does not mean ignoring injustice or refusing to help others. Paul himself certainly did neither. It means that a Christian life need not be loud in order to be faithful.

For a community like ours in Grant County, Paul’s reference to working with one’s hands probably requires little explanation. There is a long tradition here of valuing farmers, factory workers, tradespeople, mechanics, construction workers, nurses, teachers, small-business owners, and others whose contribution is measured more by what they do than by what they say.

Paul might recognize something in that. The Christian witness he describes is remarkably ordinary:

Do your work. Treat people honorably. Love your neighbors. Don’t exploit people. Don’t meddle unnecessarily in other people’s lives. Keep growing.

There is not much glamour in that. There may be quite a bit of Christianity in it.



BECAUSE OF THAT, HOW SHOULD WE BE LIVING OUR LIVES?

Keep growing.

Paul does not allow “I’m already a good Christian” to become the end of the journey. Whatever love, patience, generosity, or faithfulness we already possess, we can practice it “more and more.”

Treat people as people, never as objects.

Paul’s instruction points toward a larger principle: our desires do not give us permission to use another human being. Respect, dignity, consent, faithfulness, and concern for the other person matter.

Practice quiet faithfulness.

Not every act of discipleship requires an audience. Some of the most faithful things we do will never be announced, posted, praised, or even noticed.

Let our lives support our witness.

Paul is concerned with how Christians appear “to outsiders.” If our words proclaim love while our behavior displays anger, dishonesty, cruelty, exploitation, or constant conflict, people are likely to believe our behavior.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Paul tell people who are already pleasing God to do it “more and more”?
2. Is “mind your own affairs” the same thing as “don’t get involved”?
3. What might “live quietly” mean in our culture today?
4. Can Christians become so concerned about other people’s behavior that we violate Paul’s instruction to “mind your own affairs”?
5. How do we know the difference?





Gospel

Matthew 5:13-16

Context: Jesus tells his disciples that faith is not merely something they possess—it is something the world should be able to taste and see.

SALT AND LIGHT

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

OVERVIEW

This passage comes immediately after the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just described the character of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven—the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and even those who are persecuted for doing what is right. Then he turns directly to his listeners: **“You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.”**

Notice that Jesus does not say, “You should try to become salt” or “You ought to become light.” He says **you are**. The question is what his followers will do with that identity.

The central theological question is therefore not simply, **“What do Christians believe?”** It is: **If we really are followers of Jesus, should our presence make a recognizable difference in the world around us?** Jesus’ answer is yes—but that difference is not meant to draw attention to ourselves. The light should cause others to see good works and give glory to God.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes immediately before:

Matthew 5:1–12 contains the **Beatitudes**. Jesus describes people who are blessed in ways that often contradict ordinary assumptions about power and success: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness. The “salt” and “light” Jesus describes are not undefined religious influence. **The Beatitudes have just told us what this life looks like.** Salt and light should therefore resemble mercy, humility, peacemaking, righteousness, and faithfulness.

What comes immediately after:

Beginning in Matthew 5:17, Jesus turns to the Law and the Prophets: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.” He then begins a series of teachings that deepen familiar **commandments—anger, reconciliation, adultery, divorce, truthfulness, retaliation, and love of enemies.**

So, Matthew places “salt and light” between **the character of discipleship** in the Beatitudes and **the behavior of discipleship** in the teachings that follow.



HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Salt was much more significant in the ancient world than the shaker on our kitchen table might suggest. It was used for seasoning and preservation and had economic value. Jesus' audience did not need a chemistry lesson to understand the metaphor: **salt changes what it touches.**

Strictly speaking, pure sodium chloride does not simply stop being salty. The saying about salt "losing its taste" probably reflects the impure salt mixtures common in the region. If the actual salt leached away, the remaining material could become useless.

Light was equally practical. First-century homes generally depended on small oil lamps. A lamp produced relatively little light compared with modern lighting, making its placement important. Putting a lamp under a basket would defeat the purpose of lighting it.

A "city built on a hill" would also have been visible from a considerable distance, especially when lamps were burning after dark.

The historical context reinforces a simple point: **Jesus chose ordinary things whose purpose was obvious. Salt that makes no difference and light that cannot be seen have ceased to accomplish what they are for.**

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

A detailed timeline does not materially improve interpretation of this passage.

The important setting is simply the ministry of Jesus in first-century Galilee, within Roman-occupied Judea and Galilee, and within the Jewish religious world from which Jesus and his earliest followers came.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION NOTES

"Good works" — This does not mean religious performance designed to earn God's approval. The works are visible expressions of the life Jesus has just described. And Jesus explicitly redirects the credit: others should see those works and **"give glory to your Father in heaven."**

WHAT DOES THIS SCRIPTURE MEAN IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

We often hear faith described as a private matter: "My religion is between me and God." Matthew 5:13–16 complicates that idea. Jesus certainly does not tell his followers to force their beliefs upon others. But neither does he describe discipleship as invisible. **Faith has public consequences because behavior has public consequences.** There is also an important distinction between **being visible** and **seeking attention.**

Jesus does not say, "Make sure everyone knows how religious you are." In fact, only a chapter later he warns against practicing religion "in order to be seen" by others (Matthew 6:1). That is not a contradiction. It is the difference between: **"Look at me."** And **"Look at what love can do."**

Here is Grant County a church can have a sign, a steeple, a website, a Facebook page, and a full parking lot and still ask whether the surrounding community is actually better because the church is there.

Likewise, Christians can be very visible politically or culturally without necessarily being visible in the particular ways Jesus has just described—through mercy, peacemaking, humility, righteousness, and compassion. That gives us an important interpretive safeguard: **Being loud is not the same thing as being light.**



BECAUSE OF THAT, HOW SHOULD WE BE LIVING OUR LIVES?

Make a difference where we actually are.

Salt works through contact. Light works by being present. Christianity lived only inside a church building misses much of Jesus' metaphor. Our faith should affect families, workplaces, neighborhoods, communities, and encounters with strangers.

Let our actions make our beliefs credible.

If we speak about love but behave cruelly, speak about grace but refuse to forgive, or speak about peace while encouraging hostility, our words and actions contradict one another.

Do good without needing credit.

Jesus says people should see the good—but the glory belongs to God. There is a difference between visible goodness and performative goodness.

Ask whether people encounter something of Christ because they encounter us.

Not because we quote Scripture to them. Not because they know what church we attend. But because they experience mercy, honesty, generosity, patience, courage, forgiveness, and love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What does it mean that Jesus says "you are" salt and light rather than "you should become" salt and light?*
2. *Can someone be "salt" or "light" without ever talking about religion?*
3. *How do we reconcile "let your light shine before others" with Jesus later warning us not to practice religion just to be seen?*
4. *Can Christians become so concerned with being heard that we stop asking whether we are actually being salt and light?*

