

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 (NKJV)

Dare To Be Different

Introduction

One time in ancient Rome, thousands were watching gladiators fight to the death in the arena. Suddenly there was an interruption. A man boldly leaped down into the arena. Telemachus was his name and he was a devoted monk.

He moved towards the two gladiators who were engaged in their life-and-death struggle. He sternly chided one of them for shedding innocent blood. Then, turning towards the thousands of angry faces around him, he said, "Do not repay God's mercy in turning away the swords of your enemies by murdering each other!"

Angry shouts drowned out his voice. "This is no place for preaching! Get on with the fight!" Pushing Telemachus aside, the two gladiators prepared to continue their combat. But Telemachus stepped in between them and pleaded, "This is not right. In the name of Jesus, stop it! In the name of Jesus, stop it!" Enraged, the gladiators turned on Telemachus and stabbed him again and again until he died in a pool of his own blood.

The crowd fell silent, shocked by the death of this holy man. But his death had not been in vain. From that day on, no more gladiators ever went into combat in the Colosseum as declared by the Emperor himself.

(John Foxe, *Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World*, pp. 26-27.)

The call to Christian witness is a challenge to live differently for Christ in this world. It often is intimidating though we may not need to die for the cause of Christ like Telemachus in his time. But to be different for Christ in this world in our time can also be costly in different ways.

In our text today, Paul calls on the Thessalonians to dare to be different for Christ in their difficult environment.

Paul exhorts them to dare to do two things.

I. Dare to live life as a walk with God (vv. 1-2).

¹ Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; ² for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Walking was the most common means of moving about in the ancient world. The Hebrew people were fond of referring to one's entire life as a walk. "Enoch walked with God" (Gen. 5:24) is the highest affirmation of the quality of his life.

To walk with God is to please God. But we are more likely to think that we are pleasing God if we are fast moving rather than slow and steady. This is because for many of us, life has become more of a run than a walk. Someone said, "My trouble is that I'm always in a hurry, but God never seems to be."

To please God is to walk with Him and to wait on Him (not wait for Him)—"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). There are times to soar and times to run. But much of life is about walking and waiting.

These days, Satan often leads us into thinking that life cannot wait. He puts this idea in us that everything concerning us, our circumstances and relationships should always be smooth—no inconveniences, no hindrances. If I want it, I want it now. If it is to happen, it is to happen now.

This is not to suggest that we are to be negative or passive in outlook. Rather, it is to suggest that we need to realize that things in real life are not always trouble free. Failing and falling from time to time, and taking time to recover from that is a reality we have to expect and come to terms with. Of course, we don't deliberately plan to fail and fall. But we do remember Jesus teaching that in this world we will have trouble, including failing and falling.

Australia's five-time Olympic swimming champion, Ian Thorpe, was in Singapore one time to race in the FINA World Cup. He once held 11 world swimming titles as well. He surprisingly went into retirement in 2006 but decided to race again some time later. Being realistic about his chances after such a long break, he said this:

"I am most likely to fail. That's how the universe is. Once you accept that, there is no problem failing. I don't mind failing. It's everyone else who seems to have a problem with it. I've freed myself up and I can deal with failure."

I believe Ian Thorpe was not being negative or pessimistic about himself. He was just waiting and buying his time to come back to prominence. Meanwhile, he was walking his way out of pre-mature retirement and not racing his way out of it. It takes a lot of humility and patience to do just that.

(*Today*, 4 Nov. 2011)

To walk with God is to humbly and patiently press on according to God's way and time even though we may fail and fall.

In the spiritual realm, the shortest way to go from where we are to where God wants us to be is not necessarily the straight line. In fact, the straight line may well be the shortest distance to our downfall, not straight to God's destination for us. Prov. 16:25 (MSG) says, "There's a way that looks harmless enough; look again—it leads straight to hell."

A man may have started right his walk with God. But somewhere along the way, he becomes strayed onto a seemingly harmless way. But that leads him to his destruction. In the end, he started well but finished badly.

One such person is Solomon. He started well—he asked God for wisdom to rule people and to walk with God. Solomon had godly wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong. But he failed badly towards the end of his life. He lost his Godward focus.

What caused Solomon to lose his Godward focus?

Remember that Solomon was a man with much abundance—for better or worse. He had too many horses and too many wives. He had started as a son of David with nothing. Then he became somebody with something—he had 12,000 horses, 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Solomon had gained much. Ironically, he also lost much as a result. He lost his Godward focus. He lost his way and walk with God. Wise Solomon knew what's right in God's sight, but he did not do what's right in God's sight. The more he knew, the less he did. The more he talked, the less he practiced.

His life was filled with abundance and success. Sadly, he was lured into a different lifestyle. He did not persist in his walk with God because he lost the commitment he had when he first walked with God.

That's why God allows us to fail and fall from time to time. It keeps us working on our child-like trust and dependence on God.

Perhaps the reason why there are many unhappy and unfulfilled Christians is because they are busy trying to make something happen. They try to play God and bring upon themselves their own frustration. And Satan will always be most happy to see us do that, tempting us to move away from our child-like trust and dependence on God.

God calls us to walk the upward way with Him. He wants us to press on towards that goal in trust and dependence on Him. God calls, we press on—both are necessary.

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Two questions to help check yourself:

- To walk with God, what are some things you need to remove out of your life?
- To walk with God, what are some things you need to replace into your life?

Paul calls on the Thessalonians to dare to be different for Christ in their difficult environment. A second thing he challenges them to do is ...

II. Dare to abstain in obedience to God (vv. 3-8).

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵ not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. ⁷ For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

One thing God wills for us at all times is our sanctification (v. 3). The root word for sanctification is the word for holy. To be sanctified is to be holy. The root meaning of the word for holy is that of being “set apart”. An object used in the worship service in the Old Testament temple was said to be holy because it had been set apart for special use. Christians are said to be holy in the same sense of being set apart for the service of God.

Paul’s first specific appeal here with regard to holiness is in the realm of sexual behaviour. When Paul wrote to Christians in a place like Thessalonica, he was addressing first generation Christians who came right out of Greco-Roman culture. Historians concur that it was a society in which there were no restraints when it came to sexual mores.

Christianity’s roots were Hebrew, not Greek or Roman. As such, the contrast in sexual standards was dramatic. The Law of Moses placed adultery and coveting the neighbour’s wife strictly out of bounds. By the time of Jesus, standards of sexual and marital purity had been established which were absolutely foreign to the surrounding culture.

The reason Paul tackles the sexual question first is not difficult to see. The first thing a new, Gentile convert would have to confront would be the radical changes in sexual standards demanded by Jesus Himself (Matt. 5:27–31) and applied in the early church (1 Cor. 6:15–20).

God has created man and wife for intimacy with each another. One of the ways of sharing that intimacy is sexual union. And that is designed by God to be used only in the context of a lifelong commitment of marriage. Sexual union apart from marriage is out of bounds—not because sex is bad, but because it is holy. It is set apart by God for special union between man and wife.

The set apart principle is determined by God, not by the majority of the people surveyed or popular opinion. We may try to rewrite sexual standards in our generation, but the way God has set them is the way things must always be. God has set us apart to observe a rule of holiness—i.e. abstain from sexual immorality.

The word abstain means “to hold off from, to distance oneself from, to have nothing to do with”. In the New Testament, abstain is always a positive word because it refers to separating yourself completely from that which is not good in the sight of God.

The phrase “sexual immorality” comes from the Greek word *porneia* (from which we get the word *pornography*). It is a very broad word encompassing every kind of sexual activity outside the circle of God’s will. It covers sins of the mind, body, eyes, ears and lips. It includes premarital sex, extramarital sex, every form of homosexuality, adultery, and every form of pornography. We are not to dabble in sexual sin in any of its various forms.

In a world of much sexual temptation, Christians are called to be different. That’s our sanctification as God’s people. A sanctified person is a Christian whose life is “distinctly different” because it is set apart for God.

The Greek religions of Paul’s day practiced even sacred prostitution. That involved hiring a prostitute at a pagan temple as part of your acts of worship. You could have all the sex you wanted and yet felt so spiritual about it!

Given the moral atmosphere of the day, there must have been enormous pressure on those young Christians in Thessalonica to lower their standards to conform to the world around them. But Paul would have none of it. He ordered them to abstain from every form of sexual immorality.

The walk that pleases God even today is one that abstains from sexual immorality. In vv. 4-6, Paul fleshes out that command in more detail. He gives them two instructions.

- First, control your own body. Paul says that “each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (vv. 4-5). Verse 4 literally commands each man to “possess his own vessel”. In this context it means his own body. To possess is to control in the sense of

mastering the inner impulse to sin. In v. 5, Paul mentions the passionate lust of the Gentiles. In our age of high-speed internet connection, things of such lust are now only a click of the mouse away.

Notice carefully the reason Paul gives—the Gentiles “do not know God”. Men who do not know God indulge their worst fantasies. When men turn away from God, anything is possible. There is no limit, no end.

But we know God ... and that should make all the difference! You can control your body when you allow the Holy Spirit to control you.

- Second, don't cheat another person. Paul says “that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter ...” (v. 6a). The New King James Version uses the word “defraud”. Other translations use words like “wrong” or “cheat”.
 - Don't cheat your brother by sleeping with his wife.
 - Don't cheat your wife by dreaming of another other woman.
 - Don't cheat your boyfriend or girlfriend by leading him/her on.

Immorality is like that. It always cheats someone else—usually someone you love very much.

Perhaps the saddest thing about lust is that it never satisfies. Someone has said that lust is “the craving for salt by a man dying of thirst”. No real release. No lasting satisfaction. You always have to go back for more. Lust forces you to keep coming back.

Confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation. Let me risk this by sharing with you a childhood experience.

When I was in primary school, I lived with my grandmother for a few years. My favourite pastime then was reading war comics. I used much of the money that my parents gave me to buy these comics.

One day I picked up a blouse belonging to my grandmother from the floor. It was made of light material but it felt heavy in my hand. As I looked at it, I noticed that it had two big and deep pockets. And of them was filled with some things. I put my hand into that pocket and you guess what I felt? I felt coins in that pocket—lots of them!

One time, one newly released comic book caught my eyes. I really wanted to buy it but did not have the money. Then I remember that blouse belonging to my grandmother hanging in her room with lots of coins in one pocket. I needed money to buy

that comic book I wanted so much. You know what I did? You have guessed right—I dipped my hand into that pocket, took some coins, and went off happily to buy that comic book. I told myself, “It is only for one time.”

But it didn’t stop after that one time. I kept going back to that pocket whenever I needed money to buy comic books. One day, I was in the living room and heard my grandmother saying this in her bedroom, “Eh! Where are all the coins?”

I was not a Christian then but when I heard that, I felt like Adam who felt guilty and hid himself when he heard God calling, “Adam! Adam! Where are you?” It was like God calling to me through the voice of my grandmother, “John! John! Where are my coins?”

I had thought I would only do that for one time, but it went on for some time. By the sovereign grace of God, I was there and then stricken with such a strong sense of shame and guilt that I stopped doing it again.

Giving in to sexual sin is like that as well. You think you do it for just one time, but once you start, you realize that you are caught. It is not just for one time, but for a long time, and even for a life time of bondage and addiction.

So, how do you deal with sexual temptation? Be brave—stand your ground and fight! Right? Wrong!

Fleeing from sexual temptation is what God calls a brave Christian to do.

Paul’s final word in vv. 7-8 makes it clear that the bottom line is obedience to God. To reject Paul’s appeal to abstain from sexual immorality is not to reject some redundant church teachings but to reject God Himself.

Verse 8 ends with a very hopeful truth—God has given us the Holy Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit always within us. Therefore, when God commands us to walk and to abstain, he also gives us the power to obey. What a wonderful thought. We are not in this battle alone!

Because of the nature of the sexually “liberated” world in which we live, we want to conclude by remembering that the Gospel is ultimately redemptive. Jesus has come not to put us in bondage, but to set us free. The Christian standard confining sexual love exclusively to marriage may appear to be bondage. But in reality it is a way to freedom—the freedom to enjoy one’s sexuality in the way intended by God.

Let me share some practical guidelines for dealing with sexual temptation.

- Know your weakness—never think you are too strong to fall.
- Stay out of questionable areas—beware that a little and brief fun can bring about much and long lasting harm.
- Don't face the temptation alone—make yourself accountable to someone.
- Don't make excuses—don't give yourself reasons to give in.
- Be honest about your problem—acknowledge your need for help and seek it.

Conclusion

Paul called on the Thessalonians then and us today to dare to be different for Christ in our world.

- Dare to live life as a walk with God.
- Dare to abstain in obedience to God.

Remember who you are in Christ. You are a child of God and given a new life—you are saved, redeemed, justified, and forgiven. All the promises of God belong to you. You bear the name of Christ. You are called to live out the new life you have in Him. You are made for better things. You are not made to live in sin.

As Christians, you and I are called to live differently in this world and uphold distinctly the holiness of God.

Pray that the Lord will help us dare to be different and distinct for Christ in where we are. Amen!