

1 Thessalonians 4.1-12

Walking by the gospel

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 23 October 2022

Walking Worthily [6]

Walking

The week before last, Jess and I were in Jersey and we did a *lot* of walking. Over the week my exercise tracker recorded 142,699 steps: almost 120km or 75 miles. When we arrived in Jersey at the *start* of the week it was only the *beginning* – we didn't realise how much was to come, how many steps we'd take, many miles we'd walk.

The Christian life is like that: salvation is the beginning, the first step on a long, a *life*-long journey of faith. Salvation is a gift from God, a free gift of life and forgiveness, adoption into God's family. It's so important that we allow that truth to take root deep within our hearts. *Equally* important is that every area of our lives is renewed and transformed, that we learn to live the family way, that we grow in holiness, walking with Jesus and one another.

┌ That's why so often there is a dividing line in the middle of Paul's letters. In the first half he often looks back, either to his visit or to some basic, foundational truths of the Christian faith. Here in 1 Thessalonians he does a bit of both.

Then in the second half Paul often looks ahead, dealing with specific issues, or helping us see how the truth works out in practice, how to live – or indeed *walk* – by the gospel. **The gospel is not only for preaching; it is also for living.** To put it another way, the gospel is for talking and for walking.

Christians are free from the requirement to keep God's Law to be accepted by him, but we are still called and commanded to keep his moral law and commandments.¹ We are set free – but for a purpose: to be holy. That's what these verses are about.

More and more (1)

Last week I and a small working group met for the first time to look at the report of the leadership Away Day we had recently. Here's the full report – it's quite detailed! We will be meeting a few times over the coming weeks and months, before presenting something to the PCC and then to the whole church – I hope at the end of November.

We started the Away Day by giving thanks to God for all that had gone before, for people, for God's faithfulness, for different groups, and so on. We did that because it's good to say thank-you, but also because this process is not about wiping away all that's gone before and starting again from scratch. No: it's about *building on and developing what we already have.*

That's the way Paul talked to the Thessalonians too:

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.

1 Thessalonians 4.1 (NIV)

They weren't nowhere, they didn't need to start from scratch, they didn't need to wipe everything away and start again. But neither had they arrived, neither were they perfect (1): **now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.** What you *are* doing, do it **more and more.** Be *more* faithful, be *more* loving, be *more* generous, be *more* like Jesus, Paul says. It isn't about earning God's love, but responding to the God who has **loved** and **chosen** us (1.4).

If you've ever given someone a present – how does it make you feel when you see them using it?

It's like that with God; it brings him great pleasure when he sees us using and growing in the life that he's given us, when he sees us turning away from wrong things and towards him, when he sees us showing people Jesus with our lives and our words.

So friends, let us do that **more and more**.

Holiness (2-8)

Jess and I had baked potatoes for dinner a couple of nights ago. We started them off in the microwave to soften them before putting them in the oven to crisp the skin.

When the microwave pinged, I went to get them. I opened the door, put my hand in, and – ouch! – those potatoes were *really* hot!! I had to fetch the oven gloves to move them into the oven.

These next few verses reference a different kind of hot potato. Sexuality has long been a place where church and culture have clashed – it was true in Paul's day and it's true in our day. Over the next few weeks the Church of England's bishops are meeting to discuss whether to change the Church's definition of marriage to include same-sex unions. In March we will start discussing questions of sexuality and identity here at Christ Church.

A hot potato is a situation or subject that people disagree strongly about, but don't want to talk about it or deal with it. That seems to fit the sexuality debate rather well. However, we can't bury our heads in the sand; we have to learn how to disagree without falling apart.

When Paul talks about **sexuality immortality** here (3) – he uses two brackets to make sure we see where it comes from, the context it fits into.

First, **¶** *authority*. In verse 2 Paul says:

For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4.2 (NIV)

And then in verse 8 he says **¶**:

Anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 4.8 (NIV)

This means everything inside that bracket comes from and with the authority of God. This is not something Paul made up; this is God, the author of life, telling his people how best to live the life he made for us to live, and giving **his Holy Spirit** to help (8).

The first bracket is *authority*: Jesus' authority. The second – and this is really important – is *holiness*. Verse 3:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified [become holy].

1 Thessalonians 4.3 (NIV)

And verse 7:

God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

1 Thessalonians 4.7 (NIV)

In other words, (1) we are *commanded* by God, (2) it is God's *will*, and (3) God has *called* us to live holy lives. Holiness is not an optional extra for church leaders or super keen Christians; all God's people have a purpose, and that is to live a holy life.

Have you ever wondered what God's will is for your life? Usually when we ask that we mean something like 'should I live here' or 'should I work there' or 'should I do this'. They're important questions, but sometimes they can be a smokescreen because the *first* thing God calls his people to, is to live a holy life. Everything inside that second bracket helps us see what that looks like.

If you've been a Christian a while, you'll know this is not an easy thing to do. And it's not something we can achieve in this life – God's people are a work in progress.

Paul's teaching on living as God's people, chosen and loved by God, is bracketed by two things:

1. God's people live under his *authority* and by his command;
2. God wills and calls his people to be *holy*.

Within those two things come all Paul's teaching on living as God's people – *one aspect of which* is our **¶** sexuality.

If all supporters of Liverpool FC were like me, Anfield would be empty each week, because I've never been to a match. They'd make very little money from shirt sales – in fact they'd make nothing, because I have never owned a Liverpool shirt. Their TV viewing figures wouldn't be up to much either, because I don't watch. And most fans couldn't name the first team. I'll be honest, I'm not much of a fan. Though I am enough of a fan to know that Forest beat us yesterday.

There are lots of things that go into making up a football fan: **¶** buying a replica shirt, going to matches, watching on TV, following scores and team news during the week, watching the manager give press conferences, and so on. Following the scores on the BBC Sport page and doing little else – like me – makes for a very poor fan!

In the same way, there are lots of things that go into making a holy child of God: things like praying and reading the Bible, not gossiping about other people, serving and using our gifts inside and outside the church, sharing our faith, discovering and using our spiritual gifts, not giving in to anger or temptation, fasting, giving generously and so on. It's a big list. Some are things we should do, others are things we should **avoid** – and one of those, the Bible tells us, is **sexual immorality** (3). Actually it's stronger than **avoid** it – *cut it off*, Paul says, *get rid of it!* §

Paul continues by contrasting the **passionate lust of pagans** (5) with the self-**control** of God's people, who should be **holy and honourable** (4). Verse 4 is extremely hard to translate – the word **body** there means 'vessel' and is sometimes translated 'wife', for example, 'acquire a wife' instead of **control your own body**.

I've read various different options, and I think the best one I've come across is that Paul was using an euphemism, and meant something like 'keep it in your pants'. He was also most likely referring to a specific situation, where a member of the church had taken **advantage** of another (6) – we don't know, but most of Paul's ethical teaching came directly out of live situations in one of his churches.

Paul took it seriously – because God does: God **will punish all who commit such sins** (6). That doesn't mean God will *only* punish people who commit sexual sins – not at all! Paul had to say that because the culture of the day celebrated promiscuity and all sorts of other things. Coming out of that, the Thessalonians had to learn that those things are not part of 'holiness', they do *not* please God, and they needed to **avoid** them, to get rid of them, if they wanted **to live in order to please God** (1).

There is so much more to say about this – I have barely scratched the surface this morning. It touches some of our deepest desires and longings and hurts. That's why, although there is much more to holiness than avoiding **sexual immorality**, Paul singles it out here, and in other places. He knew it is one of – if not the – most difficult areas for God's people to grow in holiness.

I don't expect everyone to agree with me in this area – any more than I expect everyone to agree with me on *any* area of faith and life. There are one or two foundational things I hope we *can* agree on – the resurrection of Jesus is pretty important – but beyond that I'm well aware that I'll disagree with all of you on *something*. Of course we will, we aren't all the same!

But I *do* expect us – myself included – to treat others, even those with whom we disagree strongly, with humility, compassion and grace, seeking first to listen and not to explain.

I *do* expect us – myself included – to take God's Word seriously: even the bits that are challenging and difficult (to understand or to put into practice).

And I *do* expect us to live and grow in holiness together.

Friends if this were easy, the Bible would be a couple of pages long and God's people would be perfect already. It's not, and we aren't – but if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, at least we'll be heading in the right direction, together.

Pause

Deep breath time – if you want to talk to me about any of this, please get in touch with me. I won't engage by email, but I'm more than happy to arrange a face-to-face conversation.

Love (9-12)

I'd like to end as Paul does, by talking about love. In Greek there are four words for 'love' – the one Paul used here means *family* love, to describe the love between ¶ brothers and sisters.² This wasn't something new they need to start doing:

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.

1 Thessalonians 4.9-10 (NIV)

Unlike with holiness where Paul has to spell out what it looks like in practice, he doesn't need to tell them how to love one another – simply to do it **more and more**. One of the best things about Christ Church is way we love one another – there was a great example of that last week, and some thanks in this week's update. Brothers and sisters, I don't need to tell you how to love each other – but **do so more and more**.

And don't only love one another, but love those outside our church family too.

§ The Warm Welcome is a fantastic way in which we will be loving and serving our community together this winter. Like all such things it is ‘mission’ in two ways:

First, sharing God’s love in practical ways is important. God has blessed us with a modern, comfortable, warm building – so let’s share it! Even if people don’t want to know about Jesus or explore faith, they can still come and be warm and welcomed and know God’s love for them through us.

Second, it’s important we remember that we aren’t an aid agency, we are a church, and although people need to be warm and fed, what everyone needs most is Jesus. He put it like this: **‘let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven’** (Matthew 5.16).

My hope and prayer is that this winter we grow relationships, we begin to § build some bridges – bridges that will one day be strong enough to carry the gospel. That’s a picture Cathie shared with me this week, and I rather like it to describe what we’re doing: **building bridges strong enough to carry the gospel.**

That’s what Paul was getting at here too (11-12): **lead a quiet life, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders.**

As we learn to walk and talk the gospel, as we learn to live and grow in holiness under God's authority, as we share God's love with all and win their **respect** – may God our Father be glorified.

By the way we live and the love we show, I pray many will want to find out more, and perhaps be willing to hear the good news about Jesus.

To do any of that we need help, and lots of it – so let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, be poured out on us, fill us, and make us new.

¹ Stott, 76.

² Morris, 84.