

# 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – The Will of God

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## Intro: What is God's will for my life?

People spend their whole lives trying to figure out what God's will for them is. What should I study? Where should I live? Who should I marry? Should I get married? And often it comes from a good place. We want to know God's will so that we can please God. We want to do what he wants for our lives, not what we want.

But sometimes, we want to know God's will so that we will be blessed. If we find the job God wants us to take, then we'll be successful. If we find God's will for who to marry, then we will have a happy life with fewer problems. Whole books have been written about this subject. Books like, 'Your best life now!' which mention nothing about sin or salvation. Instead it says things like, "God didn't make you to be average. God created you to excel." And, "if you will start acting like it, talking like it, seeing yourself as more than a conqueror, you will live a prosperous and victorious life"

Well today we see that God's will is very different to that. Paul's simple answer to 'What is God's will?' is this: 'Be Holy and Love one Another'. That's it. In fact, as we look deeply into this passage, we'll see there's a deep connection between love and holiness. So in the end, I think what Paul is saying is, 'Be holy *by* loving one another.' So let's pray as we look at God's will for our lives...

## 1. Be Holy

Paul couldn't be clearer about how they should live to please God. And he encourages the Thessalonians that they are already doing it! But he wants them to do so more and more. And he gets to the heart of it in v. 3

**1 Thessalonians 4:3** *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;* Literally, 'this is the will of God: your *sanctification*' or 'your *holiness*'. Holiness is a broad term, but in essence it's about being 'set apart' for a special purpose. When you buy your toothbrush from the shops, it's just like any other toothbrush. But when you buy it and use it for the first time, it becomes *your* toothbrush. It's *sanctified* for you. You don't want to use anyone's toothbrush. That's disgusting!

Well you and I have been made holy, sanctified, *set apart*, for God. God himself is holy: there is no one like him. He is set apart from all created beings, and from the whole universe. And because God is perfectly pure, holiness has this moral dimension as well. His eyes are too pure to look on evil.<sup>1</sup>

And we are no longer like the rest of the world. But we are set apart as God's special family. And so, our morals are to be different from the rest of the world. We are to avoid sexual immorality. Now the word that's translated to sexual immorality covers a broad range of sexual sin. But it basically means any kind of sexual relations outside of marriage. That could mean having sex before marriage. Or it could mean a married person having sex with someone who's married to another. Or a married person having an affair with a single person. And it's not just sexual intercourse, but any kind of sexual activity apart from with your spouse.

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<sup>1</sup> Habakkuk 1:13

This was a completely different way to live from the Ancient world. In many pagan religions, part of the rituals was to have sex with a temple prostitute. It sounds crazy to us but that was part of worshipping the gods! And apart from a wife, you could have a mistress and a concubine so that you can indulge your urges whenever you like. But Paul says that those who know are to be different:

*1 Thessalonians 4:4-5* that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, <sup>5</sup> not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;

These days people don't associate sexual immorality with religion. But, brothers and sisters, doesn't this so accurately describe our culture? Our culture is all about freedom. People should be able to do whatever they want, with whomever they want. And anyone who puts any boundaries on right sexual behaviour is repressed and judgmental.

But the age of sexual revolution and free love has shown how this has failed! We are surrounded by brokenness. Couples who live together before marriage have a 33% higher divorce rate. Longitudinal studies of children of divorce have shown that divorce affects their mental health and relationships for the rest of their lives! Pornography stunts the emotional growth of teenagers, making them unable and often uninterested in pursuing long-term relationships! They would rather bond with a picture than a real person. And depression is rampant because families are broken.

But Paul says that those who know God; who have been set apart for him, are to be holy. God has created sex for our enjoyment but in the context of a safe and loving life-long commitment. It's not about lust, but about love. Safe sex is not sex with protection. Safe sex is sex in marriage. Sexual immorality is *not* God's will for you.

Up until now, Paul has been gushing with encouragement for the Thessalonians. He has been joyful, and intimate and positive. And he's not negative here. But he is deadly serious. Notice how many times Paul says that this is *God's* will:

He reminds them these instructions are 'by the authority of the Lord Jesus.' (v. 2). It is God's will 'that you avoid sexual immorality;' (v. 3). That 'The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins. (v. 6). That God did not call us to be impure, but in holiness (v. 7). That whoever rejects this instruction 'does not reject a human being, but God, the very God who gives you his *Holy Spirit*.' (v. 8).

Brothers and sisters, we need to hear this today don't we? Because Satan tries to deceive us into thinking, '*a bit of sexual immorality is ok isn't it?*' We might have that lovely conversation with someone who's not our spouse. And they're so nice, and they don't argue. And before you know it, you're letting your mind fantasize into what it might be like to have a relationship with this person.

Or it could be those late nights, when you're exhausted and stressed and can't sleep. And you just stumble across a website or a TV show. And you think, 'What's the harm? I'm not hurting anyone.' And before you know it, you've wasted hours and you feel more exhausted, and guilty too. It doesn't help in the long term.

This is why Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6<sup>2</sup>, 'Flee, sexual immorality!' He doesn't say, 'stand and fight.' But 'flee!' Don't think, 'I can handle a little bit. I need to get stronger by practice.' No, don't be stupid. Flee!

When I read that verse, I always think of Joseph, when Potiphar's wife asked him day after day to sleep with her. When she finally grabbed him by the cloak, he fled. He left his cloak in her hand and ran! He didn't try to reason with her, he got out of there! We too need to avoid sexual immorality, because God is holy and we are set apart for him.

But notice that this is not just a matter of *not* doing things. It's actually a function of love. When we are tempted with sexual immorality, we have a choice to either control ourselves, or hurt others:

**1 Thessalonians 4:6a** *and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.* If a man sleeps with a woman, he is wronging his brother, because she has promised to love him alone. Or if she is single, he is wronging her future husband. Or he is taking advantage of his sister, who is trying to be pure for the Lord Jesus. Sex is like super-glue. It is meant to bind a husband and wife together for life. We were not meant to be glued to someone and then ripped apart, over and over again. It hurts people! And it damages your soul. So avoid sexual immorality like the coronavirus.

Now if you have sinned sexually, or are struggling with this, know that God is merciful. God loves you and forgives you whenever you turn to him. And if you need help, please talk to me or Rodney, or a trusted brother or sister. But we need to hear this warning clearly: avoid sexual immorality. You and I need to have it burned into our brains: Sexual immorality is *not* God's will for my life.' And the good news is that God has given us his holy Spirit to help us be holy and loving.

## 2. Love One Another

Paul then comes back to the command to love one another. See love and holiness are two sides of the same coin. Back in chapter 3, Paul says,

**1 Thessalonians 3:12-13** *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. <sup>13</sup> May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

It's as the Lord makes our love overflow more and more, that we are transformed to be holy like God himself. You and I love conditionally. We find it hard to love those who don't love us back. But God *is* love. And that's why he is different. He can love perfectly and unconditionally because he is holy<sup>3</sup>. It's only as we are filled with God's love that we are able to love unconditionally more and more. And that's why we need God himself to teach us deep within:

**1 Thessalonians 4:9** *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.*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:18

<sup>3</sup> See how God says that he can love unconditionally because he is a Holy God and not a man: Hosea 11

But he urges them to love each other more and more. This is God's will for our lives. That is our life's ambition, to never stop growing in love. And that's the only ambition we are to have. In Paul's time, people used to gather in social groups, a bit like clubs. But they would aim to outdo each other in status and honour. They were ambitious, and wanted to get recognized for their achievements.

Sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking, 'If I'm just successful, people will respect me. Outsiders will be impressed and I'll be able to share Jesus with them. I had a friend at uni who dreamed of designing the new World Trade Centre, this was after the Twin Towers were destroyed. And I said, 'Why do you want to do that?' And he said, 'Then people will really listen to me. I'll have a great opportunity to witness about Christ.' Is that we are to do? Be the most successful we can be to impress outsiders?

Well Paul turns this thinking on its head. He says,

*1 Thessalonians 4:11* '...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, <sup>12</sup> so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Make it your *ambition*, not to be ambitious. To just get on with your work and live a quiet life. This would have been hugely different to the culture around them. And he actually says, that is what will win the respect of outsiders. When we are content with what we have, and so don't need to be greedy for more. When we know deep down that we are loved and precious to God, we don't need to prove our worth to others.

When we make it our dream to live a quiet life, working hard, loving others, we will have a pattern of life that the world respects. We will have the kind of stability and purpose that the world so badly needs.

Brothers and sisters, the world is full of greed, and instability and hopelessness. But when we work hard and love one another, outsiders will see that we have a contentment that our world can't provide. For our contentment, joy and hope come from God alone. Our best life is not now, chasing success and riches. We are waiting for our best life when Jesus returns.

So what is God's will for your life? It's that you are holy: that you avoid sexual immorality and learn to control your own body. That you use your body to love one another like God loves. And he is working in us to help us love more and more, so that we will be holy and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. So let us be holy by loving one another. Amen.