

The Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Called to Holiness and Love

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the nature and necessity of sanctification, that God's revealed will for every believer is holiness, expressed concretely in sexual purity, brotherly love, and a diligent, honorable daily life. Paul roots these commands in God's own authority ("whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God") and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, who indwells believers and empowers holy living. This guards a treasured conviction in our churches: that salvation issues in a transformed life, that the moral commands of the New Testament carry God's authority, and that the Christian life is a lifelong walk of faithful obedience, not merely a moment of decision. It also affirms the Spirit's presence with the people of God to enable that walk.

At the same time, this passage is intensely practical and formational. It speaks to the body, to sexuality, to relationships, to work, and to witness, the very places where holiness is either lived or lost. The aim is to help students take God's call to holiness seriously in concrete areas, to receive His commands as His own word, and to depend on His Spirit for the power to obey.

So aim at both targets. Ground students in the truth that God wills their sanctification and gives His Spirit to accomplish it, and stir them to pursue holiness in the practical realms of body, love, and labor. Handle the matter of sexual purity with candor and grace, holding out both God's high call and His abundant mercy.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (v. 3). What does it mean that God's will for every believer is sanctification, and how should that truth reshape the way we think about what God wants for our lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the clarity of verse 3 land. People often agonize over discovering God's will, treating it as a hidden secret about jobs, moves, and relationships. Paul cuts through the fog: God's will, plainly stated, is your sanctification. Whatever uncertainty remains about circumstances, this much is never in doubt.

Help students grasp what sanctification means: being set apart for God and progressively made holy, conformed to the character of Christ. It is both a status (we are set apart as God's holy

people) and a process (we are being made holy day by day). God is committed to this work in every believer.

Draw out how this reframes daily life. If God's central will for me is that I become like Jesus, then every circumstance, even the unclear or unwanted ones, becomes an arena for that purpose. The question shifts from "what does God want me to do?" to "who does God want me to become, and how does this situation serve that?"

Reassure students that this is good news, not pressure. God is not withholding a secret plan; He has clearly revealed His deepest desire for us and committed Himself to accomplishing it. Our part is to cooperate with the work He is already doing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sanctification as God's clearly revealed will for every believer (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
- Holiness as both a status (set apart) and a process (being made holy)
- Reframing "God's will" around character before circumstances
- God's commitment to complete the work of holiness in us (Philippians 1:6)

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we so often look for God's will in circumstances rather than character?
- How does knowing God's will in your holiness change daily decisions?
- What is the difference between being set apart and being made holy?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you think about "God's will for my life," how much of your attention goes to decisions and circumstances versus your growth in holiness? What would change if you made becoming like Christ your main concern?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question helps students notice where their attention actually goes. Many sincere believers spend enormous energy seeking guidance about decisions while giving little thought to growing in holiness. The aim is gentle realignment of priorities.

Help students see that pursuing holiness actually clarifies many decisions. When our chief aim is to become like Christ, choices that once seemed agonizing often resolve, because we ask which path best serves that purpose and best honors God.

Encourage a concrete shift. Invite students to name one decision or area they have been overthinking and to reconsider it through the lens of sanctification. The goal is to make Christlikeness the controlling concern rather than an afterthought.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prioritizing growth in holiness over anxiety about circumstances
- How a commitment to Christlikeness clarifies decisions
- Realigning our spiritual attention toward character
- Trusting God with circumstances while pursuing holiness

Discussion Prompts

- Where does most of your spiritual energy currently go?
- How might making holiness your main concern reshape your choices?
- What is one decision you could view differently through this lens?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 3 through 6 Paul calls believers to abstain from sexual immorality and to control their own bodies “in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” What does this passage teach about sexual holiness and about why it matters so deeply to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses sexual holiness directly, and it calls for candor seasoned with grace. Paul is unembarrassed and specific: believers are to abstain from sexual immorality and to control their bodies in holiness and honor. Help students see that this is not prudishness but a high and dignifying vision of the body as belonging to God.

Set the cultural contrast Paul draws. The Gentiles “who do not know God” were governed by “the passion of lust,” treating desire as their master. Christians are called to a different way: desire mastered, the body honored, sexuality expressed only within God’s good design of marriage between a man and a woman. The difference flows from knowing God.

Explain why this matters so deeply to God. Sexual sin is not a trivial matter of private preference; it involves the whole person, wrongs others, and profanes what God means to be holy. Paul notes it can also defraud and wrong a brother or sister. Our bodies are not our own to use as we please; they belong to the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Handle this pastorally. Many students carry wounds, regrets, or ongoing struggles in this area. Hold out God’s high call without crushing those who have fallen. The same gospel that commands purity also offers cleansing and power to change. Aim for conviction joined to hope, not shame.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sexual purity as an essential part of holiness, expressed within God's design (1 Corinthians 6:18–20)
- The body as belonging to God and meant to be honored, not driven by lust
- The contrast between desire mastered by the believer and desire mastering the unbeliever
- The seriousness of sexual sin as wronging God and others
- The gospel's offer of cleansing and power to those who have fallen (1 John 1:9)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul connect sexual holiness with knowing God?
- What does it mean to control the body in holiness and honor rather than passion?
- How does the gospel offer both a high call and real hope in this area?

Question 4

Student Question:

Our culture, like the pagan world Paul addressed, treats sexual desire as something to indulge freely. Where do you feel the pull of those cultural messages most strongly, and what would it look like to honor God with your body in that specific area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question invites honest reflection on where cultural messages about sex and desire press hardest. The aim is courageous honesty in a safe setting, not public confession of specifics. Frame it so students can reflect inwardly even if they share generally.

Help students name the avenues of pressure: entertainment that normalizes immorality, the constant availability of pornography, the assumption that desire must always be satisfied, relationships that drift past God's boundaries. Recognizing the specific pull is the first step to resisting it.

Then point toward concrete obedience. Honoring God with the body might mean setting real guardrails, removing access to temptation, seeking accountability, fleeing rather than negotiating, and pursuing the positive vision of a body offered to God. Emphasize that the Spirit gives power for this; it is not white-knuckle willpower alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing cultural pressures toward sexual compromise
- Concrete guardrails and accountability as means of obedience
- Fleeing temptation rather than negotiating with it (2 Timothy 2:22)
- Dependence on the Spirit for power over the flesh (Galatians 5:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you feel cultural pressure about sex and desire most strongly?
- What practical guardrails would help you honor God with your body?
- How does relying on the Spirit differ from relying on willpower alone?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul warns that the Lord is “an avenger in all these things” and that whoever disregards these instructions “disregards not man but God” (vv. 6, 8). What do these sobering words teach about the authority behind God’s commands and about how seriously He takes our holiness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus here on the weight Paul places behind these commands. He warns that “the Lord is an avenger in all these things” and that to disregard the instruction is to disregard “not man but God.” These are sobering words meant to underline the seriousness of holiness.

Help students hear the authority claim. Paul’s moral teaching is not personal preference or cultural convention; it is God’s command. To brush it aside is not to disagree with Paul but to defy God. This reinforces the conviction that the New Testament’s moral instruction carries divine authority over our lives.

Address the warning that the Lord is an avenger. This is not a threat designed to terrify believers into anxious religion, but a serious reminder that God cares about justice and holiness and will not treat sin as nothing. He defends those who are wronged and holds the unrepentant accountable. Holiness matters because God is holy.

Pastorally, hold the warning together with grace. The seriousness of these commands magnifies the mercy of the cross. God takes sin seriously enough to warn us soberly and to redeem us at great cost. The right response is not fearful paralysis but reverent, grateful obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The divine authority behind God’s moral commands (1 Thessalonians 4:8)
- God’s commitment to justice and His seriousness about sin
- Disregarding God’s commands as defying God Himself, not merely human teaching
- Reverent obedience as the response to a holy God, held together with grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that rejecting these commands is rejecting God, not man?
- How should the warning that the Lord is an avenger affect us, without breeding mere fear?
- How does the seriousness of sin magnify the mercy of the cross?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a command of God you have been quietly treating as merely human advice, something you can negotiate or set aside? What would it mean to receive it instead as the word of God Himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows naturally from the authority of God's commands. Many believers quietly downgrade certain commands to optional advice, the ones that cost us something or cut against our preferences. The aim is honest identification, not condemnation.

Help students recognize the pattern: we accept the commands we like and rationalize the ones we dislike, treating God's clear word as negotiable. Paul's point in verse 8 dismantles this; to set aside His command is to set aside God.

Encourage a specific act of submission. Invite students to name one command they have been treating as human advice, sexual, financial, relational, or otherwise, and to receive it freshly as the word of God to be obeyed. This is the practical outworking of receiving Scripture as God's word, which the study has stressed before.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Selective obedience as treating God's word as negotiable
- Receiving all of God's commands, even the costly ones, as His authoritative word
- Submission as the proper response to divine authority (James 4:7)
- The connection between honoring Scripture and obeying it fully

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a command you have been treating as merely human advice?
- What makes us downgrade the commands we dislike?
- What would full submission to that command look like this week?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Paul moves from purity to brotherly love (vv. 9–10) and then to living quietly, working with your hands, and walking properly before outsiders (vv. 11–12). What does this teach us about how love, honest work, and an ordinary faithful life are part of holiness and witness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul moves from purity to two more arenas of holiness: brotherly love and ordinary daily life. Help students see that holiness is not only what we avoid but how we love and how we live.

Paul commends their brotherly love yet urges them to do so “more and more,” because love, like holiness, is never finished growing.

Draw attention to the surprising spirituality of ordinary life in verses 11 and 12: aspire to live quietly, mind your own affairs, work with your hands. Paul dignifies honest labor and a calm, responsible life as part of holiness. Faithfulness in the unglamorous routines, doing our work well, paying our way, not meddling, is genuinely holy.

Note the witness dimension: “so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.” A diligent, honest, peaceable life commends the gospel to those watching. Our work ethic and our reliability preach. A Christian who is lazy, meddlesome, or perpetually dependent through irresponsibility undermines the message.

Apply it to the congregation. Encourage students to see their jobs, finances, and daily responsibilities not as separate from their faith but as a central arena of holiness and witness. Holiness wears work clothes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Brotherly love as part of holiness, always to grow “more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:9–10)
- The dignity and spirituality of honest, diligent daily work (Ephesians 4:28)
- A quiet, responsible, peaceable life as part of Christian holiness
- Our work and reliability as a witness to outsiders (1 Peter 2:12)

Discussion Prompts

- How is honest daily work part of holiness, not separate from it?
- What does our handling of work and money communicate to those watching?
- Where do you sense a call to grow in brotherly love or in diligence?

Question 8

Student Question:

How is the way you handle your daily work, your money, and your ordinary responsibilities either commending or contradicting your witness to the people watching your life? Where could you grow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question applies the dignity of ordinary faithfulness to the student’s own work, money, and responsibilities. The aim is to connect daily conduct with witness, helping students see that holiness is tested in the routine.

Help students examine specific habits: diligence or laziness at work, integrity or shortcuts with money, reliability or flakiness in commitments, peaceableness or meddling in others' affairs. These ordinary matters either commend or contradict the gospel.

Encourage one concrete improvement. Perhaps it is greater diligence in a job done grudgingly, more integrity in finances, following through on a commitment, or stepping back from meddling. Small faithfulness in ordinary life is genuine growth in holiness and a real witness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Daily work and finances as arenas of witness and holiness
- Integrity, diligence, and reliability as part of Christian character
- The way ordinary faithfulness either commends or contradicts the gospel
- Growing in the unglamorous routines of life

Discussion Prompts

- How is your handling of work and responsibilities affecting your witness?
- Where could greater diligence or integrity commend the gospel?
- What is one ordinary area where you could grow in faithfulness?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul says, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness," and adds that the One who gives these commands also "gives his Holy Spirit to you" (vv. 7-8). What does this teach about the calling of every Christian, and about how the indwelling Holy Spirit makes a holy life possible?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax, gathering the whole passage into the call and the power of holiness. Paul says, "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness," and immediately points to the One who "gives his Holy Spirit to you." The call to holiness and the gift of the Spirit belong together.

Unpack the calling. To be a Christian is to be called by God into holiness; impurity is a contradiction of our very identity. We are not our own; we have been claimed by a holy God for a holy purpose. This is the dignity beneath every command in the chapter.

Now stress the gift of the Spirit, which makes the difference between mere moralism and Christian holiness. God does not call us to holiness and leave us to manufacture it. He places His own Holy Spirit within us. The Spirit indwells every believer, empowering obedience, producing fruit, and transforming us from within (Galatians 5:16-25). Help students see that holiness is the Spirit's work in cooperation with our yielded effort, not a lonely struggle of willpower.

Connect this to the body. Because the Spirit dwells in us, our bodies are His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19), which is exactly why bodily holiness matters so much. The same Spirit who makes us holy also makes our bodies sacred ground.

Bring it home with both seriousness and hope. The call is high, to be holy as God is holy. But the resource is sufficient, the indwelling Spirit of God. Send students away sobered by the calling and encouraged by the provision, knowing that the God who calls them to holiness also empowers it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian's calling into holiness as central to our identity (1 Peter 1:15–16)
- The indwelling Holy Spirit given to every believer (Romans 8:9–11)
- Holiness as the Spirit's empowering work, not mere human willpower (Galatians 5:16–25)
- The body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- The sufficiency of God's provision to match the height of His calling

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God has called us in holiness, not impurity?
- How does the indwelling Spirit change the way we pursue holiness?
- Why does the Spirit's presence make bodily holiness matter so much?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage. Name one specific way you sense Jesus calling you to greater holiness in your body, your relationships, or your daily life, and what your first step of response will be.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone calls for a single, concrete response. Help students choose one arena, body, relationships, or daily life, and listen for the Spirit's specific prompting rather than resolving to improve everything at once.

Steer them toward a real first step: a guardrail to set, a command to obey, a person to love more, a habit of diligence to begin. Formation happens in specifics, empowered by the Spirit.

Close by returning to the dignity and provision of the calling. God has called your students in holiness and given them His Spirit. They pursue holiness not to earn His love but because they belong to Him. Send them out sobered, hopeful, and Spirit-dependent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response as the goal of studying Scripture (James 1:22)
- Pursuing holiness in dependence on the Spirit
- Concrete first steps as the path of formation
- Living from our identity as a people called in holiness

Discussion Prompts

- What one area of holiness is the Spirit pressing on you?
- What concrete first step will you take this week?
- How can this group support one another in pursuing holiness?