

The Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Lesson 5: Called to Holiness and Love -- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Somewhere along the way, many of us picked up the idea that figuring out “God’s will for my life” is mostly about decisions, which job to take, whom to marry, where to live, as if God’s will were a hidden map we have to decode. So it can come as a surprise, and a relief, to hear Paul say plainly, “this is the will of God, your sanctification.” Before God ever spells out the details of your circumstances, He has already made His will for you crystal clear: He wants you to become holy. He wants you to become like His Son. Everything else is secondary to that.

In the first century, as in ours, that call to holiness ran straight into the culture’s attitude toward the body and sex. The pagan world around Thessalonica treated sexual desire as something to indulge however one pleased; the gods themselves were imagined doing the same. Into that world Paul speaks with startling directness. Christians are to control their bodies in holiness and honor, not to be driven by lust like those who do not know God. This is not because the body is bad or sex is shameful, but because the people of God belong to God, body and soul, and our bodies are now the dwelling place of His Holy Spirit.

But holiness, for Paul, is never just about what we avoid. In the same breath he turns to love, brotherly love that he says they already practice but should pursue “more and more.” And then, remarkably, he grounds holiness in something as ordinary as how we live our daily lives: working quietly, minding our own business, earning our own keep, so that our conduct earns the respect of outsiders and we depend on no one unnecessarily. Holiness shows up at the dinner table, in the bedroom, on the job, and in the neighborhood. It is not a Sunday performance; it is a whole life offered to God.

This lesson presses the truth of the passage into the most practical corners of life: our sexuality, our relationships, our work, our witness. It also lifts our eyes to the dignity of the calling behind it all. The God who saved us has not called us to impurity but to holiness, and He has put His own Spirit within us to make it possible. So as we walk through these verses, do not hear a list of rules. Hear the invitation of a holy God to become, by His grace and His Spirit, the holy people we already are in Christ.

Group Discussion: Paul says that the will of God is our sanctification, our becoming holy. Why do you think so many people search for God’s will in their circumstances while overlooking the clear will of God for their character? How would taking holiness seriously reshape the way we make everyday decisions?

Personal Reflection: Paul calls believers to control their bodies in holiness and honor rather than be driven by desire. In what area of your bodily life, your appetites, your sexuality, your habits, do you most need to invite God’s holiness right now, and what makes that area hard to surrender?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, fleeing sexual immorality because the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; Romans 12:1–2, presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice and being transformed; Hebrews 12:14, striving for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord; Galatians 5:16–25, walking by the Spirit rather than gratifying the desires of the flesh; Ephesians 4:28, working honestly so as to have something to share with the needy.