

Holiness

The Christian faith is built on a foundation of relationship.



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vulnerable.

We may think we understand God as the originator of the physical world, ultimate power and wisdom, mysterious beyond all other realities. But the key to any real understanding of God is his love. 1 John 4:16 isolates the essential truth of God and our relationship to him: “God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him/her” (NASV). We see this connection in Paul’s letter to the Christians of Thessalonica. There is a genuine love between Paul and them built on their mutual love for God and God’s love each of them.

Our lesson title, “Holiness,” has nothing to do with our spiritual greatness, nothing to do with any church group that may claim a special fullness of the Spirit and nothing to do with an unbroken history line back to a person or event that birthed our denomination.

Holiness has to do with choices, lifestyle, a knowledge that God is willing to shape and guide your life in a way that helps others experience his love. “So then” (v. 1) can mean “finally” or “now listen to this” because I want you “in the Lord Jesus to keep living the way you already are and even do better in how you live and please God.”

Paul voices the basic truth “God’s will is that your lives are dedicated to him,” then follows the specific “stay away from sexual immorality.” Then come the warnings against sexual laxity and abuse that so marked the culture of that day. Not only was adultery and sexual abuse common, but most pagan gods were known for their vices and uncaring attitude toward mortals. Some religions even involved male and female

prostitutes in their celebrations.

This text does not suggest that Paul is addressing sexual impurity within the church, but he is well aware that these young believers are constantly confronted by the world where they have friendships and business dealings. Later, Gnosticism will teach that this physical life has nothing to do with the spiritual truth that transcends the world.

Paul voices a plain warning: “stay away from sexual immorality” (v. 3) ... “learn how to control your own body” (v. 4) ... “don’t be controlled by your sexual urges” (v. 5) ... “no one should mistreat or take advantage of their brother or sister in this issue” (v. 6) ... “whoever rejects these instructions isn’t rejecting human authority. They are rejecting God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you” (v. 8).

Given the moral laxity of our day I find Paul’s words very timely. When I cleared messages from my computer this morning I had seven or eight unsolicited sexually suggestive advertisements. The program selections on my cable service are often morally offensive. We can describe these influences as sinful, deviant and dirty, but the more accurate idea is that of destructive selfishness.

Paul offers an alternate approach to living: “You don’t need us to write about loving your brothers and sisters because God has already taught you to love each other” (v. 9). He celebrates that they show their love by their actions. They are even acting out God’s love beyond their own circle “throughout Macedonia” (v.10). Applied to us, holiness is all about how we live out the love and generosity of God in our relationships. “The Holy Spirit within you” (v. 8) and “God has already taught you how to love each other” (v. 9) returns our attention back to the fact that faith is a relationship that shapes every facet of our living.

In verses 11-12, Paul reminds us how we are to live in the real world. “Live quietly” suggests that our lifestyle will impress the world more than loud demands, judgmental words or treating others as if they are unlikely (unworthy) to experience God’s love. From my childhood I remember a preacher railing against “a woman who has committed

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adultery will not get into heaven!” I asked my mother if God is forgiving, or would only a few people get into heaven? Our words, attitudes, actions and everything about our living can impact others in a positive or negative way. Paul taught young Timothy to “live a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Timothy 2:2).

“*Mind your own business*” suggests we are not to be religious police handing out a summons to every person who breaks one of God’s laws. I admit to breaking this rule a few times! We are to be witnesses, sharing the hope of the God’s love and grace with a broken world. God can handle the judgment and punishment. We are to share God’s love out of our joy in Christ. Let’s work on our own shortcomings and share how Christ makes a difference when we face failure and obstacles.

“*Earn your own living*” probably focuses on how you manage your choices. I have known a few people who were so fascinated with “end times theology” that they were not interested in ministering to those in need or sharing Christ with the lost! They wanted to figure out the signs of Revelation and the identity of the beast. Some have interpreted these particular words from Paul as addressing the attitude of some Thessalonians who were so focused on the second coming that they were no longer even working and expected the church to take care of them until Christ’s return. Our concern should not be the date of Jesus’ return, but what we must do as long as there is time to proclaim the good news to our world.

Paul says if we follow these simple guidelines we will be “behaving properly toward outsiders” (v. 12). Every day is another opportunity to minister, to share Christ, to ask God’s Spirit to make us instruments of his love. This is holiness.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.