

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 4: Instructions for Christian Life

Paul has affirmed the depth of his affection for the believers in Thessalonica. He reminds them that he has expressed that affection by sending Timothy to visit them. And the affection has only been strengthened by the report that Timothy has brought of their faith and hope and love. With chapter four Paul moves to several sets of instructions. Formally the letter is now most clearly an example of *parenesis*, ethical and practical instruction appropriate for a teacher with students or an apostle with church members.

At the end of chapter three, Paul sets forth the assumptions on which the parenesis is based—the grounding of the lives of the Thessalonians in God, the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ; the bonds of mutual love among the Christians and between the Christians and Paul; and the promise that the Lord will come to appraise the holiness of the Thessalonians.

Chapter four begins with direct attention to the issue of holiness. We do not know for sure whether Paul here responds to direct information he has received from Timothy or whether he shares with the Thessalonians from his more general concerns for the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians, there is direct evidence that Paul is responding to information he has received from and about the congregation—some of the information contained in an oral report from Chloe's people and some of the information contained in a letter. While there is no such inescapable evidence here, the context of chapter four, immediately following the report of Timothy's visit to the Thessalonians, suggests that he knows whereof he speaks. The specific exhortations are related to known issues within the Thessalonian community. Of course, we have only Paul's response to what may be Timothy's report so it takes some imagination to try to indicate what

problems Paul addresses. (Reading Paul is a little like playing jeopardy; we get the answer and then must guess the question.) Yet it is clear that in this chapter there are three distinct subjects: sexual purity, communal cooperation, and comfort in the face of death.

Sexual purity: (4:1-8)

The section begins with a clever rhetorical strategy, familiar in moral exhortation in the first century and now. Rather than condemning the Thessalonians for their moral lapses, Paul credits them for their exemplary behavior and only suggests that they be a little more exemplary. He is somewhat like the pushy parent who responds to the B+ on the child's report card: "Well, that's really quite good." Implicit is the claim: "But I know you could do better."

In a similar parenetic vein Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his own teaching among them on the question of sexual morality. Then he ups the stakes by saying that he gave them these instructions "through the Lord Jesus" (v 2). It is possible that Paul has in mind some particular teaching of Jesus regarding sexual purity that he has passed on to the church. We have an instance of this kind of reminder in the teaching on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. It is also possible that Paul as a Christian leader under inspiration (a Christian "prophet") may believe that he has received a spiritual revelation on this question from the Risen Lord. What we can say undeniably is that Paul sees his whole ministry, including the ministry of moral instruction, as being a manifestation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To say that he is an apostle is to say that he brings a message from an authority greater than his own.

Paul makes much the same point at the end of our section (v 8) when he tells the Thessalonians that to ignore these instructions is not just to disrespect Paul but to reject God and the Holy Spirit God gives to guide Christ's people in all righteousness.

What is clear is that the sexual behavior Paul commends is an example of purity and holiness and that this behavior contrasts Christian believers with the larger Gentile world around them. The passage reminds us of the Holiness Code in Leviticus where Moses tells the people to be holy as God is holy, in part as a way of differentiating them from the unholy nations all around.

Perhaps Paul has particular popular sexual malpractices in mind; if so, he is appropriately reticent to name them. It is quite clear that he has a particular understanding of sexual fidelity to commend—and while we can be quite sure what kind of life he encourages, the exact nuances of the argument are not altogether clear.

The phrase that may have been entirely clear to the Thessalonians but is puzzling to us appears in v 4. Both the meaning of the verb (NRSV “to control”) and of the noun (NRSV “body”) are disputed. Start with the noun. The Greek word is *skeuos*, which most often means “vessel” as in “container” “a vessel of oil.” In the idiom Paul uses here it could refer either to a man’s own body, the vessel that contains his life or to a man’s own wife, as in our somewhat sexist phrase “the weaker vessel.” So, it is not clear whether the instruction about purity has to do with what a man does with his own body or with his own wife though the net result, not surprisingly, will be much the same.

Similarly, the verb *ptaomai* in most common usage means “to acquire” or “get for oneself.” However, it more broadly can mean “to possess”—hence the various translations for this verse:

“that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.”

(NRSV) (similar REB)

“that each one of you learn how to acquire his own wife in holiness and honor.”

(Malherbe, AB)

The translations suggest a response to two rather different issues. The first suggests that the issue may be inappropriate lust within marriage, sexual behavior where the husband does not show due respect for the wife. The second translation suggests that the issue is lust outside marriage, and that the proper response is for the libidinous male to find a wife. There are other passages in Paul that could reinforce either of these interpretations.

The interpretation is further complicated by the next verse (v 6) and the injunction that “no one exploit a brother in this matter.” (The NRSV’s more inclusive translation just further confuses the issue.) How does either of these behaviors “exploit a brother”?

What is clear is that the proper context for sexual expression is marriage. Marriage is a matter of mutual respect. In this as in all other matters Christians honor not only their own marital relationships but the whole community. Christians should not look like pagans. And there will be judgment for those who do not live up to this standard.

Communal cooperation (4:9-12)

The claim that right Christian behavior always involves attention to the whole community of faith becomes even clearer in this next section. There are several injunctions here.

The Thessalonian community are to love one another (v 9). That seems clear enough.

The Thessalonian Christians are to love Christians throughout Macedonia (v 10). That is a little less clear. Does “love” here imply some kind of inter-congregational cooperation, incipient Presbyterianism? Does it imply some kind of financial support? Does it imply sending missionaries to spread the Gospel throughout Macedonia? Does it imply continuing to set an

example for all the churches of Macedonia (as in 1:7)? Certainly, it includes holding up these other churches in regular prayer.

The Thessalonian Christians are to “aspire to live quietly and to mind your own affairs” (v 11). Perhaps this is a response to some problem that Timothy has reported. Perhaps it is just a general admonition that is bound to be appropriate in any Christian community.

Minding your own affairs may be closely related to “working with your own hands” in the last injunction of this section. It may mean not to rely on other Christians to maintain your economic and physical security. It is possible that some of the Thessalonians have taken Paul’s strong pleas for interdependence to suggest that it is more blessed to depend than to be depended upon. We simply do not know. We do know that Paul has already reminded the Thessalonians that he worked among them with his own hands and by implication they are called to follow his example. He of all people had the right to rely on the financial support of the church and he refused to do so.

Some have thought that these verses indicate that the Thessalonians Christians were slacking off in general. They connect this to the repeated claim of our letter that Christ will return soon and hypothesize that since the days were short it might seem advantageous just to back off such mundane activities as working with your hands.

There is no clear evidence of this connection between Jesus’ return and laziness in this passage, and we are reminded of the placard posted on a Yale office bulletin board. “Jesus is coming again. Look busy.”

Comfort in the face of death (4:13-18)

In interpreting this last section of our chapter, it helps to remember that throughout this chapter Paul is concerned with the edification of the community. He opposes sexual behavior which threatens unity. He opposes the kind of laziness or the kind of nosiness that destroys community, too.

Now his vision of community broadens. He is concerned not only for the community of the living Thessalonians, he is concerned for the community shared by the living and the dead. Again, just as Christians are supposed to practice their sexuality differently from the way pagans do, Christians are supposed to honor their dead differently from the way pagans honor their dead.

It is fairly clear what the situation is in Thessalonica. In the (not very long) time since Paul started the church, some of the members have died. Paul needs to explain more clearly his hope for the end of time to spare the Thessalonians from inappropriate grief and to assure the wellbeing of their community. Whether Paul responds here to specific information from Timothy we cannot be sure, but it seems the simplest explanation of the lengthy response to what seems a quite specific problem.

Some have suggested that Paul takes on the issue of the resurrection of dead believers here because this is a relatively new problem for him as well. Clearly during the early part of his ministry, he believed that Jesus would return during his lifetime. Perhaps he left the Thessalonians with exactly the same impression, and neither he nor they had much pondered the issue of those who died “in Christ.” (Falling sleep was a euphemism for dying, then and now; its use probably does not imply any particular understanding of the state of the dead.)

While it is dramatically appealing to think of Paul struggling with the death of believers here for the first time, this seems a little late in his ministry for him to be surprised by death (see our suggested chronology in the introduction). And while it is possible that he had preached

Jesus' coming to the Thessalonians without any reference to the general resurrection, it seems more likely considering Paul's Pharisaic background and considering what he would later write in 1 Corinthians 15 that the idea of general resurrection was not brand new but that the fact of death left some problems for the Thessalonians.

The most obvious problem from the way Paul shapes his solution is the problem of the order of eschatological events. The anxiety of the Thessalonians seems to be that when Christ returns the dead will miss out. They will miss out on the big event and they might miss out on the celebration to follow. Paul's comforting word, then, is that the living will not precede the dead in greeting the coming Christ (v 15); but quite the contrary, the dead will be at the front of the welcoming party (v 16).

Abraham Malherbe suggests a slight variation on this theme. If, as Paul has told them, the Thessalonians are aware of their unity in Christ, their hope for the end was a hope that they as a community would be caught up into Christ's reign. How disappointing that they might have only most of the community present. Salvation was not, after all, just about this Christian or that. It was about the community.

In any case the overall promise is clear. Christ will return with the kind of supporting players and special effects predicted by much apocalyptic literature. Neither the dead nor the living will be left out of that glorious consummation.

We are left to wonder whether Jesus, in mid-air (v 17), has come to bring the faithful to heaven with him or has come to rule over the faithful on earth. Perhaps the purpose of this parousia, this coming, is not for him to welcome the believers but for them to welcome him. There is after all that old prayer that Paul may know: "Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Suggested Reading

Lindsey Trozzo, "Thessalonian Women: The Key to the 4:4 Conundrum," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39 (2012) 39–52.

Richard S. Ascough, "A Question of Death: Paul's Community Building Language in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004) 509–30.

Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, "1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 in Rabbinic Perspective," *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012) 199–212.

Questions for Discussion

1. While we are not certain precisely what issues Paul is addressing when he speaks of sexual purity, it is quite clear that he commends sexual intercourse within the context of marriage. In our society, for Christians and non-Christians alike it seems that sexual intimacy does not depend on the marriage vows. Are there ways that we can be honest about the different morals of our society and yet learn from Paul's deep concern for marriage?
2. How do you understand the relationship between faithfulness to God and the gift and responsibility of labor? How does this affect our vision of a church or a community that can be both loving and rigorous?
3. Paul clearly is deeply concerned with the interdependence within congregations and probably among congregations as well. In your own church, how does your community move beyond polite relations with other Christians and other churches to a deeper and more strenuous commitment?

4. Paul is deeply concerned not only with the claim that Christ will come again but with some of the details of that scenario. It is hard in a world that has waited for that return for two millennia to be as certain as Paul about what God's triumph in Jesus Christ might look like. Do these details matter? What can you affirm about the Christian hope beyond death?