

Sermon Series – Resource map for Christians



1 Thessalonians Chapter 4 – Respectful Relationships

On 21 November 2004 Michael Long, perhaps the most recognisable Aboriginal figure in Australian sport, embarked on an historic trek. He walked from his home in the suburbs of Melbourne all the way to Parliament House in Canberra – more than 650 kilometres away.

After returning home from yet another funeral for a young aboriginal, Michael decided that something needed to be done about the plight of his people. He took it upon himself to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues back on the **national agenda** and resolved to meet with Prime Minister of the day to discuss his concerns... even if he had to **walk all the way** to Canberra to do it.

Michael was joined on the road by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters from all over Australia. Some walked in support for an hour, some for a day and some took the journey all the way to Canberra. As the walkers passed through the Victorian countryside, local people came out to meet them, offering **encouragement, support and assistance**.

“The long walk” is a title the Apostle Paul would have been happy to use to describe the Christian life. Some translators even adopted this image to paraphrase his words to the first followers of Jesus Christ in Macedonia in the 1st Century CE. Paul begins the second half of his Letter to the Thessalonians saying...

“Finally, then, believers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you **ought to walk** and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.” (1 Thes. 4:1 ESV)

Like those locals coming out on the street to encourage and support Michael Long and co, Paul's letter urged on the believers at Thessalonica long ago to keep on walking (or living) in the ways of God.



If in the first half of this letter Paul urged the believers to “**stand firm**” upon the hope in Christ they learned of in his Gospel, then the second half is an encouragement to keep on “**walking**”. Confused?

- **Standing firm** being an image of the confidence to hold on by faith to the gracious promises of God given to us in Jesus Christ; and,
- **To walk**, meaning stepping forward, trusting God is with you, and being and being transformed day by day through grace to grow in **faith, hope and love**.

Paul pictured his own life as a believer as a journey on the road (e.g. Phil 3:13-15) to a glorious destination and prize. He knew the need for **encouragement, support and guidance along the way**.

Paul had **three groups** in mind to encourage and support in the Church at Thessalonica in this second half of the letter (see 5:14¹):

1. Some in the church were **idlers** - believing that Christ would return imminently they neglected the need to work and disrupted the harmony of the congregation (4:9-12; 5:12, 13);
2. Some were **faint-hearted** - anxious about the status of loved ones who had recently died and were believers² (4:13-18) and for themselves (5:1-11); and then there...
3. Some who were **weak** in self-control and Paul feared they might be easily tempted back into their previous lifestyles (4:3-8).

¹ we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.

² the only distinctly new teaching in the Epistle

That **third** group is addressed first here in chapter 4.

He urges the many Gentile³ converts in the congregation at Thessalonica to **continue in the way of life (to walk)** that they had taught...

“For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification...” (1 Thes. 4:2,3)

“**Sanctification**” is from the word group used of the temple and its fittings, furnishings and fineries and can mean “to be set apart for God.”

It is also used, as here, to describe the **journey of progressive transformation** promised to believers through the work of The Holy Spirit to bring them to eventual **completeness** or “**holiness**”⁴. For example, Paul tells the Philippians...

“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:6)

Paul goes on in verses 3-5 to identify the **greatest threat** to the sanctification of the Thessalonians?

“...your sanctification:

- that you abstain from⁵ **sexual immorality**⁶;
- that each one of you knows how to **control your own body**⁷ in holiness and honour, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;
- that no one wrongs or **exploits** a brother or sister in this matter

Two things to note before we unpack this perceived threat to their growth in faith, hope and love...

³ The term is used by English translators for the Hebrew גוי (goy) and נכרי (nokhri) in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek word ἔθνη (éthnē) in the New Testament referring to non-Jews, and can mean “of the nations”.

⁴ “Holy” defines the character of God, the Holy One of Israel. The only holiness you and I possess as believers is the holiness of God in Christ. “Christ is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:28-30). “Ye are complete in Him” (Colossians 2:10). Our holiness is in Christ: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

⁵ Paul’s word “avoid” means “keep completely separate from.”

⁶ Greek word *porneia*, sometimes translated as “fornication” or “prostitution” was like an umbrella word for all sorts of practices considered as unholy compared to the ethics of Jewish and Christian communities of the time. The original word means “to sell” and refers to slaves bought and sold for cultic prostitution e.g. in the Temples of Corinth farmers were visiting the temple priestesses who represented the fertility Gods. By having sex with such prostitutes they believed their fields would be more fertile.

⁷ This particular clause has been interpreted in several ways e.g. The King James has “possess his vessel”; the Weymouth New Testament has “procure a wife”; Young’s Literal Translation has “know his own vessel”; the Contemporary English Version has “respect and honor your wife; the Good News Translation has “know how to live with your wife”; and the NIV has “control your own body. NIV serves the context best.

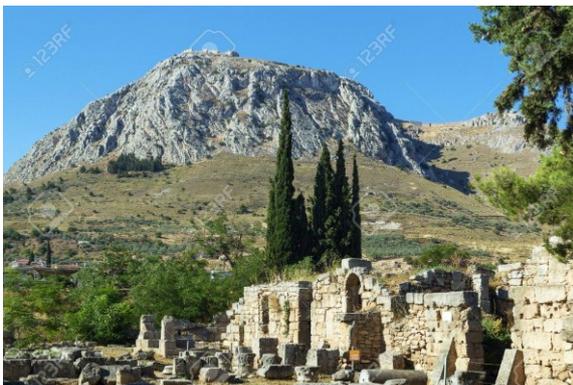
1. Firstly, Paul says they **are already “walking” well** (see vv. 1, 10). There isn’t an existing pastoral problem like at Corinth (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5),
2. Secondly, this is no lightweight threat – **it matters to God** (see vv. 7-8, 11-12).

It’s important that we take **all three dot points** in verses 3-5 set out above together to understand the **antithesis to walking** in the ways of the Lord in Paul’s view – what they should avoid completely (“abstain from”).

Sexual immorality⁸ is the part of the text many well-intentioned preachers like to dwell on, and they are quick to teach **what people should abstain from today**, without regard for the complexities of the 1st century context.

But when **we take all the words of verses 3-5 together**, as Paul intended, we see that the call to abstain is to acts that commonly involved **exploitation of others for self-gratification..**

The **common lifestyle of Roman citizens** and many “Freemen” in Paul’s day in regard to gratuitous sex for pleasure is well-documented in history books. Every form of **sexual vice** was widespread in cities steeped in Hellenistic culture such as Thessalonica and Corinth. Sex procured by trade or by power over the weak or lowly was common and often integrated with one’s status and advancement politically, commercially, and spiritually.



When I visited the 1st century ruins of Corinth in Greece a few years back it was clear to all how the **backdrop to city life** – the foreboding Acro-Corinth mountain – was a symbol of one major aspect of life for the free and powerful

⁸ Could include a range of sexual behaviours such as any sex acts outside of marriage, including adultery, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, bestiality. Often used in a more restricted sense (fornication, not adultery, as in Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21), and other times it includes adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). It should be noted though that the essence of *porneia* is to sell, so there is a transaction of trade and power assumed with each.

in those ancient times. The small mountain once had glistening white marble temples atop where citizens would regularly visit for rituals combining worship of the emperor and a myriad of “gods” with prostitution. **Life in Macedonia** did not differ greatly, as in many cities across the Roman Empire.

Paul was aware that many Gentiles who were free regularly took part in rituals for self-gratification and advancement at the expense of the weak.

Exploitation of women, children, slaves and foreigners was common, especially through **trade for sex** (the original meaning of the Koine Greek *porneia* which lies behind the translation “sexual immorality”). Paul would have had in mind too to warn against the loose regard for the marriage bond in Gentile circles. Literature from the time includes the boasting of citizens of their adultery: parading their extra-marital sexual exploits on the one hand and acknowledging wives and families on the other without any sense of shame.

No wonder the **first council of apostles who met at Jerusalem** to address the spread of conversions taking place among non-Jews (Acts 15) insisted that Gentile believers be instructed not to continue in “sexual immorality”. Jewish sexual ethics and monotheistic avoidance of the idolatrous rituals made them stand out as distinctive in ancient Roman cities, often forcing them to gather at the margins of society. Christians from Jewish backgrounds in the 1st century were initially shocked and perplexed to think that Gentiles might be even acceptable to God (eg Acts 15:12). Many Christians wondered what impact the inclusion of Gentiles with their unholy alliances in daily life might have on Christian fellowship (eg Acts 15:5). It was not a matter of merely fearing difference in sexual ethics, but the enmeshed nature of religion, politics and sex in Gentile behaviour that presented a real threat to holy living for anyone with a Hebrew mindset (eg 1 Thes. 1:9; Eph. 2:11-13).

It was **deeply challenging** to the apostles at Jerusalem to think that any Gentiles might receive the Holy Spirit and live to God’s glory (Acts 15:12); yet, it was an **amazement** and a matter of praise to God for Paul (eg Acts 15:3-4; Col. 1:27) who himself knew of unworthiness despite being a “righteous” Jew but for grace (eg. Phil. 3:8-9). Paul was blown away to see Roman citizens of his day accept the gospels and leave behind their previous exploitative lifestyles and begin to engage in **respectful relationships** promoting peace and love.⁹ No wonder he thought the Gospel powerful (eg. Rom. 1:16).

⁹ in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul says to the Gentile male converts, you were once living like this, but you were “washed”, “sanctified”, “justified” by Jesus and the Spirit.

Paul commended the Thessalonian Church for **standing firm** on the truth of God's grace to them in Jesus and for walking in the ways of Christ, despite persecution and temptations in abundance. He also sought to encourage them to **keep walking**; to press on in the journey, to **grow in faith hope and love more and more**. He also exhorted them **not to slip back** into the ways of their former lives often characterised by licentious, idolatrous exploitation of others.

What can we say about the impact of Paul's encouragement to keep walking in the way of the Lord today? How does this relate to our world?

1. Firstly, **it's not right** to suggest that our lives or those of our neighbours today are **just like Thessalonians** of Paul's Hellenistic world. With regard to religion, sex, and power we must be careful not to take a "this is that" approach with Paul's words and warnings. It can be plain abuse of the Scriptures. What Paul calls to be abstained from must be navigated carefully in our context and many modern sermons ignore the factor of exploitation referred to and present in the original setting.
2. Secondly, Paul is personally convinced of the **reversal of power** the Gospel engenders in Christians due to the humble, servant-like and faithful life and work of Jesus. He sees power over others for personal gain and self-gratification as completely unfit for the people of God and disreputable to the Gospel. The flip side of Paul's warnings is to see **Paul's goal for respectful, peace loving relationships** in the church as a godly sign of the gospel at work. This text has more to say to call out **those today who abuse or exploit others for personal gratification** and to those who break faithful commitments for reasons of personal gain and self-gratification while abandoning those they vowed to care for – especially speaking to Christians. We might best align our vision for Holy living now as a path for "walking" that **consciously avoids exploitation** and seeks the freedom and peace of others. Paul's words, perhaps, has less to say about modern situations of sex between consenting adults - those seeking meaning and intimacy - than some preachers have made us think in the past.
3. Lastly, then, let each of us take time to **reflect on any areas of life** in which we might be **taking advantage of others** for personal gain and self-satisfaction or advancement – especially those who are marginalised or disempowered. We too might ask, **what threatens our own walking** in a way that pleases God today.

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1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Finally, brothers and sisters,^[a] we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you knows how to control your own body^[b] in holiness and honour, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrongs or exploits a brother or sister^[c] in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹Now concerning love¹⁰ of the brothers and sisters,^[d] you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters^[e] throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved,^[f] to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one.

¹⁰ "Love" is the subject – here it's love like an ideal family (*adelphoi*, meaning literally from the same womb and translated "brothers" or "siblings"). A believer must have "love" for the brothers and sisters. Paul recognizes that they have already been taught by God how to "love each other," this being through God's example in sending Christ (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 5:1-2), through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22; Romans 5:5), and through Jesus' teaching (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17), which the apostles echoed in their instruction (Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:2; 1 Peter 1:22). Indeed, the Thessalonians have already learned lessons of love, as demonstrated by their love for all the churches in Macedonia (such as at Philippi and Berea; 4:10). This love is something they have demonstrated (1 Thessalonians 1:35), possibly through hospitality (Romans 16:1-26) or acting as benefactors by helping those in need (2 Corinthians 8:1-57, 8-11, 24). As in 4:18, he urges them to excel in what they are already doing. Notice that after Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit, love is the first thing that he mentions. Christianity sprang up in a land and culture where clan ties were strong and society was more corporate than individualistic. But Greco-Roman culture pushed the liberty afforded to some individuals to licentiousness; hence, Paul's constant emphasis on love distinctive to Christians.