

A life pleasing to God

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 12th November 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

(part of series on 1 Thessalonians, but not in the lectionary)

Introduction: Remembering

November is a season for remembering. The 1st of November is the feast of All Saints, which we celebrated last Sunday. The 2nd of November is All Souls' Day, which we commemorated on the previous Sunday with our Memorial Service, when many people came to remember loved ones who have died. The 5th of November, of course, is the anniversary of the Gunpowder plot in 1605, when Guy Fawkes and his companions tried to overthrow the government by violent means. And today is Remembrance Sunday, when we remember those who have given their lives trying to protect others from the violence of war.

Later this morning, at Acts of Remembrance in Sandhurst and around the world, we will spend time reflecting on the devastating effects of war on individuals, families and nations. We will all be mindful of ongoing conflicts in the world, particularly in Israel and Gaza, in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Sudan. We grieve at the senseless loss of life and destruction of property and livelihoods that is caused by human selfishness, greed, prejudice and anger, and by our apparent inability as a human race to live together in peace.

A better way

There has to be a better way – and of course, there is: the way of God’s Kingdom, the way of living that reflects God’s image in us, and in which human folly and self-centredness is replaced by obedience to God’s commandments and openness to God’s work of forgiveness, healing and restoration.

So my fundamental question this morning to all of us, including myself is, are we part of the problem, or part of the solution? Are we open to living our lives God’s way – not just when it suits us, or in certain areas of our lives only, but in all that we think, say or do? What would it mean for us to be *holy*? We can probably all agree that the world would be a much happier, kinder place if everyone lived the way God wants us to. But the really challenging question is, are we prepared to live that way? Could it really be true that if we did, not only would we be happier, but we would actually be contributing to making the world a happier place also?

1 Thessalonians - recap

Over the last few weeks we have been exploring Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. You will remember that Paul, Silas and Timothy faced a lot of opposition when they preached the gospel in Thessalonica, and had to depart in a hurry, leaving behind a group of new Christians who were young in the faith and were facing the same opposition and mistrust that the apostles had experienced. Paul was anxious that they might give up their faith under pressure, but when Timothy caught up with Paul months later it appeared that the church had not only hung on to their

faith, but were sharing it and getting a reputation for their love and faithfulness in the surrounding region.

What about us? When we're under pressure, do we turn to God, trust him and respond to the situation with faith and love? What would my faith look like if I was living in a front-line city in Ukraine – or sheltering beside a hospital in Gaza?

Fortunately, none of us are living in those situations. We face different challenges, which are often much more subtle. When you're in a war zone, it's not difficult to work out which side you are on. But when you're living in a peaceful country like ours, it's all too easy to just go with the flow and forget what being a Christian means in practice. And yet through Jesus God has reached into our lives and called us to be part of his Kingdom. We've received forgiveness of all our sins – past, present and future – been brought into a personal relationship with our Creator, made citizens of heaven and been called to live as disciples of Jesus in this world. What God has done for us is summed up in the words of this hymn:

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
to his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who like me his praise should sing?¹

A life pleasing to God

What God has done for us is our motivation to live lives that are pleasing to God, obeying his commandments in every

¹ *Praise, my soul, the King of heaven*, by H.F. Lyte (1793-1847), based on Psalm 103

area of life. But sometimes we need little reminders of what that means in practice. Here in chapter 4 of his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes:

Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.²

There's one particular area of life that he feels he needs to draw attention to:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you knows how to control your own body 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...³

The word translated “fornication” here is the Greek *porneia*, meaning sexual immorality of any kind. In Paul's Jewish culture, that meant sex outside of marriage. You will notice that the word is incorporated in our word *pornography*.

In these verses, Paul contrasts the Christian approach to sexual desire with that of the pagan world around him, where attitudes to sex were pretty similar to those we find in our secular Western culture today. There is, however, one respect in which we could say that our culture is slightly more moral than that of the 1st Century Roman Empire: we put much more emphasis on *consent*. There isn't time today to explore Western sexual mores, but I will just say that

² 1 Thessalonians 4:1 NRSV

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6a NRSV

“consent” is not as straightforward as legislators would like it to be. Saying “yes” is giving consent, but what if you do it out of a sense of obligation? Not a straightforward thing at all!

I think Paul is making two key points here. The first is that we need to be in control of our sexual desires, not let them control us. The second, and most important, is that living a life that pleases God includes all aspects of our lives, and our sexuality is part of that. As Paul goes on in verse 7,

For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.

As Christians, we are holy, that is, set apart for God, because God has called us. We’re holy, not because we are particularly good in our own right, but because we are washed clean from our sins through the death of Jesus. And now as we seek to live lives that please God, the Holy Spirit within us gradually makes us more like Jesus, as we overcome each temptation with his help, and as we do each act of kindness, or show generosity and unselfishness in small and bigger ways day by day. And that’s what Paul means by *sanctification*⁴.

Lord of our lives

Our sexuality is just one area which we need to give over to God and decide that we are going to please him in it. God wants to be Lord of every other area of life too. In verses 9-12 Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians for their love for each other and for other Christians throughout their

⁴ Verse 3

region. How does *our* corporate life as a church match up? Are *we* known for our love?

Last week we heard a presentation about the suffering church throughout the world. How often do we remember our brothers and sisters who are suffering or even persecuted in other countries? Through our support as a church for Barnabas Aid⁵ we are expressing our love and concern, but please remember to pray for their work and consider whether you would also like to make a personal donation.

In the beginning of this sermon, I commented that wars are caused by human selfishness, greed, prejudice and anger. I should add to that “a desire to exercise power over others”. We may not be guilty of starting wars, but we are all prone to the same sins which cause violence and war. We can make a difference for good or ill in every area of our lives - the way we behave in our families or in our workplaces, our decisions about ethical shopping, how we treat the people who serve us in a shop, on the bus, etc. In today’s reading Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians – and us – that our sexual desires and behaviour are also a part of our lives that we need to surrender to God, so that here also we may express what it means to be holy – “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven”.

This area may or may not be an issue for you, but perhaps there is another area of your life that needs to be surrendered to God. It could be a relationship that needs to be put right, a hurt that you need to forgive. It could be your

⁵ <https://www.barnabasaid.org/gb/>

attitude to your money and possessions, a need to be set free from a spirit of ingratitude and to discover the joy of generosity. You and the Holy Spirit know which areas of your life are not yet fully surrendered to God. And as I speak to you, I also need to listen to what the Spirit might want to change in my life.

Becoming part of the solution

As we remember today those who have died or suffered in war, and how much of a mess the world is in, let me ask this question again of you and of myself: are we part of the problem, or part of the solution? As we thank God for all that he has done for us, and recognise God's call on our lives, let's resolve to please him in everything we think, say and do. And may his Spirit work in our hearts, minds and actions to make us more like the one who came to bring peace to the world, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.