



SILVER STREET MISSION

Regular Sermon 2006

Living Rightly

I Thess 4: 1 – 12

Rev. Peter R Green, Sunday 05 Feb, 2006

CHRISTIANS are called to think rightly, to believe rightly, and, above all, to live rightly. The Bible is not a self-help handbook, but it contains a vast supply of information on living in society.

Our world is so focussed on self that we all risk losing sight of society.

So we seek a religion to make us feel good about ourselves. We look for a religion to relieve our fears and sorrows. We seek a religion to give us confidence for today and comfort for tomorrow.

But a religion which makes demands — who wants that?

Isn't it great to be part of an in-group? Isn't it wonderful to have special knowledge of God? Don't we feel blessed to follow the very best theologians? But who wants a lifestyle which confronts and challenges our friends?

Yet Paul moves straight from discussing faith and love to talking about living as Christians. There must be an important reason.

That important reason is that faith and love which don't result in a changed life are not Christian faith and love at all.

Paul speaks to the Thessalonians about three issues, which he sums up as, "Living to Please God."

These three issues are

- Sexual purity
- Brotherly love
- Quiet simplicity

Sexual Purity

The Bible is not obsessed with sexual morality. But it does demand separation from the world and its values..

There is so much in the Bible about justice, about righteousness, about fair trading, about fair play in the workplace.

The Bible says, "Be like the God of justice!" It teaches us to keep covenant, as lovers of the God who loves.

But the early Christians lived in a world without sexual standards. Just as the Nazirites of the Old Testament had to be separate from their own society — in society, but not of it — Christians had to stand against that world,

Apuleius was a pagan writer around the same time as Paul. He talks about female criminals forced into sex with animals as entertainment for the crowds, about homosexual rape as a punishment, about adultery everywhere, about commonplace sexual slavery.

History tells of paedophilia at the top of society. Fornication was rife. This was the lifestyle. Everyone knew it.

Christian leaders struggled to help new converts with sexual issues. Sometimes it seemed easier even for leaders to go with the crowd than to stand firm.

If you understand the society that early Christians lived in, you can understand the emphasis on sexual purity.

Is our world so different?

A young woman I met in a Marrickville shop phoned me one night. She was lonely. Could I pop in? She wasn't offering coffee and biscuits — I asked her. She was shocked that I didn't accept! She didn't even know that a Christian would probably refuse an offer of casual sex.

Imagine what it would have meant to my family, to you, to me as part of this community, if I had accepted! People imagine that what they do has no consequences, as long as no one gets hurt. But who says no one gets hurt?

Paul writes,

1TH 4:3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

People *do* take advantage of each other, and call it love.

A friend went through the pain of breaking up last year. It's an on-going issue. She had committed herself financially to the relationship, and her partner took advantage of it. Unravelling that has taken a long time. We used to say, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." So many people live together in haste and repent repeatedly.

Did you have a sexual relationship before marriage? Your risk of a marriage break up is roughly three times greater than if you didn't. Don't say that marriage doesn't work. Marriage works — but never as an afterthought.

Don't get trapped in a sexual relationship. Don't feel you have committed yourself and can't back out, no matter how much you need to. That happens far too often!

The best thing is, don't start.

But if you have started on the wrong footing, you *can* repent. You *can* start over again. You *can* recognise that you started out wrong.

We must be sanctified; and sexual holiness is a significant part of that. If we want to live to please God, we will need to review our sexual behaviour and attitudes very carefully, and not follow the world's patterns. It's one of the hardest things we will struggle with. Paul knew that Christians had to be separate from their world; and separation in the area of sexual behaviour stood in such stark contrast to the way of their world, that it marked the Christians out from just about everyone around them.

God loves sex — he made it. At the right time and place with the right person, it's pretty good. But Jesus shows us how to live a life of sexual self-control. He lived in a world where celibacy was considered quite odd. He could have openly married Mary Magdalene, and taken away Dan Brown's fortune in one blow. But he didn't. He put pleasing God first.

Let's live to please God, too!

Brotherly love

A big factor in living to please God is to live in brotherly love. If we want to love God, we need to love the Christian family, the people of God whom we are placed among.

John writes,

1JN 4:19 We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Paul tells us,

1TH 4:9 Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

Brotherly love is an English translation of the Greek *philia*. In Classical Greek it might also refer to the love brother soldiers might have for each other. Because it was generally men who

fought, who explored, who worked together in a business, it was generally translated as brotherly love, but it really covers both men and women.

Greek had a number of terms for love. There is *eros* — sexual love; there is *philia* — brotherly love; there is *storgi* — maternal love and there is *agapi* — God's kind of love.

In a way, *philia*, *eros* and *storgi* all point towards *agapi*. And the Bible even sometimes uses them almost interchangeably. Everything in the Bible points beyond itself to God and his kind of love.

As a church, we are learning to love one another, but we always have further to go. If we love each other, we listen to each other. Sometimes some of our people feel just so overloaded that they feel like giving up. Are we aware of them and their needs? Sometimes some of our people are torn between being involved here and being involved with family or friends elsewhere. Does our love pick up on their needs?

If we want to live to please God, our brotherly love must grow.

As the Psalmist says,

How good and pleasant it is, when brothers live together in unity (Psalm 133)

One reason why Paul and John both emphasise brotherly love is that sometimes we love the outsiders, but don't keep loving them when they become insiders.

Love starts in the middle and works outwards.

Jesus gathered a group around himself, and he loved them to the end. He showed how true brotherly love works in a community.

Do we want to live to please God? Then, let's grow out brotherly love!

Quiet simplicity

Finally, the Bible calls on us to live in quiet simplicity.

It may seem strange to be told this.

Yet how often do we fail to do it? I know of a couple who attend a Pentecostal church where they teach that faith brings wealth.

They are scared stiff of looking poor, so they are living beyond their means.

That's really sad, and it's not Biblical.

It's the chap who was sick on and off for months. He had really bad chest infections, head colds, — everything.

Whenever anyone said, "You sound sick, Bernd!" he would say, "No, I'm not! God has healed me."

Everyone laughed and said he was mad.

In the end, I took him aside and talked to him about what he was saying and doing.

He wasn't giving a testimony: he was bringing God into ridicule.

God desires truth in the inner being, as we read in Psalm 51. The truth was that he was sick. The truth also was that he was trusting God to change the situation. I encouraged him to speak the truth rather than deny the truth.

In the same way that couple who live beyond their means deny the truth, and encourage others to deny the truth.

To live in quiet simplicity pleases God, because it means living with the truth of who we are and what we have.

Paul advises the Thessalonians to work with their hands, to avoid depending on others, and to gain favour with their society through the kind of life they live.

In Paul's day, there were few jobs for brain workers. The vast bulk of people were labourers or soldiers. Tax collectors, money lenders and even merchants were often petty criminals. It was better to dig ditches, than look like a crime boss.

People who work for a living don't need to rely on others. They can stand on their own feet and be proud.

We all need support sometimes. That's not Paul's point. The early church provided for its sick, for its elderly, for widows and orphans. James says that that is what true religion is.

Paul is talking about people who exploit others. I know a woman who can't manage her own affairs, who is constantly in debt even though she is working, and who goes around her fellow workers, cadging money from them. That is not Christian behaviour.

God isn't against Social Security. A society which does not care for those who can't care for themselves is a sick society.

The giant US supermarket chain, Walmart, is a perfect example of the effect of a sick society. It pays its employees so little that most of them qualify for Government income support.

Walmart makes profits by taking Government subsidies. Why should the US's biggest retailer get welfare from the Government so that it can make obscenely huge profits?

The biggest evils in our society are the rich, competent people who demand support from others, the multi-millionaires who use their position to pay a couple of cents in the dollar in tax and whinge about tax being too high.

But we have to make sure that we don't start doing the same.

The world sees, and is disgusted, when Christians exploit one another or their world.

The world may do those things, but the world is also almost sadly pleading, "You Christians, why don't you come out from among us and be separate? Why don't you live in quietness and simplicity and show us how it is done?"

They say that the Quakers intended to do good but, instead, they did well. It's a risk. But the fact is that the Quakers, as a group, *did* do well. People hated their theology, but they loved doing business with Quakers, because they lived quiet, simple lives. Their yes was yes, and their no was no. They could be trusted to do a good job.

Didn't Jesus tell a would-be disciple that foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but he himself didn't even have a support for his head. He demonstrated quietly simple living. He lived it out, and he pleased God.

Living in quiet simplicity pleases both God and man.

Conclusions

Being a Christian is always more than merely feeling good, or knowing that God is with you. It is more than experiencing blessings and healings. It is more than being part of an accepting group of people. It involves learning purity, it involves the choice of love, and it involves living in quiet simplicity.

Nearly all people are sexual beings, We are built for procreation. But a society structured around the free expression of sexuality is a greatly unbalanced society.

When we have our sexuality under control, it makes for safe communities.

I can think of some Christians who have reputations for caring for each other like family. They demonstrate philia, brotherly love, sisterly love, for each other. That's enviable — that's something we all need to copy!

And there are many, many believers who live humble, quiet and simple lives, and the world sees something really good in them.

It's in a relationship with Jesus our Lord that these things become easier for us to live by. We like to remember his death for us, and his resurrection power — and so we must. It is basic and vital. But never forget that he is also our model, the one who demonstrated, in every aspect of life, what it means to live to please God.

Let's choose to follow him.

AMEN

If there is an issue of purity, of love, of simple living that you want to discuss, why not see me after the service? Our God is gracious and merciful when we come in Jesus' name!