

“Passion & Purity in Thessalonica”

By: Keith Keyser

In an unholy world the Christian gospel stands out for the dramatic change it makes in the lives of its adherents. Like the contemporary world, ancient Thessalonica was a depraved sink of iniquity, but the liberating glad tidings of Christ effected a great change in the lives of the first believers when it came there. Their experience, coupled with the testimonies of many other ancient and modern Christians, shows that the gospel is indeed “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). What is more, their conversion demonstrates the purity that stems from receiving the new life that the Lord gives to those who receive Him.

Situated along a major east-west route called the Via Egnatia, the seaport of Thessalonica had seen its share of peripatetic philosophers and clerics. There were many belief options in the city – none of them offering any certainty or transformation of life. Idolatry was pervasive in every part of the community with a plethora of temples to various deities, including Dionysius, Zeus, Artemis, and many other false gods. The veneration of these idols encouraged immorality and had no power to liberate the people from their lusts. As one commentator points out: “...a number of cults promoted a lifestyle that would have been viewed as immoral from a Christian perspective.”¹ For example the adoration of Aphrodite entailed sexual immorality, and drunkenness was central to the worship of Dionysius. Just like today, there was much money to be made in selling spiritual lies to beguiled souls. That many of the Thessalonian believers had been won to Christ from this background is evidenced by the statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: “...ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”.

The Purity of the Message & Its Messengers

The motivation and methodology of the Christian missionaries set them apart from the religious peddlers of competing truth claims. Their arrival in Thessalonica followed intense persecution in Philippi, yet these intrepid preachers did not soft peddle the message. Instead, they fearlessly proclaimed the truth to whoever would listen. As Paul describes his preaching: “For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile” (1 Thes. 2:3). In other words, the content of their proclamation was not false – it was a historically accurate account of the truth as revealed by the Lord Jesus. Nor did their preaching lead to impurity. Lastly, they were men of character, not deluded devotees of falsehood.

Preaching the gospel was hardly a lucrative or safe career. In fact, Paul affirms that no ulterior motives under girded their gospel. Unlike the pagan philosophers, they did not place monetary demands on the new converts; furthermore, they actually labored in tent-making to supply their own needs (v.9). Moreover, they were parental in their actions towards the new believers. Their approach was gentle, like a nursing mother with a small infant (v.7). Sagacity marked their exhortation, like a loving father advising his precious children (v.11). Their behavior was an exemplary instance of the love of Christ in action, characterized by purity. As another has written: “...Such a picture...warns all of the

followers of Christ against the temptation of avarice and ambition and inspires them to emulate the courage, the purity, the tenderness, the self-sacrifice, and the fidelity which the apostle claimed and which all who knew him could testify he had embodied in his life.”²

Purity is God’s Will for the Believer

Oftentimes believers ponder what the will of God for their lives might be. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 makes it clear that sanctification is one aspect of His will. Just as the gospel is pure, so it calls its recipients to purity of life and thought. It gives them the power to overcome sin and live for God. The epistle has several references to holiness, but in chapter four the spotlight is specifically turned on the sin of sexual immorality. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, sexual mores were libertine. All sorts of perversions were commonplace, and indiscriminate promiscuity between a man and a woman was regarded as natural. To not indulge one’s physical impulses was considered abnormal. As mentioned before, in Thessalonica the worship of many of the gods and goddesses involved ritual prostitution and abandoning oneself to the basest desires of the heart.

Of course, modern attitudes toward the use and abuse of the body are similar to the ancient views that Paul faced. Many people think nothing of sex outside of marriage. Pop culture glamorizes adultery and fornication in song, literature, and film. Modesty and chastity are viewed as hopelessly antiquated ideals, only followed by zealots and prudes. The restriction of sexual activity to marriage is considered unhealthy and strange.

In contrast to the prevailing mindset of both the ancient and modern worlds, Paul points out that the proper use of one’s body is determined by the believer’s relationship to God and His will (1 Thes. 4:1-6). The Lord Jesus said that the one who loves Him would keep His commandments (Jn. 14:15). Purity characterizes all of the Lord’s actions. His purpose in salvation is “...that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). In a parallel passage, Christians are told that their bodies are “members of Christ” and “bought with a price”, as well as being described as temples for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:13-20). In light of the great redemption that purchased them – in addition to their current standing in Christ – believers cannot use their bodies for illicit sexual pleasure. Christians are to use their bodies to please the Lord.

Purity is to characterize our relations with each other

Some scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians 4:4 is referring to the wives of the brothers when it uses the word “vessel” (especially when compared with 1 Pet. 3:7.) This is not certain, for the New Testament uses that word in a variety of senses, including one’s body (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:20-21). It is evident, however, that a Christian should not sin against his brother in the Lord by committing adultery or any other type of defraudation. Verse 6 makes this clear, saying: “That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified”.

Purity must especially be the prevailing moral atmosphere within the Church of God, lived and breathed by those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus. It must characterize their thoughts, words, and deeds; moreover, it should mark them out from the defiled world around them. Let each reader search within, and ask: Lord is my heart pure before you? Do I cherish any idols before You? Is some sin clouding my vision and communion with Christ? If so, we must repent, and set our affections on things above, asking the Lord to cleanse us from the defilement that surrounds us and give us a fresh appreciation of Christ (1 Jn. 1:9-2:2; Col. 3:1-10). Purity flows from knowing Christ, and allowing His Holy Spirit to produce His fruit within us. As believers walk with the Lord, His purity will transform them into His own morally beautiful image (1 Jn. 3:1-3).

¹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p.35.

² Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1935), p.41.