

Sermon on **1 Thessalonians 4:1-12** for 6th Sunday after Epiphany
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

Grandma Boldt used to sell her cars to her grandkids at a generous price rather than trade them in to the dealer. I got the last one. She didn't upgrade her car this time. Grandma got upgraded to heaven. I respect my Grandma for a lot of things, not just the 2003 Grand Am she took great care of. Grandpa died in 1984. Grandma taught kindergarten and was an active member of their church. A few decades later grandma reconnected with her high school sweetheart who was a widower. We didn't know if they were going to get married. Grandma decided she did not want to marry again. We were fine if she did, but she didn't want to, and that was her decision. But what I respect her most for looking back was that she did not act like they were married. They were close friends for the last years of their lives. They didn't move in together or do those things that are reserved for marriage. They had separate apartments on the same floor of their senior living center. They were careful too of the impression they gave others and especially us grandkids. It helped as we considered how we should go about our relationships and honoring God in the process. I was dating Hannah at the time.

The apostle Paul had a great respect for the Thessalonian Christians. He loved them and they loved him. God had grown them in faith and it was a model to other Christians around the world, and even here today. Paul knew the persecution they endured for he had suffered it, and the temptations that beset them living in a large port city that was also a crossroads of one of the great Roman land routes. Business thrived there as did immorality and idolatry. Paul reminds them of who they are in Christ their Savior who called them into his kingdom and glory, and how to live:

Live a Holy Life

"As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." We don't simply follow God's Word and commands because it makes sense or it's the best way to do things. We follow because we are his children and he loves us. We follow because he sent his Son to suffer for our sins and die in our place so that we want to please him. He gives us life to the full now and eternally. Only *"in the Lord Jesus"* can we *"do this more and more."*

Live a holy life in a messed-up world. *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;"* Many in this world think God's way of reserving these things for marriage is thought old fashioned, absurd, impractical and even impossible. But God doesn't think so. He gave the gifts and they are to be used by married couples. This pleases him. If you abuse it, the result is detrimental, the guilt runs deep, and God condemns it for what it is – lovelessness, selfishness, and uncontrolled passionate lust. God condemns us for setting our Christian jersey aside to live like the unbeliever who has no boundaries, no sense, and no hope. We please God when we are self-controlled and use his gifts as he directs. Why does God care so much? He loves you and your life now and eternally. And he doesn't just love you, he loves all of you.

"and in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit." When we sin by misusing God's gift and push the boundaries from proper and respectable in God's sight to something else even when two consent sinfully, God sees it. It's taking advantage of someone whether in person or on screen, or truthfully of their marriage partner or their future marriage partner. God promises punishment for this because he cares about each one of you and his gifts that he gives. And when we think this nothing or do it anyways, what does this do to our relationship with God? What does sin do? Our sinful nature leads us to reject not just

“being old fashioned” or “an out of touch” church or pastor or parent or grandparent or friend, we are being led to reject God. You see it in the lives of people who live this way. God’s Word, his love, his promises soon become less and less important. They’re choosing a different god.

“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” What do we do when we realize our sin and the train wrecks of our past, or that we are caught up in something even now? Remember that God has called you. He has called you a lot of things – friend of Jesus, brothers and sisters of Jesus, child of God. Jesus earned this by his life and blood. He lived perfectly in God’s will here and credited his perfection to you. He sacrificed his own blood on the cross to pay for your sins, your sinful living, your pushing the boundaries no matter what your age, or if you’re still caught in it. Jesus paid, died and rose, so he could call you forgiven. And you are. Your guilt is atoned for, your sin wiped away. The Scriptures show us that God’s *“mercies are new every morning.”* This is a new day. And so God calls you to follow him and use his gifts or not use his gifts as he directs. He will strengthen you and help you. If you are caught in a sin, pray and stop. If you don’t think you can stop, pray, go to God’s promises of forgiveness and strength, get help, encouragement, advice from a Christian friend, counselor, teacher or minister. If you are living together and not married, move out if you’re not marrying them. If you do want to marry, talk to me. I’m two blocks from the courthouse. Back in the day people of this congregation simply got married in the parsonage parlor if they didn’t want to wait to plan a big wedding or think they could afford it. We’ll marry you and you can still have a big wedding later. People have done this. It works. If you are single, and staying that way, that’s good too. Live in a way that pleases God. Live self-controlled and treat men and women respectfully. If you are dating or hope to date, pray for strength to be self-controlled and consider seriously what you need to be looking for in a godly spouse. God will help you. He has called you, made you his own, placed you on his team. He saved you. He will certainly coach you, strengthen you and bless you. Why? Because he loves you. And because he loves you, love each other.

“Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more...” You love each other. I see it among this family of believers and up on the hill – the care, the concern and help you give to one another. You help others carry and share their burden. You double their joy when you share their joys. You care not just for each other outwardly, but you care for their souls, and the souls of the next generation. You support Christian education at every level and to every child. You support the work of our synod in starting new missions through our offerings. You put in countless hours supporting the work here and you come to worship and Bible Class to hear the Word and to grow and learn and be strengthened as together we align our lives with God’s instructions. By God’s grace we want St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church and School to be a model to our fellow Christians of loving one another as brothers and sisters not by blood, but by Christ, just as the Thessalonians did. We want to love like Jesus loves – selflessly and for the good of others.

“and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” We commit to working hard at whatever we do, not for show, or just for a paycheck or for some guaranteed result, but to help, to provide, because that’s what God has given us to do to serve God and help our neighbor. We mind our own business and take the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way. Where there is conflict among Christians, we trust one another to do it in a godly way and to work to resolve, forgive and unite. And guess what, others will see it, just like we watched Grandma. You’ll give family members, parents, siblings, grandchildren, co-workers, classmates, even strangers encouragement to follow Jesus, to listen and follow his instruction and commands, not just because it make sense or it’s the best way, but because he’s our Savior. He’s called us. He loves us and because of that we love each other. We love them in the way Jesus wants and he will bless it and we will be a blessing. In Jesus and because of him **we live a holy life.** To God be the glory. Amen.