

2013

# Exhortation to Persevere and Grow in Holiness, Love, and Integrity (1 Thess 4:1-12) (Chapter in 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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## Recommended Citation

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## Exhortation to Persevere and Grow in Holiness, Love, and Integrity (1 Thess 4:1–12)

<sup>1</sup>Furthermore, my dear brothers and sisters, we ask of you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, as you received from us instruction about how you must walk and live to please God—as indeed you do walk this way—we encourage you to pursue this even more passionately. <sup>2</sup>For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>This is God’s will: that you are consecrated to him, namely that you distance yourself from sexual immorality. God wills that each of you knows how to maintain control of his own “vessel” with holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup>not yielding to lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. <sup>6</sup>Each of you must not trespass and cheat his brother in this matter, because the Lord repays justice for all these things, just as we forewarned you and testified. <sup>7</sup>For God called us not to be impure, but to be holy. <sup>8</sup>Therefore, whoever rejects this teaching is not rejecting a mere mortal but rather rejects the God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

<sup>9</sup>Now, on the matter of love for siblings, you do not need us to write to you, because you yourselves are taught by God when it comes to mutual love. <sup>10</sup>Indeed, you already do it, you have shown love for all the brothers and sisters in all of Macedonia. And we encourage you, my dear brothers and sisters, to let this love overflow even more. <sup>11</sup>And set your ambition on living a quiet life: attend to your own affairs and work with your own hands, just as we commanded you. <sup>12</sup>Then you will walk in the proper way in view of outsiders and you will need nothing.

In the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians, Paul’s primary concern involved extending compassion and comfort to a suffering and troubled church. There is a gracious, warm, generous tone. He reminds them of how special they are, and how attentive God is to their plight. He reminds them of how God has worked among them in power in the past, he is at work in the present, and he will act again on their behalf through Messiah Jesus at his return. He confesses to them his longing to have close fellowship with them—they are loved and missed.

But Paul's purpose in writing is not purely to offer reassurance and comfort. He also writes to them to remind them of God's expectations for their lifestyle and behavior. It is important for them to know that God has called them into his "glorious kingdom" (2:12), but this "calling" is also a privilege, a lifelong response and responsibility. They are called to live according to kingdom standards. The constitution of their kingdom citizenship requires holiness, not impurity (4:7). Three main topics are treated in this early section of chapter four: holiness (4:1–8), love (4:9–10), and integrity (4:11–12).

### *God's Call to Holiness (4:1–8)*

Paul begins this section by reminding the Thessalonians (through the authority of the Lord Jesus) about the teaching that they had already received from him (4:1). When he originally instructed them, he shared not simply the good-news message, but also counsel regarding "how you must walk and live to please God." We sometimes call this "ethics," but Paul would not have seen a distinction between "theology" and "ethics."<sup>1</sup> For Paul, the free gift of new life in Messiah Jesus automatically entails a new set of personal and social standards under the Lordship of Jesus. The idea behind "walking" (*peripateō*), a Jewish idiom, is that the religious life is lived at all times, not just in temples and religious meetings (Deut 6:4–12).

Paul is quick to note that the Thessalonians are not failing in their obedience to God—he simply wants them to keep their eyes focused on God's will and expectations (4:1–2). He goes on to refer in quite specific terms to the nature of the will of God. God wishes, in particular, that they are "consecrated" to him (*hagiasmos*). To be consecrated is to be dedicated to holiness. Here Paul views holiness as a kind of maintained condition of purity and personal dedication to God.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes this word is explained as if it were simply about *not* doing or being something (i.e., avoiding worldliness), and Paul does point out here what jeopardizes holiness. However, the language of holiness in Jewish thought has an important *positive* value. Holiness involves being close to God and being available and dedicated to serving God wholeheartedly.<sup>3</sup> Given that most of the Thessalonian believers would have been Gentiles (see 4:5), and in the Greco-Roman world at large men had quite a lot of freedom to indulge their sexual passions, it

1. See van der Watt 2006.

2. L-N 53.44; see Peterson 2001.

3. See Tidball 2000.



is no wonder that the early Christians had to give new believers directed and repeated teaching about self-control and purity.<sup>4</sup> For example, the early Christian training manual called the *Didache* (“The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles”), dating perhaps even to the first century AD, impresses upon the readers the need for everyday purity: “Abstain from fleshly and worldly lusts” (1:4); “thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not commit paederasty, thou shalt not practice fornication” (2:2); “My child, be not a lustful one; for lust leadeth the way to fornication” (3:3); “The way of death is this: . . . adulteries, lusts, fornications . . .” (5:1).

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### Excursus: Sexual Immorality in the Greco-Roman World

The world in which Paul lived offered men a number of sexual opportunities and “privileges,” even for those that were married. F. F. Bruce explains it in this way:

A man might have a mistress [*hetaera*] who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine [*pallakē*], while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot [*pornē*]. The function of his wife was to manage his household and be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs. There was no body of public opinion to discourage *porneia* [sexual immorality], although someone who indulged in it to excess might be satirized on the same level as a notorious glutton or drunkard. The general attitude is frequently illustrated by a quotation from Demosthenes's oration *Against Neaera*: “We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes.”<sup>5</sup>

Roman poet Horace (65 BC–27 BC) confirms just this sort of sexual license in Roman society:

If your groin is swelling,  
and a housemaid or a slave boy is at hand,  
arousing constant desire,  
do you prefer to burst with tension?  
Not me: I enjoy love that is available and easy.<sup>6</sup>

4. See Hock 1999: 159–70.

5. Bruce 1982: 87; see also Morris 1975: 118; Hubbard 2014.

6. Horace, *Sermons* 1.2.116–19; as cited in Elliott and Reasoner 2011: 252.

From Pompeii a piece of graffiti was discovered that reads: “If anyone’s looking for tender embraces in this town, he should know that all the girls are available.”<sup>7</sup> Even when observing these few examples, it is easy to see why instruction regarding sexual purity was so standard in Paul’s ethical teaching.<sup>8</sup>

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Paul offers much the same kind of clarity regarding what dedication to God entails: “that you distance yourself from sexual immorality” (4:3). This advice goes beyond a simple “don’t do it.” Rather, Paul essentially counsels them, “Get as far away from it as possible!” (One thinks of Joseph running with haste away from the temptress in Potiphar’s household [Gen 39:12]; see also below.) Too many Christians (of every generation) have desired a kind of minimum-standard moral system to follow which often results in believers lining up as closely as possible to the boundary of sin, but just barely on the “holy” side. This is not Paul’s mindset whatsoever. The only way for believers to have real integrity is to put any hint of sin or dubious behavior at a far distance.

The concern was not just with public witness, though that was also something of which Paul was mindful (4:11–12). The immediate issue is with mastery over carnal passions and lusts (4:4–5). Each one needs to know how to “control his own ‘vessel’ with holiness and honor” (4:4). There is hardly another verse in Paul’s letters that has generated more debate and discussion than this one.<sup>9</sup> Obviously Paul is concerned with self-control, but what does he mean by “vessel” (*skeuos*)? This word *skeuos* is the normal Greek word for container (see, e.g., John 19:29), but in this context it is obvious that Paul is being metaphorical.

Three interpretive options are possible. First, it could be that the *vessel* is the man’s *wife* and the text is encouraging marriage (see RSV: “to take a wife for himself”).<sup>10</sup> Scholars and translators who prefer this reading argue, firstly, that Paul employs a verb here (*ktaomai*) that is also used in a semi-technical phrase “acquire a wife” (so Sirach 36:29; Ruth 4:10; Xenophon,

7. *CIL* IC 1796, trans. Berg; as cited in Elliott and Reasoner 2011: 251.

8. Another route into this topic is the study of sexual themes in Greek and Latin Graffiti; see Williams 2014: 493–508.

9. See Still 2007: 207–19.

10. This interpretation is favored by Patristic interpreters such as Theodore of Mopsuestia and Augustine; also Frame 1912, Best 1986, Holtz 1986, Malherbe 2000, and Witherington 2006; for detailed argumentation, see Yarbrough 1985.



*Conviv.* 2.10). Thus, on this reading, Paul would be adapting conventional language. He would be urging believing men in the Thessalonian church to “restrict their sexual activity to their own wives and to enter on this with them in sanctification and honour.”<sup>11</sup>

A second option is to see *skeuos* in reference to the person’s own body (see NRSV; NET).<sup>12</sup> So, Paul writes in 2 Cor 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels (*skeuos*), that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (NASB). This view comports well with the idea that the body is sacred and not meant for sexual immorality, so what we do with our bodies matters greatly to God (1 Cor 6:13, 18; 9:27; 2 Cor 12:21; Rom 6:19). The greatest challenge with this view involves the verb *ptaomai*. If the primary meaning of this verb is “to acquire,” what would it mean for Paul to urge the Thessalonians to “acquire” their own bodies? It is possible that one heard excuses for promiscuity like “I couldn’t help myself.” Paul would, then, be responding, “Get ahold of yourself!” Thus, G. K. Beale, for example, looks at the use of *ptaomai* in this way: “those not presently living holy lives must begin to do so, that is, take possession of their bodies and begin to control them and then continue to do so.”<sup>13</sup>

A third option (perhaps viewed as a more specific subset under option two) would be to see *skeuos* as a euphemism for the male genitalia. Gordon Fee has made a reasonable case that the desire to use a euphemism may be the reason behind Paul talking about “vessel” versus simply using the literal words for “wife” (option one) or “body” (option two).<sup>14</sup>

Of these options, I lean in favor of the second, that Paul refers to control over the body.<sup>15</sup> Paul saw the problem of sin as a battle for control: “do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions”

11. Best 1986: 162–63. Some interpreters in the past who have defended this view made appeal to 1 Peter 3:7 where *skeuos* is used in reference to the wife, but this so-called parallel has been largely debunked because the text implies that both the husband and the wife are *vessels*; see Smith 2001: 65–105.

12. While it is not commonplace for the word “vessel” (*skeuos*) to be used metaphorically to mean “wife,” it is more frequently used in reference to the body in Jewish literature; see, e.g., *Apocalypse of Sedrach* 11.2, 6; *Testament of Naphtali* 2.2.

13. Beale 2003: 117.

14. See Fee 2009: 149; also further possible evidence from Elgvin 1997: 604–19.

15. How should translations approach this matter? Beverly Gaventa wonders whether it is best to render it literally as “vessel.” She explains: “It is important to see . . . that one reason this debate has emerged is precisely that *Paul himself gives us few clues* as to what he means by the use of the word *skeuos*. He writes in terse aphorisms that call out for explanation. Presumably this is because he has already instructed the Thessalonians, and they know what he means, even if we do not” (1998: 53).

(Rom 6:12; cf. 1 Pet 2:11). Because of the bondage-breaking power of God, one can “put on the Lord Messiah Jesus,” as it were, and his power can enable believers to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:14). This is not automatic. It is a choice—a daily, hourly choice to let Jesus rule and to live according to the Spirit (Gal 5:16). It is not a matter of pure will-power, but the believer must fully assimilate the idea that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

The choice to indulge in sexual vices, to degrade the body with lust and promiscuity, is not a symbol of freedom—just the opposite; it is a mark of imprisonment (see Rom 1:18–32). Inversely, holiness is not a barrier or restriction, but true freedom in God. Controlling one’s body is not a prohibitive rule, but a natural corollary of one’s honor (4:4) or value in God. What many Christians lack today is a deep sense of self-worth or dignity. Believers will have a mature sense of dignity when they truly understand their incalculable worth to God. It actually degrades the sacrifice of Jesus when we do not ascribe worth and value to ourselves. If we put value in his giving of his life, such “worth” is ascribed to us for whom he gave that blood. Paul wants each believer to weigh his or her own body on the scale of worth in God’s perspective and to treat that commodity in a way commensurate with what God has invested in it through Messiah Jesus.

In 4:5, Paul draws a sharp qualitative distinction between the Thessalonian believers’ lifestyle and that of “the Gentiles who do not know God.” Almost certainly the Thessalonian believers themselves were not ethnically Jews (and, thus, they were Gentiles, “non-Jews”), so how can he tell Gentiles not to act like Gentiles? It could be that Paul is comparing “Gentiles who do not know God” with “Gentiles who *do* know God.” But I think Paul’s thought runs deeper than this point. The idea is that they have been written into a new story through Jesus, the story of Israel; they do not literally become “Jews,” but they are adopted into the family of Yahweh through Jesus and they live out a different set of values (see Rom 11:17).<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Paul seems to draw from a common Jewish criticism of Gentiles who are “godless” despite having many idols, and their state of

16. Notice in 1 Corinthians, Paul also corresponds with a church composed mostly of Gentiles and he writes to them in regards to lessons learned from the Israelite wilderness period that “*our ancestors* were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea” (1 Cor 10:1; NRSV). As Richard Hays explains, “the story of Israel is for the Gentile Corinthians not somebody else’s story; it is the story of their own authentic spiritual ancestors” (Hays 1997: 160); see also Garroway 2012.



being disconnected from the one true God (hence the life-transforming conversion of the Thessalonians in 1:9–10). The Jewish philosopher Philo (roughly a contemporary to Paul) made this statement about the difference between Jews and Gentiles:

And there are some of the Gentiles, who, not attending to the honor due to the one God alone, deserve to be punished with extreme severity of punishment, as having forsaken the most important classification of piety and holiness, and as having chosen darkness in preference to the most brilliant light, and having rendered their own intellect blind when it might have seen clearly (*Special Laws* 1.54).

This is, more or less, what Paul expresses in Rom 1:18–32: when people reject the one God, it is as if they choose to live in darkness—ignorance of (the one, true) God is ignorance of life itself (Rom 1:21). But Paul's point is precisely that the Thessalonians are *not* in darkness (1 Thess 5:4) like their neighbors (or even their pre-Christian selves). They are people of the day who are, or certainly can be, at their full wits to live holy and upright lives (1 Thess 5:8; cf. Rom 13:12).

While there are obviously some interpretive conundrums in 1 Thess 4:3–5, Paul's overall concern for sexual purity and holiness is clear. However, when we transition to 4:6, we are at a loss to make sense of what he means that “each of you must not trespass and cheat his brother in this matter.” What is “this matter”? Probably the meaning is that, when a man commits adultery with a married woman, he is violating the boundaries of that marriage and sinning against his Christian brother (see NLT). We may gain some insight on these concerns by, again, turning to the situation of Joseph and Potiphar's wife according to Josephus' retelling (*Ant.* 2; cf. Gen 49). Josephus explains Joseph's righteous refusal of Potiphar's wife in this way:

She made known her naughty inclinations, and spoke to him about lying with her. However, he rejected her entreaties, not thinking it agreeable to religion to yield so far to her, as to do what would tend to the affront and injury of him that purchased him, and had vouchsafed him so great honours (*Ant.* 2.42).

While Joseph shows concern for proper holiness (“religion”; *hosios*), he demonstrates particular respect for Potiphar himself. He would never do anything, no matter how tempting, to damage and mistreat Potiphar. This is an apt analogy for what Paul is concerned with. It is improper for



a man to gratify his urges with a married woman, lest he *trespass* and sin against the marriage covenant of his brother. God will refuse to turn a blind eye to such unholy behavior (4:6b). The calling of God is gracious, but also formative—God’s people must direct their lives towards holiness, not impurity (4:7). In 4:8, Paul threatens anyone who would stubbornly reject this teaching.

### *Even More Love (4:9–10)*

Paul transitions from teaching on holiness to the subject of love (*philadelphia*; “sibling love”). Much as he did at the outset of this chapter, he makes clear that they are not failing in this area, but perhaps need a bit of a push to press on in expressing this kind of deep love for each other. So excellent have they been in loving the family of faith, their love has extended out to the wider region of Macedonia.

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### **Excursus: “Sibling Love” (*philadelphia*)**

I lived for a year near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, so the word “*philadelphia*” sounds very commonplace to me. We must recognize, though, how truly unusual it would have been for Paul to be so comfortable using this term for a group of people that were not related biologically.<sup>17</sup> So distinctive (and strange) was the early Christian use of siblingship language that second-century Roman Marcus Cornelius Fronto criticized them with these words: “They recognize each other by secret marks and signs; hardly have they met when they love each other, throughout the world uniting in the practice of a veritable religion of lusts. Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest by the intervention of these hallowed names.”<sup>18</sup> Christian believer Minucius Felix responded to Fronto thusly: “. . . it is true that we do love one another—a fact that you deplore—since we do not know how to hate. Hence it is true that we do call one another brother—a

17. Reidar Aasgaard notes that the term was used less than a dozen times in all the Greek literature of which we know before Paul’s time (Aasgaard 2004: 151).

18. See *Octavius* 8–9, in *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix* 1974: 123; ANF 4.177. It should be noted that it was unlikely that Fronto was aware of actual sexual deviance amongst the Christians. Rather, Christians meeting privately in houses (and not publicly in temples) probably led to the kinds of suspicions noted here.

fact which rouses your spleen—because we are men of the one and same God the Father, copartners in faith, coheirs in hope."<sup>19</sup>

Writing a few decades after Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, Greek historian and moralist Plutarch produced an essay called *Peri philadelphia/De fraterno amore*—"On brotherly love." Plutarch underscores how a sibling relationship is superior to one of friendship because brothers and sisters are bound together within the same family and have a special obligation to love and protect one another. As Reidar Aasgaard explains, Plutarch notes that a sibling form of love is necessarily characterized by "tolerance, loyalty, and forgiveness."<sup>20</sup> This is noticeably relevant to what Paul has to say to the Thessalonians, especially when there may have been situations where some were inappropriately taking advantage of others in the church. Thus, reinforcing their siblingship relationship in the Messiah, Paul would be reinforcing what can be called "other-regarding morality."<sup>21</sup>

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In 4:9, Paul mentions that they hardly need explicit instruction because they have been "God-taught."<sup>22</sup> What does this mean? Some have proposed that Paul is referring to particular "love" teachings from the Old Testament or to Jesus' earthly words about love recorded and passed down in the Jesus tradition, but this seems unlikely because Paul appears to be comparing normal human instruction with a unique kind of divine instruction. If Paul were referring to Jesus' teachings or Old Testament instruction, the Thessalonians would have learned it from *Paul's* own apostolic instruction, and then it would be unclear why he would call this "God-taught."<sup>23</sup> Rather, it seems most probable that Paul is talking about the inward, transformative work of the Spirit. John Calvin captures this idea with particular eloquence:

Their hearts were framed for love; so that it appears that the Holy Spirit inwardly dictates efficaciously what is to be done, so that there is no need to give injunctions in writing.<sup>24</sup>

19. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 31.18.

20. Aasgaard 2004: 106.

21. See this language used by David Horrell (2005: 115).

22. As far as we can tell, Paul made up a new word—*theodidaktos* ("God-taught" or "taught by God"). See Witmer 2008: 153–64.

23. See Best 1986: 173.

24. Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* 4:9, see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/>

Paul's point in saying this would be to comfort and encourage the Thessalonians who have suffered physically and emotionally in light of recent events (especially the death of community members). No doubt they were wondering—*what is happening? What should we do? How do we move forward?* Paul, the excellent pastor that he is, reminds them of who they are as part of the family of God in Messiah Jesus, and he gently exhorts them to excel in the love that God has already taught them how to share.<sup>25</sup>

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## **Fusing the Horizons 5.1: A New Covenant Community of Love**

When I was in seminary, I experienced a kind of crisis of faith. Some of the students in my classes expressed their serious interest in “theology,” and read their textbooks with utter devotion. They wrote impressive term papers and even met with professors outside of class for further instruction. However, as I lived with many of these students in the dorms, I became uneasy with a startling realization: they excelled in academic knowledge but many did not dedicate themselves to holiness, discipleship, and Christian love. Some went to the pub and got drunk on a regular basis. Others destroyed school property for fun. And the term “humility” could hardly characterize many of these students.

They had been taught *about* God, but it could hardly be said that they were *theodidaktos*—“God-taught.” In Paul's reckoning, the Christian cannot be merely engaged in intellectual exercises and call it Christian “teaching.” To be taught by God, to be taught by God *the Spirit*, is to be transformed. St. Augustine reflects on this idea of true Christian teaching in this way.

It is through grace that we not only discover what ought to be done but also that we do what we have discovered. That is, not only that we believe what ought to be loved but also that we love what we have believed. If this grace is to be called “teaching,” let it at any rate be called “teaching” in such a manner that God may be believed to infuse it, along with an ineffable sweetness, more deeply and more internally. This teaching, therefore, would be not only by

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calcom42.vi.vi.iii.html; see also Bruce 1982: 90; Richard 1995: 216.

25. Given the emphasis in chapter five on prophecy, it might be the case that the unexpected death of community members led the Thessalonians on a hunt for more divine revelation. If so, Paul's point here might be that their focus should not be on learning something *new* from God (in terms of information), as much as growing in what they already know (i.e., love).



their agency who plant and water from without but likewise by God also who ministers in secret his own increase. All this is in such a way that God not only exhibits truth but likewise imparts love. . . . Thus the apostle speaks to the Thessalonians, "As touching love of the brothers, you have no need that I write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another." *On the Grace of Christ* 12.13—13.14.<sup>26</sup>

Augustine makes the point that, for the new covenant people, their "way" must be unique at its core. These people do not simply receive written or verbal teaching for intellectual consumption, but, rather, the instruction they receive (even when through humans) is imbued with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit itself. And the people are not simply informed by God, but they are moved. This is why Paul can talk about the God who *gives* his Spirit to the people (4:8). "Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:20). As we recognize the powerful work of God in us, his transformed people, may we sing together a song of exhortation to love like this one.

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost  
taught by you, we covet most,  
of our gifts at Pentecost,  
holy, heavenly love.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Living with Integrity (4:11–12)***

In 4:11–12, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live quietly, manage their own affairs, and work with their own two hands. Throughout the whole letter, Paul underscores the importance of work and labor (1:3; 2:9; 3:5; 5:12–13; cf. 1 Cor 4:12). Despite the fact that he can refer to the importance of being ready for the return of Jesus (1 Thess 5:6, 8), there is also the need for faithfulness and integrity in everyday work, not least as a testimony to the outside, unbelieving world that followers of Jesus are respectful, trustworthy citizens and neighbors. Wherever need exists in the community, Paul assumes that believing brothers and sisters will step in and offer support (1 Thess 5:14). However, where "grace" is the watchword, there is always the temptation for some to exploit the kindness of others for their own gain and to gratify their own laziness. Paul rejects this spirit of exploitative dependence. This comes across clearly in Galatians as well. Each person is

26. See Gorday 2000: 82.

27. Written by Christopher Wordsworth, 1862.

expected to carry her own load (Gal 6:6), though there are obvious occasions when we must carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2).

Sometimes scholars have argued that Paul operated, especially in such an early letter (like 1 Thessalonians), under an "interim ethic" where certain moral expectations were hastily put into place in view of the imminent return of Jesus. Certainly Paul had no reason *not* to think Jesus would come soon and suddenly, but the fact that in 1 Thess 4:12 he moves the churches towards having no one directly dependent on another (and that everyone paid their own way, as it were) means that he desired, as a matter of first principle, that believers live in a self-sustaining community.<sup>28</sup>

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### Excursus: Work and Quietness

Paul's instructions in 4:11 are peculiar for a number of reasons. First, why does he tell these Thessalonians to work with their *hands*? Should the emphasis fall on *hands* (i.e., manual labor) or simply on *work* (versus inactivity)? Second, why does he tell them to be quiet and to mind their own business? Is the "quietness" about silence or about tranquility/peace?

There was a time when some scholars connected problems of idleness and unproductive fervor with the Thessalonians' misunderstandings about the end times. In 1912, James Frame made this comment: "It may be assumed that the belief in the coming of the Lord had created in the midst of some of the converts a feeling of restlessness and excitement which manifested itself outwardly in idleness and meddlesomeness in the affairs of the brotherhood. The idlers, we may imagine, being in want, had asked support from the church, and being refused on the ground that they were able to support themselves, had attempted to interfere in the affairs of the group."<sup>29</sup>

However, some scholars have wondered, if the "problem" was presumptions about the impending end of the world, why does Paul wait until 5:1–11 to talk about the true timing of the return of Jesus (instead of right after 4:9–12)?<sup>30</sup> Others relate this issue of idleness with more typical social problems in society. Richard Ascough has argued in favor of viewing the Thessalonian church as a converted "voluntary association," a kind of social club.<sup>31</sup> In

28. For a recent treatment of Paul's ethics, see Gupta 2009.

29. Frame 1912: 160; see also Best 1986 175–76; Morris 1975 131.

30. See discussion in Furnish 2007: 97–98

31. See Introduction for more on the history and composition of the Thessalonian

such clubs, it was common for members to compete for status and privilege (in terms of social value and honor). In reference to “aspire to live quietly” (4:11), Ascough notes a Greek inscription related to a voluntary association which reads: “let the association increase by aspirations.” The word used here for “aspirations” (*philoteimia*) is related to the word Paul employs in 1 Thess 4:11 for “aspire” (*philotimeō*). In the voluntary associations, it was expected that members competed for honor and status—it was obviously encouraged. If Ascough is right, Paul would have been discouraging Christians from engaging in races for honor and status.

My concern with Ascough’s theory is that the terminology of aspiration (*philoteimia*) is quite common and does not restrict Paul’s language to that of the association. Rather, I think Bruce Winter’s theory has more to commend it. Winter argues that believers should not forsake regular work in view of tying themselves to wealthy benefactors. Ben Witherington supports Winter’s view and expresses Paul’s reasoning in this way.

They were to be quietly busy, not busybodies, which is to say not living on the dole of some patron and then spending their time spreading the patron’s name around and seeking to win friends and influence people for the patron. Christians, by contrast to the patron-client system, were all to work as they were able, avoid being a burden to others, and earn money to do good to others without thought of return. Love and doing good to all, especially the household of faith, rather than reciprocity, was to be their guiding principle.<sup>32</sup>

The reality in Thessalonica may have been that some tragedy struck the Christian community (leading to unexpected deaths), for some reason some community members were stirred up by eschatological concerns, and in a troubled state they came to over-rely on patrons as they tried to discern what was going on. Paul’s counsel to these is, to borrow a British morale-boosting motto, “keep calm and carry on.” Despite unanswered questions, even amidst the confusion and chaos, the life of the community requires consistency and self-discipline. As Richard Hays writes, “The eschatological hope should leave them, according to Paul, neither in a state of passivity nor in a state of fevered striving; instead, they should gladly acknowledge that God is at work among

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church (6–16).

32. Witherington 2006: 122; see Winter 1994: 42–60; Winter 1989: 105–19; also cf. Green 2002: 209.



them preparing them for the day of the Lord precisely through the works of love that characterise their common life.”<sup>33</sup>

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## **Fusing the Horizons: Living Quiet Lives in a Noisy World**

There is an ironic twinge in Paul’s phrasing in 4:11 that is not readily apparent in English. When Paul tells the Thessalonians to *aspire to live quiet lives*, “aspire” and “quiet” are not usually put together in a Greek sentence. Aspiration, in the way it was commonly used in the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s time, was about struggling, persevering, and, most importantly, *competing*—essentially, trying to get ahead in a dog-eat-dog world. Given that the Greco-Roman world was fiercely competitive, “to aspire” was to fight and claw your way to be king of the hill.

Paul cleverly turns this somewhat natural inclination on its head—*aspire to . . . live quietly*. What he is saying here is that believers do things differently, they march to the beat of a different drummer. When *they* struggle and persevere, the goal is not to conquer the world by trampling over others. Paul is basically saying *don’t copycat the way of the world, the world’s values and models for success*.

The redeemed, grace-rich people of God do not need to add extra noise to a noisy world. To live “quietly” does not mean to sequester yourself, to step out of the world (see 1 Cor 5:9–10). Rather, it is to respond to your God-given vocation and feel comfortable in your own skin and place in the world, such that your focus is not on being so loud about yourself that you get the right attention and boost your reputation up in the right ways in public. Heart-quietness, life-quietness, is the by-product of contentment. Contentment can only come from peace with God.

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33. Hays 1996: 22–23.