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 HCC Sermon Outline
 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

INTRODUCTION

1. Image: My parent's will instructed us what they wanted us to do if one of them died.
2. Need: We occasionally need instructions on what to do.
 - a. When mom goes on trip with her friends, dad needs instructions on what to do.
 - b. When a supervisor goes on vacation, he instructs the team on what needs to get done.
 - c. When a child off to college, a parent imparts some final advice on what to do.
3. Subject: What is God's will for a flourishing church?
 - a. When Paul left the Thessalonian church, he left them instructions on what to do.
 - b. But they may have forgotten, so he reminded them of what God's will was.
4. Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8
5. Preview: When do we remember God's will is holiness? In what areas of our life does God want us to pursue holiness? Why do believers pursue holiness?

BODY

(When do we remember God's will is holiness?)

- I. Believers remember God's will is to pursue holiness when they meditate on God's word (1 Thess 4:1-3a)
 - A. Paul asks the Thessalonians to remember his instruction to please God (4:1a)
 - B. The Thessalonians remembered to follow some but not all of his instruction (4:1b-2)
 1. Did you remember to pack everything? How about the charging cable for my phone?
 2. Did you remember to buy everything from the grocery store?
 - C. Paul reminded them that the will of God is holiness (4:3a)
 - D. Meditating on God's word reminds us to pursue holiness.

(In what areas of our life does God want us to pursue holiness?)

- II. God's will for believers is to pursue holiness in everything even sexuality (1 Thess 4:3b-6)
 - A. Paul confronts the sexual immorality in the Thessalonian church (4:3b)
 - B. Since the Thessalonians lived in a sexually permissive culture, they may not have understood that God expected them to also pursue holiness in their sexuality (4:3b).
 1. To pursuit of holiness begins with a knowledge of God (4:5)
 2. The pursuit of holiness requires self-control (4:4)
 3. A failure to pursue holiness results in disharmony among believers (4:6)
 4. A failure to pursue holiness results in God's punishment (4:7)
 - C. Pursue holiness in everything.
 1. Example of someone pursuing holiness in sexuality.
 2. Example of someone pursuing holiness in church relationships.

3. Example of someone pursuing holiness in family.

(Why do believers pursue holiness?)

- III. Believers pursue holiness because God compels them to (1 Thess 4:7-8)
 - A. God's call compels believers to pursue holiness (4:7)
 - B. God's word compels believers to pursue holiness (4:8a)
 - C. God's Spirit compels believers to pursue holiness (4:8b)

CONCLUSION

- 1. Summary: Believers discover God's will when they meditate on his word is the pursuit of holiness in everything even sexuality because God compels them to.
- 2. Closing Image: C.S. Lewis in the Great Divorces says that there are two types of people.

MANUSCRIPT

Years ago, my parents, brother, and I met with a lawyer to discuss their will. Their will would contain instructions for my brother and me to follow if one of them should pass away. The will explained that if one of them entered into a comatose state with no hope of physical recovery, should we continue to use medical technology to sustain their bodies? If one of them lacked the mental facility to make decisions concerning their life, who would have the authority to make decisions for them? The will explained that if one of them should die, who would retain control of their assets? The will detailed how the remaining assets should be used. The lawyer took note of all these instructions and wrote them in a legally binding document. When one of them died, my brother and I would follow the instructions of my parents will.

We occasionally need instructions on what to do when a person is absent. In my case, my parents provided those instructions in a will should one of them be absent due to death. But there are other circumstances where such instructions are helpful. Think about the mom ready to go on a trip with her girlfriends. She leaves instructions for dad. Take Johnny to soccer game on Saturday. Jane has a piano recital in the afternoon. For dinner, reheat the lasagna. When a supervisor goes on vacation, he leaves instructions for his team on what needs to get done in his absence. Jack will oversee the turbine project in my absence. Amy, follow up with the supplier on those turbine blades. If you guys have any issues, talk to James. He'll oversee things in my absence. Before a parent hands over the keys to a teenager, the parent gives them instructions. Remember to use your blinkers. Go light on the gas. Remember to check your blind spots. In the absence of a person, we sometimes need them to leave instructions.

When Paul left the church at Thessalonica, he left them instructions as well. He hoped that they would remember them because it would aid them in their faith. As he bid farewell to the Thessalonians, he may have echoed another teacher: “Remember what you have learned. Save you it will.” When he heard about the Thessalonian church suffering, he feared for their faith. He sent Timothy to check on them. When Timothy returned to Paul, Timothy reported that in general the Thessalonians remained faithful to God despite the persecution. But they may have needed to have to their memory refreshed especially when it comes to God’s will. If they remember to follow these instructions, then their church would continue to flourish.

Like the Thessalonians, we occasionally need some reminding. Our memories require some refreshing. What is God’s will for our lives? What does God want us to do so that our church would flourish? What is God’s instruction for us? God’s response would echo Paul’s instruction: God’s will is for you to pursue holiness. But I think it needs some fleshing out.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians will help us to flesh out this idea of pursuing holiness. Please turn your bibles to first Thessalonians, chapter four. First Thessalonians. Chapter four. From this morning’s text, we’re going to discuss three questions. First, when do we remember God’s will is to pursue holiness? Second, in what areas of our life does God want us to pursue holiness? Third, why do believers pursue holiness?

First, when do we remember God’s will is to pursue holiness? **Believers remember God’s will is to pursue holiness when they meditate on his Word.** When a believer reflects on what God has revealed in the Scripture, they will remember God’s will for them to pursue holiness. God reminds us to be holy when read his word and think about what it says. **Believers remember God’s will is to pursue holiness when they meditate on his Word.**

Paul asks the Thessalonians to remember his instruction to please God. Look with me at the first half of verse one: *“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.”* In his letter, Paul shifts his attention to topics of concern. The word: finally is misleading because Paul isn’t quite finished with the letter yet. But he has a whole other chapter. The word: finally actually signals a change in topics. The NIV translates it: As for other matters. What is the other matter that Paul wants to talk about? He wants them to remember the instruction that they received to walk and please God. The word: walk is a metaphor for living. Paul writes: *“remember the instruction that you received in how to live and please God.”*

What prompts Paul to remind the Thessalonians of his instruction? We get a hint in the latter half of verse one and verse two that something’s off. **The Thessalonians remembered to follow some but not all of Paul’s instruction.** Look with me at the latter half of verse 1: *“just as you are doing, do more and more.”* The Thessalonians are following some of Paul’s instructions. They turned from idols (1:9). They proclaimed the gospel (1:8). They exhibited fruit of the spirit: faith, love, and hope (1:3). Paul exhorts them to continue doing those things. But then Paul says in verse two: *“For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.”* Why would Paul need to give another reminder when the Thessalonians seemed to be doing pretty well? In ancient writing, a writer would issue another reminder because the listener may have neglected to do something.

We do this sometimes through our questions. When a husband returns home from the grocery store, the wife may ask him: Did you get everything? The husband then recalls in mind the grocery list: I got the eggs. Check. I got the milk. Check. I got the cereal. Check. What am I

missing? The wife then asks: Did you remember the butter? Whoops. Think about a family trip to Big Bend state park. The parents are in front of their Honda Odyssey minivan. The kids sit in the back. One of the teenagers finds that their Google Pixel is running out of juice. They search through the luggage for a charging cable. But they can't find it. They ask mom: Did you pack everything? Mom says: yup. They ask: are you sure? Mom goes through the packing list: I packed change of clothes. I packed snacks. I packed charging cable for my phone. I got everything. She answers again: Yup. Did you pack my charging cable? Mom then remembers I packed the charging cable for my iPhone. But I didn't pack the Pixel charging cable. She replies: Sorry honey. I forgot.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his instruction to get them mentally review. The word for instruction can also be rendered: command. The NASB translates it this way. But if you think about it depends on who gives the instruction. If a teacher tells a student: "Please sit down." It's an instruction. But it's also meant to be followed. If a flight attendant instructs you to fasten your seat belts, she expects every passenger to put on their seatbelts. Paul's instructions were not suggestions. He intended for his instructions to be followed.

The Thessalonians may have then begun a mental review. We gather together on the first of the week. Check. We practice the Lord's supper every week. Check. We give to the poor. Check. We read a passage of Scripture every week. Check. What are we missing?

Paul reminds them that the will of God is holiness. Verse three says: "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification*". The word: sanctification is derived from the word: "to be holy" Another way of saying of verse three would be: "For this is the will of God, that you become holy." What does it mean to be holy? The word occurs four times in this text. It occurs in this

verse. It comes up again in verse four. Verse seven. Verse eight. The word: holy refers to the idea of being set apart. One could think about it as distinction. In the Old Testament, the instruments used for temple worship such as the altar, the incense burner, or candle holders were considered set apart. The priest used them only in the worship of God. The priests couldn't roast nuts on the altar. The priests couldn't try out new fragrances in their incense burners. They wouldn't use the candle holder to light their path back home. These were reserved for temple use only. For instance, we set aside certain clothing for occasions. You don't wear an evening gown to work. You don't wear a tuxedo to the gym. You reserve it for a special occasion.

Now this idea of holiness applied not only to objects. But it applied to people as well. God intended for Israel to be holy as He is holy (Lev 19:2). Israel would set itself apart by following the commands that God gave. This included worshipping the covenant keeping God: Yahweh. They would take the seventh off to rest. They would abstain from any behavior that resembled the nations around them. The idea of a holy people transfers over the church as well. Jesus calls for this followers to be a salt and light in the world. Peter writes that the church resembles a holy nation. The followers of Christ would become holy as they obeyed God's commands.

Like the Thessalonians, we need to remember God's commands given us by the apostles and prophets. We remember these commands through meditation. **Meditating on God's word reminds us to be holy.** To meditate on God's word requires you to not only know what God's word says. But it requires you to think about his words to understand what God says but it stirs your affection and transforms you.

Take for example the first verse of chapter four. The phrase “to walk and to please God” teaches me that God desire for me to live in a way that please God. To live a life that pleases God sets one apart. But as I think about my life: “Have I lived in a way that pleased God?” I felt frustrated when a trip to Home Depot took longer than I thought. It prompted me to be short with my kids when I returned home because they wanted to play when I wanted to repair a leak under the sink. You confess that such shortness toward your kids was unnecessary. This prompts you to apologize to your kids.

Where does God want us to pursue holiness? Is it limited to our homes? This brings us to the second question: “In what areas of our life does God want us to pursue holiness?”

God’s will for believers to pursue holiness in everything even sexuality. There is no area in your life that is off limits for God to change. It could be your family, work, friendships, your thoughts, and even your emotions. God desires his people to pursue holiness in all areas. One area of focus in the text is sexuality. God desires for his people to pursue holy sexuality.

God’s will for believers to pursue holiness in everything even sexuality.

Paul confronts sexual immorality in the Thessalonian church. He writes in the latter half of verse three: “*That you abstain from sexual immorality.*” Paul follows the instructions of the Jerusalem council. The Gentile believers do not need to be circumcised. But they needed to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:20). By sexual immorality, Paul meant any sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman is prohibited.

Why did Paul equate holiness with abstinence from sexual immoral behavior? As prior sermons have already mentioned, the Thessalonians lived in a sexually permissive culture. Writings from the first century encourage young men to have sex whenever they felt led so that

they could get it out of their system. This way by the time they reached adulthood they could commit themselves to their civic duty and homes. Other writings encouraged married men to have children through their wives, but to fulfill their sexual desires through mistresses and prostitutes. **Since the Thessalonians lived in a sexually permissive culture, they may have not understood that God expected them also to pursue holiness in their sexuality.** They may have thought we believe in the gospel. We care for the poor. But in the area of sexuality, we can follow cultural norms. After all, our neighbors wouldn't raise an eyebrow if I met up with a prostitute on the weekends. When Timothy discovered this, he reported to Paul. This prompted Paul's reminder: you are to pursue holiness. This means even in your sexuality you need to be holy.

What does it look like to pursue holiness in sexuality? It requires self-control and knowledge of God. Paul writes in verse 4: *"that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God."* If Thessalonians know God and they do, then they would learn to control their bodies unlike their unbelieving neighbors. A knowledge of God should result in self-control in all areas of one's life especially in sexuality.

First, **pursuing holiness begins with a knowledge of God.** Why? We believe that God designed creation to operate in a certain way. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we see God created man to rule but also to be fruitful and multiply. Humanity would carry out this command through sexual intimacy experienced between a husband and a wife. Yet the introduction of sin caused a disruption to God's created order.

While there are still echoes of God's design that still exists with human beings that sex is an intimate act, sin has changed the perspective of sex. For unbelievers do not believe that God created human beings. This means that they don't believe that God designed for sex only to be enjoyed in marriage. Hence, it should not surprise us that that the Thessalonians lived in a sexually permissive culture where most sexual activity received no condemnation. This is what Paul means by *"the passion of lust like the Gentiles"*.

But believers knowing that God intended for sex to be practice in marriage, they should abstain from any sexually immoral activity. **The pursuit of holiness requires self-control.** Look with me again at verse four: *"that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor."* The word: control has the idea of mastery. A pilot knows how to control an aircraft because he has mastery of the skills needed to fly it. A horse rider knows how to control his horse because he has mastery over his steed. In a similar fashion, believers need to know their appetites and exercise mastery over them.

What happens when one fails to pursue holiness? Paul cites two results. First, **a failure to pursue holiness results in disharmony among believers.** Look with me at verse six: *"that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter"*.

From this verse, we can infer that there may have been a sexually immoral act that resulted in Paul's statement. A Thessalonian believer may have been involved in a sexual affair with another brother's wife. This would explain Paul's instruction to the Thessalonian church.

But this principle applies even to the church today. If a sexual affair occurs between two married individuals, then it would create division, hurt, and disharmony in our church. The use

of pornographic material causes rifts in marriages. It also objectifies one's view of the opposite sex.

Another result of failing to pursue holiness is God's punishment. **A failure to pursue holiness results in God's punishment.** Paul writes in the latter half of verse 6: "*because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.*" The word: avenger is typically attributed to those who are responsible for dispensing justice. For instance, the government would be considered an avenger because it punishes those who violate the law. In this case, God would punish those who persist in this sexual affair and fail to repent.

This punishment can occur as a consequence of a sexual immorality such as a sexually transmitted disease, unexpected pregnancy, or broken relationships. But the focus of the verse seems to be on how God will punish those who persist in sexual immorality. In the case of Israel, God sent snakes to bite them when they committed sexually immoral acts with the Midianites. If a believer persists in sexually immoral behavior, then they may have a deficient understanding of the gospel. They fail to understand the cost of their sin. They fail to recognize the cost of redemption was the death of Jesus Christ. It required someone to die in order for them to be redeemed. It also demonstrates a failure to understand the forgiveness given by God through Christ as well. Their failure to confess and repent demonstrates that they do not understand God's forgiveness and provision to turn from their sin. This calls into question their assurance of salvation.

Paul had warned the Thessalonians when he ministered among them before. He reminds them again here again. That's why he writes: "*as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.*"

What does Paul expect the Thessalonians to do? What does he expect us to do? He expects the Thessalonians to pursue holiness in everything even sexuality. The instruction is the same to us. Pursue holiness in everything. This includes sexuality. What does this look like?

Imagine a couple in our church has been dating for a few months. They sense chemistry. As interaction increases, so does their attraction to one another. They display their affection toward one another through holding hands and an occasional hug. But their desire for more grows.

They decide to talk about it at their next date. Over hamburgers at Hopdoddy's, they share their mutual growing affection toward another and desire to take it to the next physical level. One of them shared that they had been reading first Thessalonians. And they came across the verse: "Abstain from sexual immorality." This person shares with the other that if they truly feel this growing sexual desire, then they need to consider the possibility of marriage. If they don't want to get married, then they should call the relationship off.

Think about a single person who has strong sexual desires. He's tempted regularly to look at pornography. In his accountability group, one of the guys shares something from his devotions in Hebrews chapter thirteen, verse four: "*Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.*" This brother goes home and thinks: If I look at porn, then it will affect how I view women in the future. Instead of seeing them as sisters in Christ, I will view them only as an object to satisfy my desires. And when I look at these images, they are

someone's sister, someone's daughter, someone's friend, and God's daughter. If I look at these images, then I will invite these fantasies into my future relationship with my wife." Instead of viewing sexually explicit images online, he calls a brother to pray with him and think through how to trust God in this season of singleness.

While these examples apply to the context of holiness in sexuality, one can apply the same principles of different areas. One should pursue holiness in the stewardship of their finances. They can pursue holiness in their thought life. They can pursue holiness in their conduct at work. **God's will for believers is to pursue holiness in everything even sexuality.**

Let's move onto our final question: Why do believers pursue holiness? What is the motivation that Paul provides for pursuit of holiness?

Believers pursue holiness because God compels them to. God calling us into relationship with Him motivates us to live in a way that pleases God. We pursue holiness not because we desire to earn God's love. Rather it is out of God's love for us that we live according to his instructions. **Believers pursue holiness because God compels them to.**

Paul brings this motivation into the forefront in a few ways. First, **God calls the Thessalonians to pursue holiness.** Look with me at verse seven: *"For God has not called us to impurity, but in holiness."* Thus far in the letter, Paul explains that God calls them to relationship with himself (1:4). God then calls them to live a life worthy of God (2:12). The Thessalonians should recognize that God has not called them to enjoy the blessings of a relationship with him, but also to pursue a life that pleases God. This entails putting off sinful desires.

God expects the Thessalonians to obey the divine word to pursue holiness. The pursuit of holiness is a divine decree. God's word commands it. Paul writes in verse eight: *"Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God."* If they reject Paul's instruction to pursue holiness, then it's not a rejection of human words. It's a rejection of God's divine instruction. And the instruction for holiness finds its roots in God's design.

The Thessalonians may have found the gospel message to have divine authority but doubted the authority by which Paul taught sexual ethnics. They may have suspected that Paul's sexual ethic was his opinion. But Paul actually rejects such a thought.

God gives the Thessalonians the Holy Spirit to help them pursue holiness. The last half of verse eight says: *"who gives his Holy Spirit to you."* The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel predicted a day when the Lord would establish a new covenant with his people through the giving of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers believers to pursue holiness.

What is God's will for believers? Believers remember God's will when they meditate on his word is the pursuit of holiness in everything even sexuality because God compels them to. When we meditate on God's word, we remember that God desires us to pursue holiness. We pursue holiness in all areas of our life. Why? God compels us to.

C.S. Lewis's book: *The Great Divorce* describes his imaginary journey from hell to heaven. He uses this idea of a trip to heaven to highlight this idea that there exists two types of people in the world. There are those who will say to God, "Thy Will be Done." That means I will do whatever you ask of me in every area of my life. These people will end up in heaven. Then there's the other person to whom God says: "Thy will be done." This refers to a person who

lives their lives as they see fit. This leads to them choosing hell. May we be a church that pursues holiness by saying to God: "Thy Will be done".