

An Exemplary Church 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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A pilot was flying over the South Pacific when he noticed smoke coming from one of the many deserted islands below.

The pilot flew closer and, sure enough, there was a man with a huge beard and tattered clothes sending the smoke signals.

When the pilot landed, the man was overjoyed. *“I’ve been alone on this island for eleven years and was beginning to lose hope!”*

The pilot noticed something odd, and then asked, *“If you’ve been all alone on the island for eleven years why do you have three huts?”*

The man smiled. *“This hut is my home. This one next to it is my church. I go there every Sunday to worship God.”*

“That’s very touching,” said the pilot, *“How about that third hut?”* With a bitter look on his face, the survivor replied, *“Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.”*

Committing to a church can be difficult. You may like the preaching at one, but you aren’t so sure about the music.

You love the people at another, but the preaching isn’t as solid. No church is perfect. But some churches are a little closer than others.

The church in Thessalonica fits that category. Unlike the other problem-prone churches, such as Sardis or Laodicea, the church in Thessalonica was an exemplary church.

In chapter 1, Paul praised them for being an energetic church, an elect church, an evangelistic church, and an expectant church.

In chapters 2-3, he described them as a scriptural church, a suffering church, and a strong church.

In short, the Thessalonian church was a mighty church that set a great example for other churches to follow.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul writes, *“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.”*

As a young church, only about two years old, the Thessalonians were just learning how to live the Christian life.

And, as Paul says, they were doing a pretty good job, but he wanted to encourage them to keep up the good work, so Paul points out three more marks of a mighty church.

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In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, Paul told the Thessalonians that if they wanted to continue being a mighty church, they must avoid lust.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, *“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; and that 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.”*

Now, you have to understand that the moral climate in the Roman Empire wasn’t exactly healthy.

Immorality was a way of life and sexual standards, in particular, were minimal. Prostitution was legal and widespread.

Explicit, pornographic paintings populated public art galleries and private collections. It was socially acceptable for men to engage in sex with teenage boys, male prostitutes, or slaves of either gender.

Yet, today is really no different. It seems the more things change; the more things stay the same. Let me tell you about Ashley Madison, a dating website, made the news in 2015.

This isn't your friendly eharmony.com, match-making type website. This is a match-making website for married people looking to cheat on their spouse, their tag line is "*Life is Short. Have an Affair.*"

The site, which prides itself on secrecy and security, made headlines when hackers broke into their computer system.

It wasn't so bad that they stole information, but they exposed the names, email addresses, credit card information, and secret sexual fantasies of 37 million cheating spouses.

It's hard to sympathize with the "victims" in a case like this. But this just demonstrates that adultery, fornication, pornography, homosexuality, and other sexual sins remain obstacles to holiness.

To be holy means to be "set apart" or consecrated. In Leviticus 19:2, God implored Israel, "*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*"

God's call to be holy is a radical, all-encompassing claim on our lives, our loves, and our very identities.

To be a disciple of Christ requires nothing less than death to our fallen, egocentric selves in order that we might live in and for Him.

To be holy means that all we are and all we have belongs to God, not ourselves. That every aspect of our lives is to be shaped and directed toward God.

Although holiness is more than mere morality, as Paul points out, a life of holiness will find expression in our sexual relationships.

As Christians, we dare to believe that sex is precious, and God created it to be fully experienced only in the most precious relationship—marriage.

Sex isn't casual. Sex wasn't created for boyfriends and girlfriends. It wasn't even meant for serious couples who intend to get married.

It doesn't matter whether its pornography, or premarital sex, or homosexuality, or adultery, if it falls short of God's purpose and plan for sex, it's un-holy.

To be holy requires us to surrender our lives—including our sexual relationships and desires—to God, because He is holy. A mighty church avoids lust.

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Which brings us to another mark of a mighty church... A mighty church advances love.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, "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."

Love is the theme of a thousand songs, the topic of a million letters, and the subject of countless sermons. It's also the defining mark of a mighty church.

Legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, was once asked what it took to make a winning team.

He answered, *“There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don’t win the game. If you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to care for one another. You’ve got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: If I don’t block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his. The difference between mediocrity and greatness,”* Lombardi said, *“is the feeling those guys have for each other.”*

Likewise, I think the difference between a mediocre church and a mighty church is the feeling we have for one another.

Do you really love the person in the pew behind you or beside you? Jesus said in John 13:35, *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

In making this claim, Jesus did something the world had never seen before—He created a group identified by one thing: love.

There are countless groups in the world, and they identify themselves in any number of ways: by skin color, by uniform, by shared interest, by alma mater, by politics, etc.

One group has tattoos and piercings; another group abstains from meat; yet another group wears fezzes—the ways people categorize themselves are endless.

But the church is unique. For the first, and only, time in history Jesus created a group whose identifying factor was love.

Skin color doesn't matter. Native language doesn't matter. There are no rules about diet or uniforms or wearing funny hats. Followers of Christ are identified by their love for each other.

Yet, loving people isn't easy. People can be hard to get along with. How do you love people who are hard to love?

The typical strategy is to try harder, dig deeper, strain more. We're going to love that person if it kills us! And it just might.

The Bible offers a different approach, which Paul hints at in verse 9 when he says, "*you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.*"

God's love is amazing. Though we're incomplete, God loves us completely. Though we're imperfect, He loves us perfectly.

Though we may feel lost and without compass, God's love encompasses us completely.

He loves every one of us, even though we're flawed, rejected, awkward, sorrowful, or broken. When we accept and embrace God's love, it fills us and empowers us to love one another.

That's what I want for this church. I want us to be able to come here, and feel totally and completely loved.

If we love each other as God has loved us, then we'll become a church of love and harmony, drawing people who are starving for love into the presence of Jesus and the salvation that He offers.

A mighty church embraces and adopts love.

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Finally, a mighty church applauds labor.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, *“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.”*

For the most part, the Greeks despised manual labor. Slave labor was typically used for any work that might make you break a sweat.

Thus, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that hard work was an honorable thing. He encouraged them to work with their hands so they could provide for themselves and win the respect of unbelievers.

Paul draws a connection between our personal work ethic and the way outsiders view the church. In other words, you can witness through your work.

Your attitude and actions testify every day to unchurched co-workers, customers, and clients about Christ.

Many of the people with whom you work will never come to a church service. Very few of them are going to turn on their television and hear a gospel message.

Fewer still are going to pick up a Bible and get to know God personally, but they interact with you on daily basis.

If you're the kind of employee or employer who always does the bare minimum, gripes about everything, and does shoddy work, people won't respect you and they won't be interested in the God you worship or where you go to church.

But if you'll come to work with a positive attitude and strong work ethic, people will see that.

One man phrased it like this: *“My first job was working in an orange juice factory, but I got canned because I couldn’t concentrate. Next, I tried working in a muffler factory but that was too exhausting. I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining. I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it, I couldn’t cut the mustard. Then I worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but I just couldn’t hack it, so they gave me the ax. My last job was working at Starbucks, but I had to quit because it was always the same old grind.”*

We’d love to work less and rest more, wouldn’t we? Most wage earners dread Monday, dream of Friday, and drag through every day in between.

Yet, God viewed work as worthy of its own engraved commandment in Exodus 34:21, *“Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest.”*

I think, if you start to view your job as an opportunity to share Christ with your co-workers or customers, it’ll change how you do your job and how you interact with the people around you.

God honors honest work. Shouldn’t your work honor God?

Slide 5

Conclusion

So... How well do we measure up to these marks of a mighty church?

Are you committed to holiness, avoid lust and sexual sin? Do you really love the person in the pew beside you? Do your actions and attitude at work win the admiration of outsiders?

I have to admit, these have been some challenging verses. They deal with where we’re living today.

That's why we should want to live a life that edifies our Lord. A life that encourages other believers and points the lost to the Savior.

I'm sure we all could live closer to the Lord than we currently do. Has He spoken to you about an area in your life that needs attention?

If so, submit to the direction of the Holy Spirit and allow Him to lead you into the depths of God's greatness!

You see, a church is only as mighty as its members. So, if we're going to be a mighty church, then we need to be mighty Christians.