

Second Sunday in Lent;

1 Thessalonians 4:1-7

EXHORTATION TO HOLINESS

1 Thes. 4:1-7

Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: 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. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.

1. This lesson is easy of interpretation. It is a general and earnest admonition on the part of Paul, enjoining us to an increasing degree of perfection in the doctrine we have received. This admonition, this exhortation, is one incumbent upon an evangelical teacher to give, for he is urging us to observe a doctrine commanded of God. He says, "For ye know what charge [commandments] we gave you through the Lord Jesus." Whatever Christians do, it should be willing service, not compulsory; but when a command is given, it should be in the form of exhortation or entreaty. Those who have received the Spirit are they from whom obedience is due; but those not inclined to a willing performance, we should leave to themselves.

2. But mark you this: Paul places much value upon the gift bestowed upon us, the gift of knowing how we are "to walk and to please God." In the world this gift is as great as it is rare. Though the offer is made to the whole world and publicly proclaimed, further exhortation is indispensable, and Paul is painstaking and diligent in administering it. The trouble is, we are in danger of becoming indolent and negligent, forgetful and ungrateful – vices menacing and great, and which, alas, are altogether too frequent. Let us look back and note to what depths of darkness, of delusion and abomination, we had sunk when we knew not how we ought to walk, how to please God. Alas, we have forgotten all about it; we have become indolent and ungrateful, and are dealt with accordingly. Well does the apostle say in the lesson for the Sunday preceding this (2 Cor 6, 1): "*And working together*

with him we entreat also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain, for he saith, At an acceptable time I hearkened unto thee, and in a day of salvation did I succor thee."

3. In our present lesson he treats chiefly of two vices: unchastity, which is a sin against oneself and destructive of the fruits of faith; and fraud in business, which is a sin against the neighbor and likewise destructive of faith and charity. Paul would have every man keep himself chaste and free from wrong against every man, pronouncing the wrath of God on offenses of this character.

4. It was a fact reflecting much credit and honor on the Thessalonians in contrast to the Corinthians and the Galatians, that they continued upright in doctrine and true in the knowledge of the faith, though perhaps deficient in the above-mentioned two self-evident features of Christian life. While it is true that if sins of immorality are not renounced God will punish, yet punishment in such cases is for the most part temporal, these sins being less pernicious than such gross offenses as error in faith and doctrine.

5. Paul, however, threatens such sins with the wrath of God, lest anyone become remiss and indolent, imagining the kingdom of Christ a kingdom to tolerate with impunity such offenses. As Paul expresses it, "God called us not for uncleanness, but in sanctification [holiness]." The thought is: Unchastity does not come within the limits of Christian liberty and privilege, nor does God treat the offender with indulgence and impunity. No, indeed. In fact, he will more rigorously punish this sin among Christians than among heathen. Paul tells us (I Cor 11, 30) that many were sickly and many had succumbed to the sleep of death in consequence of eating and drinking unworthily. And Psalm 89, 32 testifies, "*Then will I visit their transgression with the rod.*"

6. True, they who sin through infirmity, who, conscious of their transgressions, suffer themselves to be reproved, repenting at once – for these the kingdom of Christ has ready pity and forbearance, commending them to acceptance and toleration (Rom 15; Gal 6, 1; 1 Cor 13, 7); but that such vices be regarded generally lawful and normal – this will not do! Paul declares, "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." And he speaks of "how ye ought to . . . please God." His thought is: Some consider these sins a matter of little moment, treat them as if the wind blew them away and God rather had pleasure in them as trivial affairs. But this is not true. While God really bears with the fallen sinner, he would have us perceive our errors and strive to mend our lives and to abound more and more in righteousness. His grace is not intended to cloak our shame, nor should the licentious abuse the kingdom of Christ as a shield for their knavery. Paul commands (Gal 5, 13), "*Use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh*"; and Peter (1 Pet 2, 16), "*As free, and not using your freedom for a cloak of wickedness, but as bondservants of God.*"

7. Paul, following the Hebrew way of speaking, has reference to chastity where he says: "*your sanctification.*" He terms the body "*holy*" when it is chaste, chastity being, in God's sight, equivalent to holiness. "*Holiness,*" in the Old Testament, is a

synonym for "purity." Again, "holiness" and "purity" are regarded as the same thing in First Corinthians 7, 14: "Else were your children unclean; but now are they holy."

8. The nature of the holiness and purity whereof he speaks he makes plain himself in the words: "That ye abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to possess himself of his own vessel in sanctification and honor." The apostle does not here prohibit matrimony, but licentiousness, and unchastity outside the marriage state. He who is careful to keep his vessel – his body – chaste, who does not commit adultery and is not guilty of whoredom – this man preserves his body in holiness and purity, and properly is called chaste and holy. The same thought is borne out in the succeeding verse:

"Not in the passion of lust [in the lust of concupiscence], even as the Gentiles."

9. The Gentiles, who know not God, give themselves up to all manner of uncleanness, or disgraceful vices, as Paul records in Romans 1, 29-31. Not that all gentiles are guilty in that respect. Paul is not saying what all heathen do; he merely states that with the gentiles such conduct is apparent, and quite to be expected from people "who know not God." Under such conditions, one allows the sin to pass unreprieved, as does Paul himself. Notwithstanding he censures them who consent to sin of this character when knowing better, and who do not restrain the evil-doers. Rom 1, 32. But in the case of Christians, when any fall into such sin they are to be reprieved and the sin resisted; the offense must not be allowed to pass as with the gentiles. In the case of the latter the lust of concupiscence holds sway; no restraints are exercised and the reins are given to lust, so that its nature and passion are given free expression, just as if this were a provision of nature, when the fact is it is a pest to be healed, a blemish to be removed. But there is none to heal and deliver, so the gentiles decay and go to ruin through evil lust. "Lust of concupiscence' would be, with us, "evil lust." The conclusion is simple:

"That no man transgress and wrong his brother in the matter."

10. In other words, that no one take for himself what belongs to another, or use the property of another for his own benefit, which may be done by a variety of tricks. To "defraud in any matter" is to seek gain at the expense of a neighbor. On this latter subject much has been written elsewhere, particularly in the little treatise on Merchants and Usury, showing the great extent to which extortion is practiced and how charity is rarely observed. It is on this topic that Paul here would fix our attention.

