



## LETTERS FOR TODAY: 1 THESSALONIANS 4

Some would categorize 1 Thessalonians as a thanksgiving-request letter. That is, the first major portion of the letter (chapters 1-3) begins with the Paul's usual thanksgiving section (1:2-10) but adds a second thanksgiving section in 2:13-16. At 4:1, Paul uses a request formula ("we request and exhort you in the Lord") to introduce the second major portion of the letter. The second verb in that formula is the Greek verb *parakaleō*, which occurs in each of the paragraphs of chapters 4-5 and may be translated in a number of ways (NASB: "exhort" in 4:1; "urge" in 4:10; "comfort" in 4:18; "encourage" in 5:11 and 5:14).

In the NT, the verb (*parakaleō*) occurs 29 times, and the noun (*paraklēsis*) occurs 107 times. Five times a related noun refers to the Holy Spirit (*paraklete*) and can be translated "comforter." The word's range of meaning includes two primary senses: (1) to embolden to a course of action (challenge), and (2) to lift the spirits (comfort). Paul uses the verb three times in chapter 4, twice to challenge and once to comfort. The three paragraphs of 1 Thessalonians 4 give us insight in the way in which Paul "encouraged" Thessalonians (cf. 2:11) and how we might go about the work of encouraging one another.

### Paul challenged them to grow in their holiness (1 Thess. 4:1-8; cf. 3:12).

In first-century Greco-Roman culture, immorality was a way of life. There was an emphasis on pursuing pleasure. The practice of slavery gave the upper classes leisure time to indulge in that pursuit. Many religions included sex as part of their rites. In that context, Paul's challenge to live holy lives was both understandable and counter-cultural. Paul gives the Thessalonians (and us) three injunctions that will help us meet that challenge: (1) abstain from sexual immorality (4:3), (2) control sexual urges (4:4), and (3) refrain from adultery (4:6). Along with those injunctions, he provides four reasons to follow them: (1) it pleases God (4:1), (2) it obeys God's commandments (4:2, 7), and (3) it contributes to their sanctification (4:3), and (4) it protects from God's judgment (4:6).

Paul challenged them to grow in their love (1 Thess. 4:9-12; cf. 3:13).

Paul has already commended the Thessalonians for their “labor of love” (1:3) and, so, had no reason to give them further instructions about the importance of loving one another (4:9). He could, however, challenge to “excel still more” (4:10). Three areas in which they could grow were (1) living quiet lives (4:11a; cf. 2 Thess. 3:6), (2) attending to their own business (4:11b; cf. 2 Thess. 3:11), and working to support themselves (4:11c; cf. 2 Thess. 3:12). If they would behave properly toward those within the body, they would also relate properly to those outside the body (4:12).

Paul comforted them with the hope of Jesus’ coming (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The truth of Jesus’ coming was an important idea for the Thessalonians. Paul refers to it six times in his first letter and twice in his second letter. Elsewhere in the letters, Jesus’ coming is a certain hope for the future (1 Thess. 1:10), a cause for joy (1 Thess. 2:19), an incentive for purity (1 Thess. 3:12-13), a challenge to watchfulness (1 Thess 5:1-11), an incentive for sanctification (1 Thess. 5:23), a hope in suffering (2 Thess. 1:7-10), and a safeguard against apostasy (2 Thess. 2:1-14). In this paragraph, the promise of Jesus’ coming is a truth that should give us comfort and hope.

The Thessalonians were concerned that their friends and relatives who had become followers of Jesus and had already passed away might somehow have no future (4:13). Paul assures them (and us) that God will raise those believers who have passed away just as he raised Jesus (4:14). In fact, when Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise first (4:15-16). Then, believers who are alive will be caught up into the air to meet Jesus and accompany him as he comes to earth (4:17). The certainty of the resurrection that will happen at Jesus’ coming is a truth we should use to comfort one another as we face difficult circumstances.

[As an aside, the word used to refer to Jesus’ coming (*parousia*) consistently refers to his second coming in glory after “the great tribulation” (e.g., Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39). It never refers to a secret coming before or during the tribulation. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, therefore, Paul cannot be talking about a secret “pretribulation rapture” of the church.]

Paul’s concluding words in 1 Thessalonians 4 are, “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” What are “these words”? The words are the words of truth he has just written to them. Encouragement includes both challenge and comfort, and the means of encouragement is truth. If you want your encouragement to be effective, know our Scripture and encourage one another with truth. Paul’s point is . . . ***We must use truth to help one another grow.***

## Getting Personal

Take some time to read through 1 Thessalonians 4:1-18. Then, reflect on how you would answer the following questions.

1. Are there steps you should be taking to contribute to your sanctification, particularly in regard to sexual purity (4:1-8)?
2. Are you living a quiet life, attending to your own business, and working so that you are able to share with others (4:9-12)? How could you “excel still more”?
3. How prominent a place in your thinking does Jesus’ return hold (4:13-18)? Is it a source of hope and comfort, for you and for others?
4. How can you use the truth of God’s Word to challenge and/or comfort another believer this week?