

# EMBEDDED

There is no greater force for change or cultural influence than the local church. The church in Thessalonica is a powerful example: it's one of the farthest-flung churches Paul is able to plant. From there, all of Europe is reached for Christ. Though the people of this young church have serious questions about the reason for their existence, Paul reassures them in 1 Thessalonians that they are fulfilling God's purpose just by being present in the world. Because they are **Embedded**, they stand as a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ. They are examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. The church embedded is an insurgency, toppling the kingdoms of this world by sharing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

## ALWAYS GROWING • 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 • Jennifer Holz • May 28, 2017

Today we continue our study of 1 Thessalonians, our *Embedded* series. Alongside the Thessalonians, who were embedded as a worshipping community in their city, we've been looking at where God has embedded us as a downtown church in Colorado Springs and where God has embedded each of us where we live and work. We've had some great pictures on social media.

We'll end today in chapter 4—where Paul gives final instructions to the Thessalonians about how they are to live as Christians. His main point here is simply this: *A life that pleases God is a life that is always growing.* Open your Bibles.

### **Passage: 1 Thess. 4:1-12**

*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. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.*

<sup>3</sup> *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each of you should learn to control your own body<sup>[a]</sup> in a way that is holy and honorable, <sup>5</sup> not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.<sup>[b]</sup> The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. <sup>7</sup> For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. <sup>8</sup> Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

<sup>9</sup> *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. <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.*

The dandelions in our yard this Spring are pretty unrelenting. When I think of a growing process that is never ceasing and nearly impossible to stop, I think of dandelions. They aren't my favorite. I spend lots of time trying to kill them, uproot them, defeat them. I'm not patient enough to wait for weed killer to work; I want immediate results. As an aside, our neighbors aren't as passionate about this endeavor. So, I'm constantly battling the blowing seeds of dandelions on all fronts. This is war in my yard.

Several weekends ago, my daughters came out, on their initiative, to help me. That made my heart so proud. They understand that we need to be all in on this battle. It's very important! Later that day, I talked to my mom—and she told me she had spent the day digging out dandelions in her yard. Suddenly it all made sense. Hmm...I don't remember seeing my mom do this, but apparently it is a way of life in the Oraker family... I guess picked it up from her, and I am passing it along to my daughters. This is our contribution to the flourishing lawn project in our neighborhood.

Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonians that the Christian life is one that's always growing. A relationship with God is one of abundance, of growing more and more. *Sanctification* is the process of growing more and more like Christ. When we are engaged with the life God has given us, it's pleasing to God. He's pleased when we roll up our sleeves and dig in with Him. Life is growing

everywhere in you. Your life is a garden shooting forth the life of Christ everywhere.

Paul has already commended the Thessalonians (chapter 1) that their faith is influencing Macedonia. The One who began a good work in them is bringing it to completion—even when they aren't sure if anything is happening – God is being faithful to what He has planted in them. They are working hard alongside the Gardener to partner in the flourishing life of their city!

Back to the dandelions for a moment. I want to be clear here: They are weeds. The dandelions metaphor is not the picture I would use to illustrate the growing of our spiritual lives. But, according to Paul, there are practices, habits, and ways of living that have to be ruthlessly dealt with so that real life can grow. Attending to our lives, and the weeds in our lives that need to be rooted out (he talks specifically about practices of the body) is all part of the growing process. All of that together is the process of sanctification. And so we work alongside the gardener—learning the rhythms of true life together and individually. Day by day. Week by week. Life by life. This is us. This is our life together.

### **Pleasing God**

Paul starts this section of Scripture with what I would call a "mini parent-teacher conference." He reminds the church that their goal is to "please God (vs.1)." At this point he gives them an A in pursuing and pleasing God: "*we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.*" Then he encourages them to keep living that way, to keep orienting their lives toward the Lord. This is our whole-life calling—that our lives would be wrapped completely in Christ, folded into Him and always flourishing, always abounding more and more in Him. Live your whole life worthy of God (chapter 2). Keep going! Keep running after the Lord.

Our kids started swim practice this week. As many of you know, our summer activities are oriented around the pool. They will work hard, and they will listen to and work hard to please their coaches. Their coaches care about them and know what it takes to be good swimmer. But they also care deeply about what kind of people their swimmers are becoming. They approach swim team as a place where kids can grow in character, serving others and becoming leaders. It's actually quite a remarkable program. The coaches will work with them on individual strokes and getting faster, but they are oriented towards the whole of these young team members' lives.

God is interested in every part of your life. The Lord calls us to grow in godly attitudes, behaviors and practices in our lives; and we respond wholeheartedly, spurred on and filled with the Holy Spirit, cultivating a life oriented toward Christ in its entirety. Out of gratitude and thanksgiving, we seek to please the Lord with our whole lives over a lifetime. Paul praises the Thessalonians for living this way, for seeking to please Him in everything and encourages them to keep it up.

As summer approaches here in Colorado, we are being given a moment by moment picture of the beauty of God's creation. Life springs up everywhere. The days are warmer. The mountains amaze in their splendor. Creation awakens with life, and we get a front row seat to see how God works there. God gives us this marvelous backdrop in which to live our lives. And what we see externally is a metaphor illustrating the creative and vibrant life

He invites us to live. Each budding tree and blooming flower speaks to God's pleasure in his creation. He wants us to grow and bloom and flourish like the oak tree and the lilac.

Before you try to please God, you need to know that God is pleased with each of you. He loves you, He created you, and He wants nothing more than for you to live fully into the life He has created for you in Jesus Christ. Real life. And just like in a garden, some life will flourish, some will be pruned, some things will be rooted right out (which can feel painful). But in our lives, God brings beauty, spacious growth, and opportunity for sacrifice and forgiveness. He helps us to build relationships that flourish and to cultivate new patterns that honor God and neighbor. As God's Word is taken root deep within us, we begin to grow. A life that pleases God is a life that is always growing.

Paul then turns to matters of the body. He wants to remind the Thessalonians that while they are pursuing God wholeheartedly, a culture still swirls around them that threatens to pull them off course. His writing doesn't indicate that they are having particular problems in practices of the body, but when one is embedded in a place, it's good to keep eyes wide open to the surrounding forces. Paul reminds them that a life that pleases God is a holy life.

### A Life that Pleases God is Holy

Martin Luther wrote about living our lives in praise of God. He also writes about the desire that grows within us to bring our bodies into alignment with the Holy Spirit, so that every part of us lives to please God. The sanctification process is not just about soul and spirit. The sanctification process is about our whole selves, including our bodies, coming into alignment with Christ. Accordingly, in verses 3-8, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to: avoid sexual immorality, learn to control their bodies, not to wrong or take advantage of brothers or sisters.

Paul indicates that part of our sanctification process is avoiding sexual immorality—*porneia* is the Greek word, from which we get our word *pornography*. It means sexual pursuits apart from the covenant of marriage.

In the culture of Thessalonica, there was little or no stigma attached to such behavior. For men *porneia* was the status quo. No guilt. No sense that something might be wrong with such pursuits. It was just part of being male. F.F. Bruce wrote of this cultural value, "A man might have a mistress who could provide him with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine, while casual gratification as readily available from a harlot. The function of a wife was to manage his household affairs and to be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs" (Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*). This was just normal in the culture, but Paul says this is not what God intended.

We might think that ours is the most the most challenging time in history when it comes to sexual immorality. But the Greco-Roman culture of Paul's age was incredibly lax when it came to sexual practice. Historians write that cities were places of wildest corruption. In fact, "There probably has never been a period in history when vice was more extravagant or uncontrolled than in the time of the Caesars." (ibid.) The word translated "avoid" (vs. 3) in this passage is a strong one. It means to cut off, abstain, separate from. This is not a command of moderation but of complete avoidance. This is the dandelion dilemma. *Root out these practices, or they will keep showing up.*

Scripture teaches that our bodies are gifts from the Lord—they are how we experience life, relationship, serving others, giving birth, loving. But our bodies are not the entirety of who we are. They are not to control us. We are not simply a bundle of physical impulses needing gratification. As people created in the image of God, we are much more than that. Paul writes that we are to learn to control our bodies in ways that are holy and honorable.

Paul also raises up the dignity of each person by saying that no one who is in relationship with God should ever take advantage of a brother or sister sexually. Ever. Sexual immorality damages people. *Porneia* degrades, uses and destroys another. When one's life is oriented around *porneia*, or around the appetites of the body, destruction inevitably follows. Paul's instructions flow from the God-given dignity of male and female. Learn to control your bodies, Paul teaches, to bring them into alignment with God's purposes. As we mature in Christ, learning to control our bodies, we discover more life-giving pursuits for the body.

### A Life that Pleases God Loves Well

Verse 9: "Now about your love for one another..."

A life that pleases God moves toward others in love and service—building up the body. *Porneia* dis-integrates a person's life. It pulls people apart, diminishes and breaks their humanity. It moves a person towards isolation, shame and retreat, even death. But in community, the love of the believers catches the broken, lifts them up, and in the community of Christ's love, our damaged humanity begins to show signs of life and wholeness once more. The antidote to *porneia* is participation in loving, Christ-centered community. The word is *Philadelphia* (brotherly love).

The contrast couldn't be more clear: *porneia* tears apart, takes advantage and dehumanizes. *Philadelphia* brings together, lifts up the other, restores and redeems damaged relationships. Human beings flourish when they're surrounded by love and encouragement. Paul says the Thessalonians exhibit such love, and again he urges them to love one another more and more.

In the New Testament, *philadelphia* characterizes the love between brothers and sisters in Christ. It is made possible by the agape love of Jesus, the unconditional love poured out by God. Love of God moves us to the love of others. Jesus told his disciples that the world will know they belong to Him by their love for one another. The quality of our love right here in this room is a radical catalyst for the world's ability to see God more clearly. Think of the person on your right. On your left. These people are God's gift to you. Whether you know them or not. Moving towards them with God's love changes the world.

Let's think about this practically: This church is big...this service includes a lot of people. *But where during your week, does big church become small for you? Where are you learning to love? On the map of your weekly life, where is your Philadelphia? Who are the people you are meeting with regularly—a small community or group, a spiritual friendship—one or two who know one another well? A place where Bonhoeffer says "we are speaking the gospel to one another." Keep going. Keep growing. Keep loving one another well.*

Finally, we end with these verses: <sup>11</sup>...*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,* <sup>12</sup>*so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.*

Writer and spiritual director Ruth Haley Barton is well-known for

her illustration of a jar of river water. Your life is a “jar of river water” all stirred up. What we need is to stop, be still and allow the sediment, the dirt, the rocks to sink to the bottom. When we don’t take time to be still, our lives are cloudy, full of debris and hard to see. Take a deep breath. Be still.

### **A Life that Pleases God is a Quiet (ed) Life**

Paul writes “...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life...” (1 Thessalonians 4:11) Another way to say it is this: *strive with all your might to be still. Aspire to live quietly. Make it your ambition to be at peace.* A life that pleases God is a quiet (or a quieted) life. The implication here is not so much—stop talking, or take up residence in a monastery—or that verse you introverts been searching for—see! *Introverts really are morally superior.*

The direction of this command leans toward quietness of soul, an inner stillness, an understanding of purpose that brings peace and perspective. It’s knowing why you are doing what you are doing. This command refers to an inner strength that flows into our daily tasks and responsibilities, but a call to cultivate a stillness inside, to have purpose in all you do.

It’s not a call to look at your schedule and start cutting things out, although that may be the application. But, to know *why* you are doing what you are doing and to know God’s call on your life. It’s possible to be very active for the Lord and be at peace. Paul writes about the importance of work. God has given us work to do. Do it! Paul writes, *mind your own business*, or attend to your own affairs—don’t have your hands in everyone else’s business. Know God’s direction in your life. Peace, direction and the purpose of our work come from a cultivated stillness before the Lord and listening for the Word of God in our lives. Such a life wins the respect of outsiders.

*How are you cultivating stillness in your soul? As we move into summer, this is a great time to look at your schedule and find that space for God. Where will that be? Some of you will need to find it with kids crawling all over you (since they are now out of school). But there is not a better time to find it than now. Some of you will go for a walk in the beauty of our surroundings maybe in the early morning or later in the evening. Where ever you carve it out, let someone know so they can help you stick to it! In two weeks, we’ll begin to dig into what a soul needs. We’ll be working on this all summer!*

The end of the matter is this:

- Pursue holiness.
- Love one another well.
- Work hard.
- Be still.

The Christian life, if we want to grow, requires intentional cultivation of relationships, godly habits and attentiveness to the Lord. Such a life, such a church, embedded right where God has planted it pleases God and produces the fruit that God desires – that whole cities might be influenced for Christ.

A life that pleases God is life that is always growing. Amen.

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## **STUDY GUIDE**

### **“Embedded: Always Growing”**

#### **I Thessalonians 4:1-12**

#### **Start It**

- If someone were to ask you the question, “how are you doing with God today?” (or something along those lines), what would you think about in order to answer that question?
- If someone were to ask you “how are you pleasing God today?” how would your process for answering that question change? Or would it be the same answer?

#### **Study It**

- Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.
- What observations do you make about this text? What words or phrases jump out at you, or get repeated? What questions does this passage raise?
- What does it mean to Paul to “live in order to please God”?
- We aren’t clear on all the instructions Paul has given them in the past, but he does give some instruction about sanctification here. What does he focus in on and why do you think these are the behaviors he highlights here?
- Part of our sanctification process is growing in love for one another in God’s family. How does cultivating a life of love of our brothers and sisters help to provide a foundation for control of the body, not taking advantage of others and avoiding sexual immorality?
- One commentator re-translates “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (vs. 11) to “strive with all your might to be still.” What does stillness have to do with sanctification? And what does “mind your own business and work with your hands” have to do with winning respect from outsiders?
- How are you doing at these instructions in your day-to-day life?

#### **Pray It**

*Take a moment or two to be still with one another. After some time of quiet together, have someone pray over your group being guided by our text today.*

#### **Live It**

Before you depart, identify a space in the coming week where you will commit to being still before the Lord.