

What does it mean to be a Christian?

On this question there is much confusion.

In 2019, 65% of Americans identified themselves as Christian.

But if you look at our country and our churches you would never know it.

Why? Because it isn't true. Nowhere near 65% are Christians. They may think they are Christians.

65% have not counted the cost. 65% are not on the narrow path. 65% are not following Jesus.

Did you know that the word "Christian" is used only once in the entire Bible?

Acts 11:25-26 Why?

Because they were "disciples."

The word means someone who is learning, in this case, learning about Jesus and from Jesus.

We also discover in Acts 11 that these believers are sharing the Gospel with others.

A Christian is someone who is believing in Jesus Christ, growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, learning to live like Jesus Christ, and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you are not doing all of that you should not call yourself a Christian.

A Christian is someone who is getting better at living for God.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 makes this plain.

Get better at living for God.

In the first three chapters of Thessalonians we have seen Paul's love and affection for these believers.

In chapter 1 we learned how thankful Paul was for these faithful, loving, steadfast believers.

In chapter 2 we were reminded of how much Paul suffered to bring them the Gospel.

He gave them the Gospel truth and the whole truth, not just flattery and entertainment.

He did so gently, like a nursing mother caring for her children, because people are easily hurt.

Like a father speaking to his children Paul encouraged them to walk with Jesus.

As Paul looks forward to the return of Christ, he says about them, "You are my glory and my joy."

And he desperately wanted to come and visit them, though he was not able to do so.

So, he has sent to them Timothy, his best friend and fellow servant of Christ.

He has heard back from them that they are faithfully following Jesus. He is so happy.

But Paul's letters always come with exhortation, just as he says about his ministry with them.

1 Thessalonians 2:11 Now, in chapter 4 we are going to get some teaching and preaching.

Why? Because Paul wants them to grow.

Did you know? As a Christian you are supposed to be growing, improving, learning.

I. You are supposed to be growing in your obedience. 4:1-2

Paul has taught them to walk with Jesus Christ and to please God.

You might think of this as basic Christian living.

Now, Paul wants them to keep growing and get better at these things and learn new things.

I think of Paul's words to the Corinthian believers who were not growing. **1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3**

You see, every Christian begins as a baby believer, even if you are 80 years old.

You don't know the Bible, don't know what is right or wrong, don't know how to pray or witness.

At the beginning of our Christian walk we all start as babies, drinking milk from mommy.

We need others to help us grow and mature, give guidance and correction.

But the idea is that we grow up in our faith, move on to eating solid food.

What would that be?

That is when you are feeding yourself big boy food. Others don't have to feed you.

You might do the cooking or maybe someone else does, but you know how to eat.

This means that you now listen to sermons and make application to your life without someone telling you to.

You open the Bible every day and read and study on your own or with others.

You go to Bible studies without someone telling you to because you know you need it.

You do your Sunday School reading or study. You are an intentional learner.

You don't just show up and expect someone to keep feeding you. You come with knife and fork!

And you are changing...

from the gossipy, fleshly, contentious, lazy, distracted, people-pleasing person you were.

Into someone who is more like Christ, who loves other people, who is ready to teach or serve.

This is the design for Christians. We grow. We get better.

It doesn't mean that we never struggle or fall into sin, but when we do, we confess it, repent, get up, get right with God and others, and get back on the path of growth with Jesus.

We read in verse 2 about commandments that Paul gave them, commandments that come from the Lord Jesus.

This is important because Jesus is the Lord, our commander. He's the king!

He commands we obey. That is how it works. 1 John tells us that we obey because we love Him.

Many people will tell you that commandments are bad, or that God doesn't care if we obey them.

That is a very non-Biblical and false way of thinking.

God gives us commandments because He wants us to obey them.

The error, of course, is thinking that the commandments can save us or that we can do them without God's help.

Commandments are guides for growth. They show us where to go and where not to go.

You might think of God's commandments as the path laid out in front of us.

They are like the rails of the train tracks. But they do not give us the power to get going.

The power comes from God's Holy Spirit. God saves you by His grace and then helps you grow in grace.

The effort to put one foot in front of the other and get going, get growing, comes from faith in Jesus Christ.

But it does take effort along with faith. Truth and effort and faith always lead to obedience.

And you are supposed to be making progress down that path. **Ephesians 2:8-10**

Next, one particular area of obedience comes to Paul's mind, one that these Thessalonians need to think about.

II. Abstain from sexual immorality.

4:3-8

This was a problem because the Greco-Roman culture was oversexed and filled with immorality.

You see this in verse 5. The people around them who did not know God lived "in the passions of lust."

The pagan temples had prostitutes openly available to all comers.

The rich sometimes dressed in drag and often dabbled in homosexuality.

Marital fidelity was optional at best and innkeepers kept slaves for the sexual pleasure of their guests.

Now here we are living 2,000 years later and in this respect our society is just like theirs.

I am constantly amazed by the applicability of the Scriptures,

writing 2,000 to 3,500 years old and yet it speaking as if it were written yesterday.

Here we live in an oversexed, lust-obsessed, sexuality driven culture.

Where people define themselves according to sexual preference and identity.

Where marriage is thought of as adjustable and optional.

Where the push of a button brings loads of sexual images right into your home.

But the command of God is the same. "Abstain from sexual immorality."

The word is the most general word used in the Bible for sexual sin.

"Porneia" = where we get our word "pornography" = pornea in pictures

It includes adultery, sex outside of marriage when you are married, sex before marriage,

different kinds of sexual activity, kissing, fondling, nudity, all of that.

Stay away from it all. Why?

Because God wants you to be holy. "Sanctification" = living holy, set apart for God, different.

What does that look like? What is God's standard? **1 Corinthians 7:1** "Don't touch (sexually).

Don't even get the engine started. Don't put yourself someplace where it can happen.

You might say, "How can I do that when all around me is so sexually charged?"

But the Thessalonians might bring the same complaint, and still the commandment of God stands.

Sure, it is hard, and it is countercultural, but no one ever said that walking with Jesus would be easy.

In fact, Jesus said it would be hard.

You might say, "Pastor, you are just out of touch. I've already got things started. Everyone does it."

And, I say this to you, "I'm telling you the truth. God's truth."

Read the Scriptures and you will feel in your heart the Holy Spirit telling you that this is true." Listen.

It's hard. But it's true. Better yet, God will help you to obey if you let Him.

Moreover, everyone is not "doing it."

There are people, and I know some personally, who are committed to no sex before marriage.

There are people, and I know them personally, who are committed to no "pornea" during their marriage.

Don't ever fall for the lie that everyone is doing it. It's never true anyhow.

Why keep this command? Paul gives us three reasons in three verses:

vs. 6 Because this defrauds your brother.

Men, when you are sexually involved with a woman who is not your wife...

you are messing around with someone who is or might become someone else's wife.

You are stealing from that man, who you might not even know. But God knows.

The same is true for a woman who is sexually involved with a man not her husband.

The same is true for a homosexual relationship. God sees. God knows.

"The Lord is the avenger in all these things." He will make you pay for that theft, that sin.

vs. 7 Because God has called you to holiness (sanctification).

1 Peter 1:16 quoting Leviticus 11:45, "Be holy for I am holy."

You are not your own. Your body is not yours alone. If you are a Christian, God owns you.

This is the most important thing about you. This is your sexual identity.

vs. 8 If you reject this commandment you are rejecting God.

Listen, there are few sins that take you away from God as fast as sexual immorality. *Glen*
So, we are to grow in our sexual faithfulness.

We are also to grow in our loving of others, which is obviously related.

III. Love people around you.

4:9-12

We learn something about love in verses 9-10. Read carefully.

Love is something that you learn and then practice. It is what you do.

Love does involve feelings, but it is not in its essence a feeling. It is an action. Love is a verb.

The more you love someone else, the more you will feel love for them.

Our world has it wrong way round. The more you feel love the more you will act lovingly. No.

In love, your feelings follow your actions and your actions follow your commitment to love.

Therefore, Paul tells them to "do this more and more" or "excel still more" or "progress even more."

Are you growing in your love for others?

In particular, Paul is here talking about loving "the brethren," other Christians around you.

How are you doing at choosing to love others around you, then doing it and having your feelings follow?

Do you plan out your loving and then do your plan? You ought to.

I'm not that good at this, but I'll tell you where I've gotten good.

For years I have planned out my loving of my kids and I have carried out those plans.

It is amazing. I have even amazed myself! They feel loved by their daddy.

I only wish I would have done this with more people. But I can begin now. You can too.

In verses 11-12 Paul turns his attention to how we need to be growing in how we treat other people around us.

Now he is thinking about "outsiders." (vs. 12) This means people who are not Christians.

Three things that we are supposed to do in order to "behave properly" and "not be in need."

In other words, we don't want to give anyone the grounds to say that we Christians are a drag on society.

1. "Lead a quiet life."

Don't make a lot of noise about things that don't matter. Don't insist on your own way.

Don't be that person who goes off about Trump or masks or QAnon or the Kennedy assassination.

2. "Mind your own business."

Don't be in everyone else's business. Don't be a gossip. Don't listen to gossip.

Be interested in the person you are talking to about the person you are talking to.

3. "Work hard with your hands."

Do what God has called you to do. You know that you are supposed to do that. Get busy.

Productive work protects you from all kinds of sin. Proverbs warns about laziness and idleness.

Commit yourself to growing. Get better at obeying God. Get involved with others who are doing so.