

“Negentropy”

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

Have you noticed that your house seems to get messy or disorderly on its own? That’s not the work of mischievous gnomes living under your couth. Rather, it’s a picture of the increase of entropy – the measure of a system’s disorder. The 2nd law of thermodynamics states that *“The state of entropy of the entire universe, as an isolated system, will always increase over time.”*^[1] That is to say, the universe is unwinding; falling apart right before our eyes. In a world like that, it is more important than ever that those who profess a faith in Jesus Christ stand up for what they believe. It means standing against the natural process of increasing disorder and decay.

Chaos is the devil’s plaything. He is the prince of this world – Jesus even says so (John 12:31, John 16:11) and he uses chaos to disorient and confuse you, so that even when you want to pursue the good things of God, sometimes it seems like you can hardly even see straight, let alone run after Him.

But you don’t have to be part of a system like that. Yes, you are physically present, but you don’t have to be part of the values and priorities and the increasing chaos of the world around you. The phrase “In the world but not of the world” comes to mind. Surprisingly to some that phrase is actually not in the Bible, though it’s probably based on some statements in the Bible such as John 15:19.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are meant for something more. We are designed and called to be set apart for something special. That’s the idea behind our understanding of sanctification. It means being set apart for God’s purposes, plans, and designs.

Sanctification means being set apart in your views on sexuality. Verse 3 tells us to **“Avoid sexual immorality.”** This comes from the Greek word πορνεία – broad term including any illicit sexual activity, including adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. Paul was writing to a very sexually promiscuous culture. Indeed, ancient writer Demosthenes captured the liberal view of sexuality of the day when he said, *“We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”* To those living in a sex-soaked culture such as that, Paul says, ‘Control yourselves. Don’t be like the world; be different than that. Don’t let the world tell you what’s permissible; you tell the world what’s honorable.’

Sanctification means being set apart in your views on brotherhood. Having something in common is the foundation of brotherhood, which in this context comes from the Greek word φιλαδελφία. In verse 9, Paul commends their love for one another, but encourages them to avoid stagnation; to seek an even greater sense of brotherhood and community. The call to love others is not a light call, but you should not be intimidated by it. Start by loving a small group within the church, then the small group that is the local church, and

expand out from there. In our world, it is easy to find substitutes for the kind of brotherhood Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to have among themselves. But like the 'doughnut' spare tire in your car, these substitutes pale in comparison to the real thing. Being set apart in brotherhood means allowing brotherhood with God's people to have a special place in your heart of hearts.

Sanctification means being set apart in your views on living. Acts 17 gives some of the history of Paul's travels, including his arrival and preaching in Athens. Some of the people who heard him speak at Athens were part of a group called the Epicureans; a group that followed the teachings of Greek philosopher Epicurus (3rd-4th century B.C.) Epicurus taught that pleasure and happiness were the chief pursuits of this life.^[2] Some people live that way today, and the results are predictable: discouraging divorce rates, crippling levels of financial debt, and an overwhelming sense of insufficiency and insignificance. The relentless pursuit of pleasure, it seems, always leaves you chasing the end of the next rainbow; always searching, never satisfied.

Paul exhorts the Christ-follower to live differently than that. Pursuing momentary pleasure may be the way of the world, but you have a choice! You can choose to be set apart – to pursue greater things than that – to be a conduit through which people see Jesus. That's what he means in verses 11-12. Live life in such a manner that when people see you, the first thing they think of is Jesus. In these verses, you and I are called to a different lifestyle; not necessarily one of excessive self-denial and poverty, but one that shines the spotlight on Jesus instead of yourself.

Sometimes sanctification – being set apart – means living counter-culture. Paul says, 'Live better than the world around you' not because you're better than other people, but because you are following a better way. You're choosing to allow yourself to be set apart – sanctified, by the indwelling power of God's Holy Spirit.

That's really what sanctification means; allowing yourself to be set apart – living as what you are; one who is designed for a specific purpose. I'm reminded of Ephesians 2:10, which states, **"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."** You are meant for something more. You are meant to increase in order, not decrease – that means standing against the tide of the world you live in. It means living differently, allowing Jesus to cleanse you through and through; giving up control to Him as He calls you to be more and more like Him. As you do that, you will find that more and more, when the world sees you, they will be more and more able to see Jesus in you, as you are conformed to His image through the power of the Holy Spirit at work within you.

[1] [https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry_Textbook_Maps/Supplemental_Modules_\(Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry\)/Thermodynamics/The_Four_Laws_of_Thermodynamics/Second_Law_of_Thermodynamics](https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry_Textbook_Maps/Supplemental_Modules_(Physical_and_Theoretical_Chemistry)/Thermodynamics/The_Four_Laws_of_Thermodynamics/Second_Law_of_Thermodynamics)

[2] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, reprinted 1985, p. 464.

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

- 1. If Paul (and the others) had already taught the Thessalonians these things, why is he repeating them? What value is there in this? How does that change the way you might think about hearing a sermon on a topic you've already heard?**
- 2. Describe your understanding of sanctification in simple terms, so others can understand what you mean. Describe an analogy that would help you and others understand it better.**
- 3. Should a sandwich be cut side-to-side or diagonally? Why?**
- 4. How might an unmarried person apply verses 3-8? What about a married person?**
- 5. In verse 8, Paul indicates that ignoring the call to personal holiness and purity is tantamount to disregarding God Himself. How might this truth help you reject temptation? Describe how this is a call to overcome, not a guilt trip.**
- 6. What unique or highly specialized tool or kitchen gadget do you have? How is that tool/gadget more useful than the next best alternative? When you need it, aren't you glad you have it?**
- 7. Describe what it would look like if you did the exact opposite of what Paul says in verses 11-12. How would that impact your testimony before unbelievers?**
- 8. Would you rather be a hard worker who handles his/her business responsibly, or a worthless and idle good-for-nothing? Why?**
- 9. What have you learned through your personal time of Bible reading this week?**