

Paul's Exhortation To Abound More And More In Holiness Of Life.

Text: 1 Thess 4:1-7

1) To Whom This Exhortation Is Addressed

Suggested Hymns:

2) What It Requires

155, 335, 355, 291, 353

3) Why It Must Be Heeded

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7, ¹ *Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;* ² *for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*

³ *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;* ⁴ *that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,* ⁵ *not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;* ⁶ *that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.* ⁷ *For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“Abound more and more.” This is the exhortation which Paul addresses to the Christians in our Epistle. Christians should abound more and more, that is, they should not stand still and be satisfied with their present state and condition, but make forward strides, advance, and progress.

The children of this world have a great deal to say about the advancement and progress of the age. They point to the numerous inventions of the last century and claim, as the world has made great strides forward in earthly things, so there should be progress in religion also. And what is it they call progress in the line of religion?

Formerly, they say, the Christians quarrelled a great deal among themselves about matters of faith and doctrine. They disagreed as to the interpretation of

Scripture. Some would explain the Bible in this way, and others in another way. And then they framed creeds and confessions, which they put up as dividing walls between the different churches, and each church would assail the other and carry on an uncompromising warfare.

These times of religious indifference and intolerance are past. Away, they say, with the creeds and confessions! No more trials for heresy! This is an age of enlightenment and progress. Let every Christian explain the Bible for himself just as he chooses, and let all the Christian churches unite on the basis of love which is the acknowledged foundation of true Christianity. This would be true progress in religion.

Others even go a step farther and advocate the abolition of religion altogether. They say, "*What good has the Bible done? Has not the Bible kept men from enjoying themselves in this life in expectation of the uncertain joys of heaven? Does not the Bible demand faith, blind faith, in things which no man can comprehend, and lead to the grossest superstition? Away, then, with the Bible, they say; away with religion altogether! This is the age of reason. Let every person go by his own common sense, and enjoy life and do as he pleases. This would be true progress.*"

It goes without saying that no Christian can take part in such alleged progress, which either does away with religion altogether, or considers religion so uncertain a thing that, in spite of doctrinal differences, all Christians may unite on the basis of Christian love.

Nevertheless, Christians must and do progress and advance in the right way. Their progress is on a different line, on the line of holiness, of sanctification. They are exhorted to abound more and more in holiness of life.

Let us consider, *Paul's Exhortation To Abound More And More In Holiness Of Life*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. To Whom This Exhortation Is Addressed

Is there any one among us who must not frankly admit that he should abound more and more, that he is not made perfect as yet, that he ought to be better and do better in many things? Yes, is there any one in this wide world who is without a fault and who needs not to be told to become better?

One might think therefore that Paul addresses his exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life to all people. But this is not so. Let us hear him!

He says, ¹ *Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.* To whom, then, does Paul address this exhortation? To those who had received or accepted what he had preached to them, to those who had become his brethren in Christ Jesus, to the converted Thessalonians, to the true Christians.

Those among the Thessalonians who were not truly converted were excluded from this exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life.

Do not be surprised at this. Can a tree grow which has not been planted? Can a man increase who has not been born? Can a traveller approach his destination when he has not even found the road which leads to the place he intends to reach?

Behold, it is just as impossible for any one to abound more and more, to become a better Christian, when he has not even commenced to be a Christian. To know, therefore, whether this exhortation is addressed to you also, you must find out and see whether you are a Christian.

What? Are we not all Christians? Surely we are not heathen! Have we not been born of Christian parents? Have we not been baptised into the Christian faith? This is what many will say. But let us see. Who is really a Christian?

A Christian — the word translated literally into plain English — is a person anointed, anointed with the Holy Spirit. A Christian is the person in whose heart a wonderful change has been wrought and effected by God's Holy Spirit. A Christian is the person who sincerely believes in the Saviour Jesus who bled and died on the cross for his sins.

A Christian is the person who finds his delight in the Law of the Lord, who has bidden farewell to sin, who would rather die than sin against his God, who desires to do such things as please God, and whose greatest sorrow is, that, on account of the weakness of his flesh, he sins daily, and does things which are displeasing to his divine Maker.

A Christian is the person whose citizenship is in heaven, who does not cling to this present world, but whose affection is set on the things that are above where Christ sits at the right hand of God.

Are you a Christian, then? Have you experienced that wonderful change in the heart by which a person is regenerated, born again of the Spirit of God, made a new creature, a child of God? Can you say with St. Paul, *it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me?*¹ Is your life, a life in the faith of the Son of God? Does God's Holy Spirit govern your thoughts and your actions? Or have you lost your baptismal grace, and are you a Christian in name only and not in reality and truth?

Let me plead with you that you do not deceive yourselves! What does it benefit you to insist that you are a Christian when God knows that you are not a Christian? Let me tell you that, if this is so, then this exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life is not meant for you.

First, you must become good before you can become better. First, you must admit before God that you have strayed away from Him and appeal to His mercy. First, you must come to your senses like the prodigal son and learn to say, *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."*²

First, you must come and say,

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.³

Then, by the grace of God, you will be made a child of God in true faith, and Paul's exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life will apply to you also.

2. What It Requires

And now, in the second place, let us consider what this exhortation requires.

Paul says, *for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.* ³ *For this is the will of God, your sanctification.* What Paul demands here is, in one word, sanctification. Sanctification is not an inactive state and condition, but a continual process in the Christian.

In sanctification a Christian can never say, *“Now I may be at rest, now I have attained, now I am made perfect.”* No; in sanctification a Christian is never satisfied with himself, he daily finds how much he is still lacking to be what he should be, and he daily seeks to do better and to abound more and more in holiness of life.

Sanctification consists of three parts. A Christian must abound more and more in true Christian knowledge, in the purification and renewal of his heart, and in good deeds.

First in Christian knowledge. A Christian should not be satisfied with himself if he has learned only the basic elements of the Christian religion, the things which he absolutely must know as to his soul’s salvation. No, says St. Paul, you must abound more and more. You must daily search the Scriptures which will make you wise unto salvation. You must come and hear the preaching of the divine Word. You must study the plan of salvation.

You must enrich your understanding of divine things, so that always more and more you rid yourself of error, and be enabled to tell which is true doctrine and which is false doctrine, and to convince the gainsayers. This is the first thing in sanctification, to abound more and more in true Christian knowledge.

The second thing is the purification and renewal of the heart. A Christian should not say within himself, *“You are keeping yourself from gross sins, and though you have your faults as everybody else has, nobody can say that you are not a Christian. If only you stay where you are, you can be sure of eternal life.”* No, says St. Paul, you must abound more and more.

Your care and concern should be, not only, not to lose the grace of God altogether which you have received, but to do better, to increase in all Christian virtues. You must purify your heart and your life always more and more.

If there is any sin to which you are subject, you must fight that sin and rid yourself from it with the aid of God’s Holy Spirit. For instance, if the sin of covetousness has seized upon you, so that you find yourself unwilling to give for God’s kingdom, you should make it a point to overcome this sin of covetousness, and constantly bear in mind that the love of money is the root of all evil. See that always more and more you conform your life to the will of God, that continually you grow in faith and in love.

This leads us to the third part of sanctification, which is, to abound more and more in good deeds. A Christian should not say, "I am not giving offence to anybody, I am not doing wrong, and I am making an open profession of the faith before the world; what more can be required of me?" No, says St. Paul, you must abound more and more.

You must prove the sincerity of your faith by deeds of love, and increase in love to God and to the neighbour always more and more. See that you become always more zealous in worshipping God, more fervent in prayer, more diligent in reading the Bible, more conscientious in duty, more faithful, more unselfish, more kind and forgiving, more gentle, more benevolent; in short, "***Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.***"⁴ This is sanctification. This is what Paul requires in his exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life.

3. Why It Must Be Heeded

In the third place, let us briefly consider why this exhortation should be heeded.

The Apostle assigns two reasons: First, it is the will of God that we should abound more and more in holiness of life; and secondly, He threatens His anger and wrath if we do not follow after holiness.

He says, ***For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*** It is true that by sanctification nobody can obtain eternal life. Your holy living will never bring you into heaven. That which saves is the grace of God in Christ Jesus, and nothing else.

If with a true heart you believe in the Saviour Jesus, all your sins are forgiven, and you are an heir of eternal salvation. And have not all your sins been forgiven already in Holy Baptism? Does not the Scripture say in Galatians 3:27, ²⁷ ***For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ?*** See, then, what a merciful God you have! Already in Baptism He has forgiven you all your sins, the sins of your whole life.

All you must do therefore is to comfort yourself with the grace of God in Christ which He applied to you in Baptism, and you shall be saved. Luther says, "***A Christian must walk in his Baptism all his lifetime.***"

But you know that God is holy as much as He is merciful. He hates and detests sin. We read in Psalm 5:4, ***4 For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, Nor shall evil dwell with You.*** This is His will, therefore, that every one whose sins are forgiven should cleanse himself and sweep out those sins which he observes within himself. This he should do, not with a view of meriting something and gaining heaven thereby, but from thankfulness to God who from pure grace has forgiven him all his sins and whose will is our sanctification.

And another reason why we must heed Paul's exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life is, because God threatens His anger and wrath if we neglect to do so. The Apostle says, ***that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.***

Note, God does not say, ***"My dear Christians, this is My will, even your sanctification; and if you conform to My will, if always more and more you abound in holiness of life, it is well, and I will reward you in that life which is to come; but as by grace alone through faith, and not by your own deeds, you are saved, you may reach heaven even if you do not conform to My will and do not abound more and more in holiness of life."***

No; God threatens His anger and wrath upon all evildoers, whether they call themselves Christians, or whether they be unbelievers. He threatens to punish all that transgress His commandments. He is the avenger of all those who sin maliciously and intentionally and they do not obtain forgiveness.

And what are the sins which the Apostle has in view, especially when he speaks of God's anger and wrath? They are the sins against the Sixth Commandment, the sins of fornication and lust, which to this day are leading sins among the children of this world.

They are the sins which are often punished upon this earth by the contraction of the most loathsome diseases, and which are the more punished in the yonder world; for God says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, ***Do not be deceived. Neither***

fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

O how careful every Christian should be therefore that he “*possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*” as the Apostle says, that is, that he look upon his own body as a temple of God’s Holy Spirit, and not abuse it in fornication, and thereby call down upon himself God’s anger and wrath!

May the Lord, then, grant us all, His grace that we heed the Apostle’s exhortation to abound more and more in holiness of life, and that in the end we obtain the salvation of our souls for the sake of our blessed Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Galatians 2:20

² Luke 15:18

³ Hymn 335

⁴ Matthew 5:16