

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-12

“THAT’S HOW WE ROLL”

Some people *strut*... Some people *slide*... Some people *pound the ground*... Some people *sashay*... Some people *waddle*...

How do you walk? Walking is the physical activity people participate in more than any other. Psychologists say every person has their own PMP or “primary movement pattern.” The way you walk reveals a great deal about you. A **stride** means self-confidence. A **shuffle** belongs to a timid person. A **swagger** indicates a big ego... Your *walking style* reveals your personality. Apparently, our *gait* is a *gateway* to our soul - *and Paul would agree*...

This is what Paul stresses to the Thessalonians in this morning’s text. In the first half of 1Thessalonians 4 Paul describes “*how (we) ought to walk*...” He sounds like Aerosmith. He sings, “*walk this way*...” Of course, when the Bible talks about a believer’s “*walk*” it’s speaking figuratively. God isn’t concerned with our **primary movement pattern** – *whether we strut or shuffle*. God cares about our lifestyle - our conduct. This is what Paul means by “*walk*” – *how we live and order our lives*.

Paul was in Thessalonica just a short three weeks, before he was bullied out of town. During his stay he conveyed many important truths. He writes this letter to reaffirm what he’d taught. And he stresses our lifestyle. He’s saying to the Christians both then and now, “**This is how we roll!**”

Paul begins Chapter 4, “**Finally then, brethren**...” Here’s an important observation if you’re new to church... Never slip your shoes back on just because the pastor says, “*finally*.” It seems Paul is winding down his thoughts, *but he’s less than half-way through his letter*. You never know when a pastor is going to catch a second wind! Actually, the subject matter in Chapter 4 *recharged* Paul...

He writes, “**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**...” The Christian life begins with a *step* of faith... We open our hearts, ask for forgiveness, and turn our lives over to Jesus. But that initial *step* is followed by a *walk*. Following Jesus involves more than a single step – you don’t take the first step and that’s it – you keep putting one foot in front of the other. You put together a string of steps... The Christian life consists of successive steps of faith! Living for Jesus is a journey. It’s a lifestyle. It impacts our conduct in every area of our life.

Notice, Paul urges and exhorts the Thessalonians to “**abound more and more**...” Though they’d made great strides in a short period of time – he wanted them to realize they had further to go... None of us will ever reach a fully developed “*walk*” in this lifetime. There’s always room to grow. I always ask, “**Does my life look more like Jesus this year than last?**” I say it so often because it’s true, living the Christian life is like climbing up a sliding board in your socks. Either you’re moving forward or you’re sliding backwards - but you’re never standing still. You’re either increasing or backsliding...

Obviously, Paul is deeply concerned for the believers in Thessalonica. He uses terms full of intensity... He doesn't just *suggest*... He "*urges*" and "*exhorts*." Notice how he frames what he's about to say, verse 2, "*For you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus...*" Paul is saying, this isn't just my opinion. These aren't just suggestions. These are commandments that were given to us through the Lord Jesus.

Let me empathize, Jesus cares about how we live. It doesn't just matter to Him that *your soul is saved* and *you're warming a pew* – how you conduct yourself – how you move through this world matters to Him. This is why Paul tells us how to walk in a way that "*pleases*" Jesus.

Notice, Paul had communicated these truths to the Thessalonians before. Since then, their situation had changed, and he wanted to make sure the changes in their circumstances hadn't altered their commitment. This can happen... You pledge your life to Jesus, *but then you meet a girl... or take up a hobby... or get a new job...* Different circumstances can make it harder to please Jesus. It's possible for your devotion to wane. Paul is concerned this might've happened to the Thessalonians...

Last week we talked about the pressure these believers were under. They were *war time babies*. They were new to the faith, and their salvation had been accompanied by persecution. They were afflicted from the start. During Paul's brief stay in Thessalonica he had communicated to them how they should live... But then angry opposition raised its ugly head. Paul was forced out of town. The giddiness of new believers, and the optimism of the new church was replaced with the grittiness of spiritual warfare... I like this quote by Mike Tyson, "*Everybody has a game plan, until they get punched.*" It was easy for the Thessalonians to embrace Christianity's game plan while life was good – but now that they'd been punched, Paul wants to make sure they're still committed to a lifestyle that pleases Jesus.

In verse 3, Paul writes, "*For this is the will of God...*" I've never met a serious Christian who didn't desire to know the will of God for their life. *Where should I go to college... who should I marry... what job should I take... where should I live... what church should I attend...* we want to know God's will in these matters. But these are just the peripheral issues... God's chief concern for my life isn't just *where I live*, or *what I do*, or *where I go*, or even *who I live it with* – it's how I conduct myself along the way! It's *how I roll...* God's will involves my character, integrity, and purity.

In a word, God sums up His will for our lives - "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification...*" The Greek word translated "*sanctification*" is "*hagios*." It means "*to set apart or dedicate.*" A sanctified life is a life *reserved* for Jesus. It's a body and mind and soul *on hold* for His use and purposes. Before I think a thought – or do a deed – or set a course... I make the decision that my one and only life – all that I am – belongs to Jesus. And everything else I pursue – every other decision – is filtered through that commitment. Life is all about decisions. The choices I make shape me into the person I end up. "*Sanctification*" is the process of making one God-pleasing choice after another – it's stringing together good choices.

Let me say, if you're still struggling over whether you want to do what *pleases Jesus* or do what *pleases you* - or do what *pleases anybody else* for that matter – you need to settle this issue. I assure you, if you live a lifestyle that pleases Jesus there'll be times when you'll need to deny what pleases you. You'll also rub other people the wrong way - *just count on it!* We'll discover in today's text - *how the world rolls*, and *how a Christian rolls* are radically different. You need to decide who you want to please.

C.S. Lewis made an interesting observation... “Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature - either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other.” Here’s what he’s saying, whether you end up in heaven or hell – wherever you end up - *you’ll belong there*. For all along the way you’re preparing yourself - for your final destination - by the choices you make now. In a sense, *you get to heaven or hell before you get there*, by either becoming more heavenly or hellish.

“**Sanctification**” is the process of becoming more heavenly, by making Christian choices step by step. *And this is God’s will for you*. Rather than please the world, God wants you and I to please Jesus. *It’s how we roll...* And sanctification doesn’t just involve what we do at church, or work, or school – the public spheres. It involves what happens in the bedroom. Sanctification gets personal. It involves the most private, intimate issues of life. It’s not just what we do *on the street*, but we do *between the sheets*.

Paul follows up the mention of our “**sanctification**” with a command, “**that you should abstain from sexual immorality...**” *Here’s God’s will for you – here’s how you can please Jesus* - by maintaining sexual purity. The Greek term Paul uses in the original language for “**sexual immorality**” is “**pornea**” – from which we get our word “**pornography**.” It was a blanket term that covered all forms of sinful sex - *hooking up, shacking up, friends with benefits, oral sex, booty calls, pornography, strip clubs, etc.* Any sexual contact outside marriage is “**pornea**” or “**sexual immorality**.”

Understand, the Bible presents sex as a positive, pleasurable, beautiful, liberating, deeply spiritual experience. Proverbs 5:19 is one of my memory verses, “**Let her breasts satisfy you at all times, and always be enraptured with her love...**” But the “**her**” is speaking of *your wife* – not *your neighbor*. The Bible gives wide latitude to sexual expression in marriage. Hebrews 13:4 puts it, “**Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled...**” In other words, as long as it’s agreeable to both parties, “**anything goes**.” God created “**sexy**” and He wants us to enjoy it to the fullest *within marriage*. Hebrews continues... “**fornicators and adulterers God will judge.**”

Today the buzz word is **safe sex**, but God’s Word says **save sex**. Sex is a gift from God, and its Giver knows how to keep it special. He doesn’t want us to ruin it like we do everything else in life. He says, *reserve it for marriage!* Abstaining from sexual immorality is our “**sanctification**.”

This is why Paul tells us in verse 4, “**that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God...**” Today’s contemporary attitude towards sex is that it’s nothing more than a bodily function. It’s like brushing your teeth, or eating a pizza - just basic recreation.

In 2007 researchers at the University of Texas asked 2000 people why they had sex. They got plenty of answers – 237 to be exact. Most of the answers you would expect... “**I was attracted...**” “**It felt good...**” “**It was fun...**” But there were other reasons you didn’t expect... “**to boost my social status...**” “**to get a raise...**” “**to return a favor...**” “**someone dared me...**” “**I lost a bet...**” “**It seemed like good exercise...**” *Good exercise?* If

that's all you're after, a treadmill or a stationary bike is a lot less complicated. Yet this is what's happened in our society to sexual activity. It's no longer an expression of intimacy – it's *a work out* or *a dare* or *a payback*. God intended for it to be infinitely more. We've become a society that doesn't know God, and when that happens, sex loses its specialness.

It's ironic, America has more self-proclaimed Christians than any other country in the world, but our Christianity hasn't translated to our bedroom. In the year 2005, for the first time in our country's history, America had more “unmarried-couple households” than “married-couple households.” If you live in a traditional marriage you're now the minority. You're outnumbered by unmarried, co-habiting couples by a fraction. And how quickly the tide has shifted. In 1970 there were half-a-million unmarried couples living together. Today the number has sky-rocketed to 55.8 million.

We hear these statistics, and we're tempted to say, “Well, everybody else is doing it, what's the big deal?” Make no mistake about it, it is a big deal to Jesus! Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in a day much worse than ours. Today's sexual mores and attitudes may be far more permissive than they were in the 1940s and 50s, but modern times barely rival the decadent days of Paul and first century Rome. There was no such thing as sexual morality. Prostitution, and adultery, and divorce were commonplace. Even homosexuality ran rampant in Rome. Caesars and Senators tired of heterosexual sex, and sought *diverse thrills* through *perverse means*. Not even Roman religion supported sexual morality. Pagan temples were financed by *priestesses turned prostitutes*. Girls would pour out into the streets at night and turn tricks to raise money for their Temple.

The philosopher Demosthenes reflected the male sentiment throughout the Greco-Roman world, “We keep harlots for pleasure, female slaves for our daily care, and wives to give us legitimate children and be the guardians of our households.” Chastity was unheard of in Paul's day. Which reminds me of the mother who set down with her teenage daughter. She lectured the girl on the virtues of remaining “chaste.” The young girl replied, “But Mom, I'd rather do the chasing than be chased.” According to Paul that's not the attitude that pleases Jesus...

Paul expected very little from the “Gentiles who don't know God.” *Without God's wisdom - without a belief in eternity – without a love for others – without respect for a woman's dignity – without the awareness of a soul and spirit – without the reason we were created – just left in the dark like godless Gentiles, why not live by impulse... like an animal... Like a mutt on the street – if it feels good, or tastes good, or looks good - just do it! This is how the world without God has always lived. It's how they roll...*

But Christians know better! Paul tells us in verse 4 “that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor...” You are a “vessel” – you are a container for the Holy Spirit. Here is the greatest privilege known on Earth. That we can contain the Almighty God. This is mind-boggling... it's like wrapping a diamond in crumpled up newspaper, or putting a treasure in a brown paper sack. You and I are vessels that contain God. The Holy Spirit lives in us and moves through us.

And this is how a Christian “possess(es) his own vessel” and controls his passions – *by walking in the Spirit!* Paul writes in Galatians 5:16, “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” It's **the triumph of a greater affection!** When you're possessed by the love of Jesus – you start to gain some self-control. Temptation no longer has free reign in you. You have access to a power greater than the temptation. But the Spirit fills only what's been sanctified - what's on *reserve* for Jesus. *Why would he fill a person who's goal is his own selfishness?*

And here's another reason to "*abstain from sexual immorality*" - verse 6, "*that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter...*" To "*defraud*" is to cheat. Sexual sin is cheating! You're a cheater. You're cheating on God, and your spouse. *Even if you're not married, you're still cheating on your future spouse... you're not willing to wait...* You're also cheating on the kids who trust you, and friends who look up to you, and church who heard you promise, and a government that gave you the license, and a culture that depends on people keeping their word. You even cheated the spouse of the cheater with whom you cheated.

In Leviticus 18 God lays out laws for sexual relations. For example, verse 8, forbids a man to have sex with his step-mom. But in doing so God uses interesting language. He says, "*The nakedness of your father's wife you shall not uncover; it is your father's nakedness.*" Notice the implication, a wife's nakedness belongs only to her husband.

In fact, it no longer belongs to her – she's given it to her husband. That means if she uncovers her nakedness before someone else, or if someone else takes her and uncovers her nakedness – it's nothing short of stealing. Only your spouse should have access to your nakedness. This helps us understand sexual immorality. At it's heart, it's nothing but thievery - stealing. You're selfishly car-jacking what doesn't belong to you.

There use to be a beer commercial that broke my heart. It didn't last long. It's attempt at humor must've hit too close to home. The camera is outside a sleazy hotel, the site of a one-night stand. You can only hear the voices of the couple inside the hotel room, *but their voices tell the story...* The compromised couple are through with their moment of pleasure, when the woman asks, "*So you have nothing to say?*" The emptiness in her voice wants to believe she means something to this man. He responds curtly, "*no.*" She begs for the slightest affirmation, "*You have nothing to say to me?*" With a smirk in his voice, he replies, "*Sorry.*" She snaps, "*Fine.*" I can't really recall the point of the ad, but the scene is all too common. A woman becomes an object. She gets used to gratify a man's base desires. He uses her up, then throws her away like a greasy paper towel.

Tiny Turner can sing all she wants, "*What's love got to do with it?*" But the answer is "*Everything.*" People try to convince themselves sex is nothing but a physical act, but their heart betrays them. When the deed is done you long for love. It's degrading to simply be used and discarded. *There's no honor in casual sex.* In fact, nothing damages our psyche more than allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of – chewed up and spit out for someone else's gratification. You let yourself be victimized. You might not see it at the time, but guilt and shame begin to set in. Sex was meant to *express love and reinforce commitment* – not be a means of exploitation. It's no accident that the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s has spawned a generation of adults with a shattered self-esteem.

A young woman, named *Marie*, left her kids and husband over an infatuation with the most famous musician at the time – Hungarian composer, Franz Liszt. Marie's reckless immorality destroyed her life. Later, while homesick for her kids, Marie confessed, "*When one has smashed everything around oneself, one has also smashed oneself.*" We can justified our immorality in a thousand ways, but it doesn't diminish the cost of our sin. No one can escape the emotional damage.

And here's why, verse 6, "because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified." *The Lord is the avenger!* Sometimes we think sexual sin is harmless – no one will ever know. But that's not true. God sees your keystrokes. God hears your cell phone calls. There is a price to be paid. Un-confessed sin always takes its toll. Verse 7 sums it up, "For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness."

Of course, there will always be someone who says, "Ah, all this talk about abstaining from sexual immorality is just Paul's opinion, or Sandy's interpretation. I don't buy it!" Actually, Paul anticipates that argument... He heads off your excuse in verse 8, "Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit."

It's interesting that up against the backdrop of the Greco-Roman world it was the church's sexual purity that captured the society's attention. Sexual mores were foreign to Gentile thinking. "Purity," "chastity," "fidelity," "virginity" were values known only among the followers of Christ. In the 2nd Century church baptisms included a moral promise. You were baptized into the body of Christ with an expectation of purity. Neither Jews or pagans linked *spiritual growth* with *moral purity* - only the Christians.

And this is the challenge for us today... There are parts of the world where a Christian's greatest assignment is resisting persecution. There are other places where Christians are confronted with false doctrine. But for us in America, our most formidable test is abstaining from sexual immorality. In a world permeated with sexual suggestion, is it really possible to live a life pure in thought and deed? *It is!* And my confidence lies in the last line of verse 8. The God who commanded us has also given us the power to obey. He's given us the Holy Spirit. Walk in the Spirit... *that's how we roll...*

And then, verse 9, in contrast to *sexual lust* Paul adds, "But concerning brotherly love..." Rather than *lust*, a Christian should be caught up in *love*. "Concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another..." Notice, this is not something Paul should even have to mention. God teaches us to love. I don't think its too strong of a statement to make, but "If love is not the instinctive response of your heart, then you must not be a Christian."

Rabbits don't have hopping coaches. Birds don't enroll into flight training. Fish don't take swim lessons, *even though they do swim in schools*. Some things come natural, and so it is with a Christian and love. The *Spirit of God* births in us the *love of God*. A Christian doesn't have to be taught to love, it comes naturally – we simply remain in God's love for us. And speaking of love, Paul remarks how the Thessalonians loved the church at large. Verse 10, "And indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more..." To love as Christ loves means we can never love enough! There's always room to grow in love. Let's all "*increase*" in love.

As Christians here's *how we roll...* we "*abstain from sexual immorality*" - we "*increase more and more (in love)*" - then Paul encourages three more *walking styles...* Verse 11, "*that you also aspire to lead a quiet life...*" Instead of filling up every square inch of our lives with noise and activity and outward stimulation, a Christian should create a life with *inner space*. The second half of Chapter 4 describes the Christians journey into *outer space*. And it will be quick – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we'll be caught up together with Jesus in the clouds. The rapture will be out of this world. But outer space is not our only goal. Right now we need to be cultivating some *inner space*. God wants us to live a quiet, uncluttered life. He wants us to leave room for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

Do you ever just think? Read your Bible – then contemplate what God might want to say to you through what you’ve read? Do you ever go out and marvel at a sunset – or take a walk to look at the leaves - or pull off the road to watch a deer – or slip into your toddler’s bedroom and pray for their future... Do you think about God, and life, and His plans for you? Most of us don’t – we rush – *the immediate* robs us of *the important*. Anne Morrow writes, “We seem so frightened today of being alone that we never let it happen. Even if family, friends, movies fail, there is still the radio to fill up the void... Now, instead of planting our solitude with our own dream blossoms, we choke the space with continuous music, clatter, and companionship to which we do not even listen. It is simply there to fill the vacuum. When the noise stops there is no inner music to take its place.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m determined to learn God’s inner music. *I want to go deep – not just spread out*. Most people live shallow lives. They want to *do it all, feel it all, taste it all, hear it all* – they’re so afraid of not getting in on the latest and the greatest – they miss out on what was there all along – God, and truth, and His peace, and their family...

We’re still tempted by *the tree of knowledge*. *We surf the net, scan the channels, browse the news* because something might happen in the world that we don’t know about... Just as Adam’s bite of fruit from the tree of knowledge cost him Paradise, our curiosity robs us of the “*quiet life*.” There was a time when humanity’s greatest fear was *hell* - then it was *uselessness* - then *a lack of fulfillment*. I think today, most folks’ greatest fear is *boredom*. They’re afraid they might end up with nothing to do...

My friend David Guzik compares the cluttered, noisy life to a religion... He identifies the **god** as excitement and entertainment... the **priests** are celebrities we follow... the **scriptures** are tabloids and Sportscenter... the **worship services** are movies and concerts and ballgames... the **temples** are theaters and stadiums... In fact, every I-pad becomes a **chapel**. We get seduced into living for one momentary thrill after another. Life is reduced to *the next fun thing* - that’s all we look forward to achieving. Here’s the overwhelming question we ask, “*Is it fun?*” Not “*Is it true, or right, or good, or godly, or loving?*” Our life is governed by whether it’s fun!

Rather than run from the quiet – God wants us to seek the “*quiet life!*” When was the last time you spent the night with your Bible? Rather than a movie, *how about a good book?* Rather than *Facebook* a hundred people why not spend some *face time* with your kid, or spouse, or God in prayer?

As a Christian, *here’s how we roll*... we live the “*quiet life*,” and notice what’s next... Paul says, “*mind your own business*...” Rather than tell everyone else how to live their lives, focus on your own. Don’t try to clean up the neighborhood when there’s a sewage leak in your front yard. If you’re *maintaining purity*, and *increasing in love*, and *going deep* in your own life – you won’t have much time leftover to stick your nose in everybody else’s business... “*Mind your own business*” is God’s command.

And then Paul gives us one more walking style, verses 11-12... “*and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing*.” Work hard – roll up your shirtsleeves – hold a job – be a good witness! Understand, in the Greco-Roman world of Paul the more important you were the less you worked. Manual labor was hated and seen as a curse.

Work was the occupation of slaves, not Romans. Yet the NT sanctifies labor and hard work as sacred, noble duties – *tasks pleasing to God!* It's been said, "Christianity introduced the ancient world to a *carpenter King, fishermen apostles, and tent-making missionaries...*" It was revolutionary.

In a day of "militant Christianity" – where we're encouraged to *picket*, and *protest*, and sign *petitions*, and *boycott* companies, and let our congressmen *hear our beefs* - I think verse 11 brings a needed balance. I'm afraid much of our militancy is just adding to the clamor of this world. Christians are often seen as just another of society's special interest groups. We get marginalized by focusing on the next day's hot topic. Sadly, modern American Christians are known more for what we're *against* than what we *value*. We come across pushy, rather than winsome. Instead of drawing people to us, our harsh rhetoric pushes people away.

Rather than *quote our sound-bites* - and *shout over the opposition's viewpoint* – and *try to bang a louder drum* - let's live to please Jesus. *For the lifestyle that pleases Jesus also catches the world's attention.* Don't you think we'd make a bigger impact on the lost people around us, if we emphasized *abstaining from sexual immorality* – and *walked in purity*? What if we *increased in love* - and *carved out peaceful, quiet lives* - and *paid attention to our own business* - and *worked hard at our jobs...*

Paul is telling us, *this is how a Christian rolls...*
And I trust, *this is how you and I roll...*