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*Never Stop Growing (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12)*  
*2/12/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow*

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“If you’re not growing, you’re dying.” I came across this quote the other day. “If you’re not growing, you’re dying.” When I first heard it, I thought, “Well, there is such a thing as just maintaining where you’re at, right?”

But then I remembered a mistake I made a long time ago. When I was a kid, I was pretty agile and quite a show-off. I loved doing all kinds of tricks, anything that would impress people. One of my tricks was doing a front flip. I jumped in the air turned a full 360 degrees and landed, just barely on my feet.

A couple years after my last front flip, I remembered how easy it used to be, and I thought, “Well, if I could do a front flip back then, I can definitely do one now.” I was wrong. I landed square on my back and it knocked the wind out of me.

I thought that I would simply keep that skill that I had obtained a long time ago, but the fact was, since I hadn’t practiced it, I lost that ability.

I think that’s the point of this quote: “If you’re not growing, you’re dying.” With many skills that we have, topics we’ve studied, even our relationships, we can sometimes fall into the idea that those things will just maintain their level, that they will just stay with us right where we left them, but the truth is that if we stop growing in those things, if we stop working at them, many of them will die away while we aren’t paying attention.

Today, as we consider our God’s call that we live holy lives, we are encouraged to Never Stop Growing. All of you are already living to please God. You already are concerned with doing what is right, with doing what God wants, with doing those things which will prepare us for heaven. And since you have already started, simply do these things more and more. Never Stop Growing.

First we will take a look at why this is so important for us, to keep growing in our faith. And then we will take a closer look at God’s instructions to us from 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

First off, trying to live a holy life is basic to being a Christian. If anyone has no concern with living a Christian life, if anyone has no concern for doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong, the Bible only has one thing to say to those people: God’s wrath is coming. They deserve hell, and will get it if they do not repent. If anyone is content with their sinful habits, if anyone thinks, “Well, I’m not perfect, but I’m good where I’m at,” then what use do they even have for a Savior.

Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Everyone who thinks they are a good person, or even that they are good enough, everyone who has stopped trying to live a holy life will struggle to see their need for a Savior. You don’t go to the doctor when you feel healthy enough. If we think we are good enough as is, we will not go to our Savior.

I can say “Jesus has taken away my sins” a million times, but what do I even care about that if I don’t see any problems with who I am? If I am not trying to live a perfect life, the thought will always be in the back of my mind, “Yeah, I’m a sinner, but if I really tried, maybe not so bad.”

But when I am striving with all that I am to live the way God demands, that is when I see just how utterly sinful I am, just how utterly sick and in need of the doctor I am. When I am trying, with everything I am and have, to live a perfect life, suddenly I will realize just how lost I am. Suddenly, “Jesus has taken away my sins” means so much more. Suddenly we see why this gospel message has so consumed people’s lives. Suddenly we understand why there have been people who have

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been willing to suffer and lose everything for that gospel message.

Trying to live a holy life is basic to being a Christian, not only because it is the kind of life God calls us to live, but also because it prepares our souls to actually care about what God has done for us, it prepares ourselves to grasp just how high, and wide, and deep and long is the love of our God in Christ Jesus.

Let's jump into 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 now. It starts with this encouragement: you are already living your life to please God, now just continue to do so more and more. Never Stop Growing in that. Do not be content with whatever level you are at because God has given you his Holy Spirit to make you more and more. God wants us to be sanctified, to grow in our love for God and for our neighbor. God wants to make us perfect.

This isn't just my idea for you, this is God's plan for your life. He wants you to grow, to become mature in your faith, to learn practically in your every moment what it really means to follow Christ. We saw a number of clear examples of what that means in our reading for today from Matthew 5, but for now we will focus on the clear examples from 1 Thessalonians 4.

The first practical example we read about being sanctified means that God wants us to avoid sexual immorality. God wants us to learn to control our own bodies.

It's fascinating how often people defend their lack of self-control in this area with the words, "I have a right to be happy." You ever notice that that defense pretty much only comes up when it comes to sexual happiness?

I don't think I've ever heard someone defend their own laziness by saying, "I have a right to be happy." People don't accept greed because everyone has a right to be happy. For all these other urges that we have, our culture for the most part recognizes that we must reign them in, we must control them. People say, "Moderation in everything." But not, it seems, when it comes to sex.

For some reason, people accept, "That's just how I was born" for all number of sexual sins. But they don't accept, "That's just how I was born" from the greedy, or the cowardly, or the liars, or any number of other sins.

Men accept, "I was just looking," to justify lust. But people do not accept, "I was just imagining murdering that person," to justify hatred. People don't accept, "I was just thinking about how much better I am than that group of people" to justify pride.

But when it comes to sexual sins, our world justifies living out of control lives, because they have a right to be happy, because they were just born that way. People who don't know God live that way.

But you are different because you do know God, so be different. Now, I'm not saying that the struggle to control one's body is not easy. In fact, it has only gotten harder in our culture. Fashions and movies and the like provide all kinds of temptations for lust. But we are God's people. Let us, as people living to please God, pursue pure lives.

Let us learn to control our bodies by pursuing God's gift of sex in the way God has provided that to us: in marriage. Let it be an act of love that we share with the person to whom we have promised faithfulness. Let us learn to hide our eyes from those tempting images all around us and instead pursue pure lives, holy lives, lives that please our God more and more.

In particular I need to speak about an issue that many today struggle with: pornography. This is a danger to our souls that needs to be addressed. With the internet especially, it is easier

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than ever for people to get caught in this sin.

If you have struggled with porn, or any sexual sin for that matter, get some help. The longer you allow yourself to fall into this sin, the harder it will be to get yourself out of it. We saw in 2 Samuel chapter 11, how lust left King David's life in shambles.

As Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5, deal with this sin as seriously as you need to. Figure out a way to get out. Remember that you are a part of the body of Christ. You have fellow Christians to help you in your battle with sin. You are not the only one who struggles to control your own body.

You can talk to me, to a fellow Christian. For people who struggle with porn, there is a fantastic website called conquerors through Christ ([conquerorsthroughchrist.net](http://conquerorsthroughchrist.net)) that was made specifically to help Christians fight this battle. Go there and use the resources available to you. Get out of this sin. There is help. There is freedom from this.

1 Thessalonians 4 gives us another reason to fight lust: we are encouraged not to wrong another in this matter. Many people will justify their lack of self-control by saying, "If I'm not hurting anyone else, what does it matter?" But that's not a real argument.

Picture a fleet of ships traveling in some direction. Obviously, it is very important that none of the ships hit any of the others on their journey, but who in their right mind would say, "As long as our ship doesn't hit anyone else's, we don't need to take care of the engines, we don't need to make sure we have enough fuel, we don't need any maintenance whatsoever."

No one would say that. Most of us know that a ship that is not working properly will inevitably have steering problems and then it will cause problems for the other ships, even if it can last for a long time without hitting anyone else.

It's the same with people. Just because my sinful actions may not be hurting someone else, they hurt me. They damage my soul. And if my soul is not working properly, it will cause me to inevitably damage someone else.

And if anyone still doesn't care about giving in to their "small" sins, we ought to know that God will punish all who commit them. No sin, no matter how small in our eyes, no sin is acceptable in God's sight. And let's be frank, if God says something, anything that I do is sinful, how can I say I trust in him if I refuse to trust his word that what I am doing is wrong, is harmful to me, that it needs to stop? That is not faith. That is unbelief.

God did not set us free from our sins so that we could enslave ourselves to them again. God did not deliver us from hell so that we could live as though hell were our rightful home. God has called us to a holy and pure life.

As we continue on, our God encourages us to love one another more and more. But notice how little this section explains loving others. We just spent so much time talking about sexual sins, it seems that loving others would come up in life much more. Why then is there so little explanation about how we love one another? Because every Christian sees a perfect example of love from our God.

Jesus showed us his love by becoming one of us. He was able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he experienced them. So we learn to love others by first understanding them, hearing them out, trying to see things from their perspective.

Jesus showed his love for us by putting aside his power, his glory, everything that is his as God. So we love others by putting aside what we deserve so that we might put them first.

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Jesus showed his love for us by his actions and not just by his words. When we doubt God's love, we can look to the clear evidence of Jesus' life, suffering, and death to save us from hell. Jesus gave clear evidence of his love for us by what he did. And so we learn to love others by what we do; with actions and not just with words.

God's love for us teaches us more than we have time to talk about for now, but today, God simply encourages us, you already love your friends, your families, your fellow believers, and your fellow human beings, now just continue to love them more and more. Never Stop Growing.

Finally, we are encouraged to keep our focus on our own growth. As we strive to live holy lives, we don't need to shove that fact down everyone else's throats. Instead, God encourages us focus on how we personally can live a more holy life.

It can be very easy to get sidetracked on someone else's sins. On the one hand, love for others does demand that we point other people's sins out to them and point them toward a godly life in Christ, but on the other hand we have no right to judge someone else's walk with God.

I remember working with a guy who cheated me out of a lot of money. Frustrating as that was, over time I learned to reframe how I looked at that guy. He did give me some of the money he agreed to give me and I don't know that guy's past. I don't know how he grew up. I don't know everything about his walk with God. Maybe he was tempted to not give me any of the money and the amount of money he did give me was actually a huge step for him. Maybe the money that he did give me was one of the most God-pleasing things he had ever done. Who am I to judge a good work that God may have put into him?

Instead of getting caught up in someone else's sin, God encourages us to simply pursue our own sanctification, our own holy life. Let us focus on our daily tasks, that the things we do every day might be more and more pleasing in God's sight. Every day, let us examine our lives and fine tune them so that we live more and more the holy life that our God demands. And that is a God-glorifying life, whether you are scrubbing floors, or just talking to people, raising kids, or working with your hands, those can all be godly things. Let that be our focus: making our daily tasks more and more holy, more and more God-pleasing.

As we close, I want to remind you. As we pursue a more and more godly life, we are going to fail. We are going to learn just how sinful we are. We are going to learn that even in our best efforts, our selfishness is right there. Even our most pure pursuits will be riddled with sin. But when we see our sinfulness, then we will see just how much our God has forgiven us. We will see just how much it means that God has clothed us in Jesus' righteousness. We will understand more and more the miracle it is that God has granted us his Holy Spirit. And God will continue to forgive us, every time we repent. God will continue to restore us. And God will continue to give us power to live a new and holy life so that we never stop growing. Amen.