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Homiletics: Sermon Study on 1 Thess. 4:1-7 for Reminiscere

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HOMILETICS

A ROYAL PRIEST — IN MY DAILY VOCATION

The Theme for March.—The Epistle for the first Sunday in Lent describes the life of the Christian who succeeds in ministering the Gospel to other men and relates well to the theme of the month. The Epistle for the third Sunday in Lent is rich in application to the daily life and the power for it. Subsequent Sundays in Lent underscore the sources of spiritual life in the Atonement. Noteworthy are the Collects for Passion Sunday and for Palm Sunday.

Sermon Study on 1 Thess. 4: 1-7 for Reminiscere

"This is an easy Epistle," says Luther in his *Church Postil*. Few preachers will agree with him. There is a nest of exegetical problems and then the hard task of applying the admonition of this Lesson to the congregation in an evangelical spirit and with pastoral tact.

BACKGROUND OF TEXT. Three times Paul here alludes to his missionary work in this great seaport metropolis of Macedonia. Acts 17:1-10a and the first three chapters of this Letter offer a wealth of material which can be drawn upon by the preacher.* Paul wrote from Corinth (probably late in A.D. 50) after the arrival of Timothy (Acts 18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3) with his reassuring news about the radiant faith of the young converts whom he had to leave hurriedly by night not long before. The young congregation was beset by the same enemies that Paul had faced, but they were coming through the season of testing victoriously (1:7-9). Some weaknesses, however, required attention. Paul prays for his speedy return to them to deal with these weaknesses (3: 10-11). In the meantime his Letter must substitute for his presence.

* This material has been treated in detail by Prof. M. H. Franzmann in an essay which appeared in this journal in September, 1948, pp. 644-652.

Was it first read in Jason's house? Try to visualize the congregation: some Jews, the majority Greeks, some of them leading society women. Most of the people, no doubt, were of the humbler and humblest classes, small tradesmen, sailors, stevedores, slaves, people but lately idol worshipers (1:9) and still feeling the terrific tug of their recent pagan past. But they had now turned to the living God and were struggling hard to conquer the flesh in daily living. All of them together constituted a miracle in Thessalonica, as is true of every Christian congregation at any time: a colony of heaven in the country of man (Phil. 3:20), royal priests living mindful of their heavenly vocation in the midst of their calling and station here below.

TRANSLATION: "(1) Finally, brethren, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that * as you learned from us the lesson how you ought to walk and live to please God, *just as you are walking*, you should keep on making ever greater progress. (2) For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. (3) For this is the will of God, your sanctification: That you should abstain from all sexual impurity; (4) that each of you learn to take a wife for himself in sanctification and honor, (5) not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles, who know not God; (6) that no one disregard and defraud his brother in his dealings with him — for the Lord is an Avenger in all these things, as we forewarned you and solemnly declared. (7) For God has not called us for uncleanness but in sanctification. (8) Hence he who rejects [these admonitions] rejects not man but God, who also *gives* His Holy Spirit to *you* [into you, viz., your hearts]."†

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS. 4:1-12 constitute a unit. Paul exhorts his converts to a genuine Christian life, to "otherness" in conduct over against the pagan world, from which they have been called by God. The first two verses are introductory — a reminder of past instructions, a grateful acknowledgment of "otherness" already achieved, and the exhortation to "abound yet more and

* The second *ἐν* resumes the first after the break in construction caused by the desire to add praise to the exhortation.

† V. 8 has been added. It is the climax of the appeal and should not be disregarded. The words italicized in the translation call attention to readings of the critical text diverging from that which the A. V. has followed.

more." *"Progress in Christian Living Is God's Will"* (v. 3a): the theme. Two areas are then put to the fore in which the new life must be exercised: the sphere of sex, where *purity* is demanded (vv. 3b-5); and the sphere of business relationships, where *honesty* is called for (v. 6a). The admonition is then fortified by three facts with regard to God, constituting three motives for holy conduct: He is an Avenger in all these things (v. 6b); He has called us in sanctification (v. 7); He gives His Holy Spirit into hearts (v. 8). Vv. 9-10a: brotherly love; vv. 11-12: the duty of industry—a sore spot (5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-13. Read these passages in the R. S. V.).

ADDITIONAL NOTES. Vv. 1-2. "Through the Lord Jesus" (v. 2) is to be joined to "we gave." The *διὰ* does not simply denote source ("coming from") but is rather the same *διὰ* which we find in Rom. 12:1 (15:30; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 10:1), a formula of adjuration or earnest appeal which may be rendered "with eyes fixed upon," indicating that which should prompt one to ready acceptance of that which is urged. Of similar force is "in the Lord Jesus" (v. 1), only that here the appeal is made on the basis of the living fellowship with Christ which binds the Apostles and their converts together as fellow members of the body of Christ. Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, Lord and Savior, each title is a loving hand to draw believers into willing service. Luther's Second Article is the classical commentary. The instructions on Christian living which Paul gave his converts and which he again puts into their mind are anchored in the Redemption and are based on the Gospel of freedom through Christ. The appeal has not been fruitless. With gratitude Paul records that his converts are gaining victories over the flesh, they are "walking," they are "living to please God" (the verb ἀρέσκειν has that force, as can be seen from 2:4; Rom. 15:1-3, etc.; behind such ἀρέσκειν is the Gospel motive of love to God and the Lord Jesus, not the Law motive of fear of punishment). Such living was a new thing for the converts. The Gospel had brought it into their lives, and outsiders sat up and took notice (1:9). But in Christian living there can be no self-complacent satisfaction over ground already won. The goal (Eph. 4:13) is always ahead of us until we are in the beyond (1 John 3:2). Hence Paul, who knows the intensity of the struggle between the spirit

and the flesh (Rom. 7:14-24), who is himself straining every energy to reach the goal (Phil. 3:12-14), like a tender nurse anxiously watching the growth of her charges (2:7), like a brother (v. 1) who is in the fight with them, "asks and urges" them in the Lord Jesus to "keep on making ever greater progress."

V. 3a. The instructions thus given concerned concrete points of Christian conduct and embodied God's abiding will for men. Christians take up these duties, not indeed in the spirit of bondage like slaves, but in the spirit of adoption as children who "live to please" their Father by doing His will. This is their Christian "walk," or, to use another word, their "sanctification" (ἁγιασμός). Like other nouns with this termination the word expresses action, not *holiness* as a quality, but *the action that aims at holiness*. As to the implication of the word, the statements of our Synodical Catechism under Ques. 163 and 169, defining sanctification in the wider and in the narrower sense, square with the passages that introduce this term (see a concordance or a larger N. T. lexicon). Compare Kittel's *Woerterbuch* (I, 115): "The action of ἁγιασμός . . . can proceed only from a holy person. In cases where man is the subject the presupposition always is that *the action results from the state of holiness which is established through the Atonement*, in keeping with the principle expressed Rev. 22:11: ὁ ἅγιος ἁγιασθήτω ἔτι." Paul is addressing Christians who have come to faith (2:13), who in possession of Christ's redemption "serve the living and true God" in the power of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within their hearts (v. 8). To such the call to "sanctification" and the "yet more and more" can be given with the expectation of ready response.

V. 3b presents the negative side of the Sixth Commandment; v. 4, the positive side. Πορνεία originally meant "prostitution," "fornication," but came to be applied to unlawful sexual relations generally (see the dictionaries, esp. Moulton and Milligan). That is the meaning here. The article is generic, and so we render the expression with "all sexual impurity." Paul is speaking to people of the Greek world of that day in which this sin was largely regarded as an adiaphoron, in which it was even consecrated in connection with idol worship. We can understand the struggle of many of these recent converts to break with the vicious habits of their past life. In v. 4 Paul points to the aid which God has

established for the tempted — lawful marriage. We are confident that this is the meaning of the verse, although many take the meaning to be: "Let each one of you learn how to win mastery over his own body in sanctification and reverence for the body." *Κτᾶσθαι* indeed means "to win," "to gain" (not "to possess," as rendered in the A. V.); but the idea of "gaining mastery over" does not lie in the term. Nor does *σκεῦος*, "vessel," "implement" of any kind, without further specification in the context, mean "body" (namely, conceived as the container of the soul). On the other hand, *σκεῦος* can be used of persons who serve another for a particular purpose (Acts 9:15, Paul an elect *σκεῦος* of Christ). Husband and wife are that each for the other. Read 1 Pet. 3:7. The phrase *κτᾶσθαι τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος* is thus equivalent to *κτ. γυναῖκα*, which is established in Greek usage for entrance into marriage (e. g., Xenophon, *Symp.* 2, 10). "That each learn, *εἰδέναι*, to take." Conscious of his personal need and aware of God's ordinance, the Christian convert must see that this is the right way to solve his sexual problem. Let him, then, having chosen his mate, enter into this union in a Christian way, "in sanctification," with thoughts and prayers directed to his Lord, and "in honor," reverence toward his mate, redeemed by Christ no less than he and meant to be a helpmeet for time and eternity, not merely a *σκεῦος* for one particular end, as was so often the case among the pagans; v. 5. There sex was not a *part* of marriage, but *all* of it. The sex instinct is, indeed, a part of God's design for man. Therefore it is not to be despised; but it is also not to be exploited. What Paul says to the unmarried is at the same time an implied appeal to those who already are married to preserve their union "in sanctification and honor," each husband *winning his wife ever anew* in that spirit (while this does not expressly lie in the *κτᾶσθαι*, Paul does urge it in Eph. 5:25 ff., and so does Peter in the passage cited before).

V. 6a. Our translation (cf. Luther, A. V., R. S. V. margin) assumes the correctness of the view that the sin of avarice and fraud is here reproofed, against the view (quite generally adopted by English scholars, not the German exegetes) that Paul continues to treat of sexual sins, speaking here euphemistically of adultery ("the matter") and using *πλεονεκτεῖν* in the way "cheating" is used currently among us. The lack of a conjunction with *τὸ μὴ*

ὑπερβαίνειν does not stand against our view. The article thus used with the complementary infinitive is usually arbitrary, but here, after two parallel infinitives without the article, it has the effect of pointing to a new item. The article with πράγματι is again generic. Πράγμα, even in the singular, may be used of "business," "transaction," "dealing" (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1; Rom. 16:2, and see the parallels cited by Liddell-Scott and Moulton-Milligan).

The pagan Greeks thought no more of the sinfulness of avarice and cheating than that of licentiousness. These were the basic evils of the time (only of that time?), and Paul frequently, as here, puts them close together (Eph. 4:19; 5:3, 5; 1 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 1:26, 29; Col. 3:5). There is an inward connection between the two. As Trench well says, "the root out of which they alike grow, namely, the fierce and ever fiercer longing of the creature which has forsaken God to fill itself with the lower objects of sense, is one and the same." Ὑπερβαίνειν we have translated with "disregard," a meaning frequently found outside of the New Testament. When Paul makes the Christian "brother" the object of this inconsiderate fleeing and cheating he does not justify that conduct over against others. The treatment of the brother, in Christian ethics, is an example how to treat all other people.

V.6b. An appeal to conscience. "In all these things" covers not only the two classes of sins mentioned, but whatever opposes God's will. He who will not let the love of God and Christ motivate his shrinking from sin must be plainly told of God's warning and threats.

V.7. The term "uncleanness" is not to be restricted to sexual impurity. It is used by Paul for all immorality in its aspect of besmirching and desecrating the nature of man created in the image of God, even as "sanctification," its counterpart, looks to holiness in its entire compass. When God called the Thessalonians by the Gospel and they came to faith and were made heirs of heaven (2:12; 2 Thess. 2:14), it was not *for* "uncleanness" (this dative of purpose with ἐπὶ is also used in the important parallel passage Eph. 2:10), so that they could nonchalantly continue in their old life; but their very call was *in* "sanctification" (the preposition designating manner as in Eph. 4:4; 2 Thess. 2:13), signifying that the call which made them "holy" in justification carried with it,

through the indwelling of the Spirit, the power and willingness to walk in holy ways (cf. Rom. 8:1ff.). For the believer there can be no falling back into "uncleanness," but only a "walking" and "abounding yet more and more."

V.8. Hence the rejection of the instruction (v.2) is a fearful sin: it is setting at naught God, the Giver of the Holy Spirit. Shall God's dwelling be defiled? (Rom. 8:12; Gal. 5:25; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Eph. 4:30.)

SUGGESTIONS FOR PREACHING. The general need for the exhortation to make progress in Christian living remains the same for every congregation. The particular aspects of this life which require special emphasis may vary. Paul underscored purity and honesty in this Letter. Sanctification, which is the will of God, is wider than that in its scope. The pastor must know what areas he should emphasize when issuing God's call to his people.

In developing his sermon the preacher should not dwell on the negative side of the Sixth and Seventh Commandments, even though these sins are rampant. Rather dwell on the positive development of Christian character and paint the Christian virtues in their loveliness. Throughout follow Paul's evangelical appeal "through the Lord Jesus," Titus 2:14. Show how Christ hung on the tree in pain because of man's lustful passion, in stark poverty because of man's craving for pelf. *Reminiscere*, remember, forget Him not. In His Cross lies comfort for the weak and power for progress.

A profitable sermon may be preached by following the order of the text. Compare the structural analysis above. The theme might be worded: "Human Life on a New Model." Or one could preach on "Christian Consecration" or "Christian Purity" with its call for (1) pure hearts, (2) pure homes, (3) pure hands. Verse one gives an outline for a sermon on the consecrated life: (1) You know how to walk and live to please God; (2) therefore keep on making ever greater progress. The precise wording of these parts will follow the manner in which the theme is stated. The theme may be worded in endless ways, e.g., "The Christian Strives for Perfection"; "A Colony of Heaven in the Country of Man"; "The Royal Priest in His Daily Vocation."

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