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Scripture Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Sermon Title: *A Worthy Resolution for 2010*

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A Worthy Resolution for Year 2010

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Today I want us together to consider a passage of Scripture that will enable us to make a good resolution for this New Year 2010.

1 and 2 Thessalonians are probably the earliest written of Paul's extant letters. He wrote to encourage these new believers who were the converts of Paul and Silas on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9). Throughout these two letters is the recurrent theme of hope for the return of Christ and of our being with him in heaven. In the first three chapters of the first letter Paul's main thought is his thanksgiving for them as his joy and crown.

Now with chapter four, where we find today's text, he uses the word "finally." We've already noted, that like with a lot of preachers, when Paul says "finally," he doesn't necessarily mean "immediately." In fact, perhaps a better translation of the first words in our text, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, is "and now, brothers and sisters, hear this." As is typical with Paul, the first part of his letters are more in the indicative mood, as he sometimes expounds what God has done for us. In the earlier chapters of 1 Thessalonians, Paul expresses thanksgiving for the believers at Thessalonica, and reminds them of the coming of the Lord Jesus, a theme that runs throughout these two letters to the Thessalonians.

Now Paul moves into their ethical responsibility, and says, "And now...."

Follow as I read... **1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.**

I don't know if this is true in your culture, but in my home country (USA) it's traditional to make resolutions for the New Year. A resolution is a personal commitment to oneself to change one's behavior or attain a particular goal in one's life. Some of these resolutions are to stop harmful behavior, such as smoking or overeating, and also to begin new disciplines, such as a new diet and regular exercise. Over the last few weeks, many people have made New Year's resolutions, and probably will keep them for a few weeks longer! A piece I read this past week on a US newspaper website says:

"According to USA.gov, the most popular New Year's resolutions in the United States are spending more time with family and friends, becoming more fit, losing weight, quitting smoking and drinking, getting out of debt, learning something new, getting organized and helping others. Many surveys say less than 10 percent of people who keep (sic) New Year's resolutions achieve their goals, with almost half dropping off before the end of January."

One of the most obvious places demonstrating resolutions for the New Year is your fitness center. Now, and for the next several weeks, the health clubs are filled with folks working assiduously working out on aerobic and weight machines, trying to lose excess pounds and getting into super-star condition. Then, come February, there will be plenty of room in your local fitness center because many will have lost their resolve.

I read an article years ago in the Dayton (Ohio, USA) *Business Journal* with the headline,

Fitness craze doesn't last long into New Year

Writer Caleb Stephens said that, "Once the ball drops in Times Square on Dec. 31, fitness club owners begin the busiest month of the year. January brings a new crop of people whose top New Year's resolution is to get healthy. Local health clubs spend between 30 percent and 40 percent of their annual advertising budgets this time of year, club owners say.

"In January and February, people make a commitment to get on the right track," said Larry Pacifico, former world powerlifting champion and owner of Champions Gym in Kettering.

But signing up new members isn't the real challenge for health clubs anymore, it's retaining those members. That's because Pacifico said 70 percent of all new gym members quit in 21 days or less.

And consumers have become wary of signing multi-year contracts, prompting health club owners to offer short-term contracts. As a result, they must provide incentives for members to come back each month. So, local gyms are focusing more on personal training and other ways to keep members coming back.

What drives people back to the gym, Pacifico said, is commitment. He employs 31 personal trainers and said people don't often miss appointments with personal trainers.

"It's easy to blow off a (workout) but if you have an appointment then you have made a commitment," he said. (www.bizjournals.com/dayton/stories/2005/01/03/story5.html)

So, the keys for keeping a physical fitness resolution seem to be commitment and accountability. Those who keep on coming to the gym and staying with an exercise regiment are those who commit and make themselves accountable to a trainer. Fitness and health improvement and maintenance are good resolutions, but Paul gives us an even worthier resolution here in our text for today. (Paul also in 1 Timothy 4:8 contrasts the surpassing value of godliness to physical training, which has limited value, contrasted with godliness, which has "value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.")

Can there be any higher goal than to please God? The Son of God, our Lord Jesus, said it was his goal, and one he kept perfectly, by the way, to please the Father (John 8:29). And to grow in holiness and in love are pleasing to God. I've mentioned to you before that even though my father has been deceased for over 21 years, I still have an almost unhealthy desire to please him, to gain his approval, something I was never ever quite sure I totally attained. He was my hero, and I thrived on making him proud, and he wasn't the best at verbalizing his approval.

One of the great things about our loving, heavenly Father is his unconditional love for us, and his delight in us, whatever our level of attainment. He is pleased by our progress, however small it may be. Paul says we can please the Father, just by growing in these areas of our lives. In verses 1 and 10 in our text Paul uses the phrase "more and more." Paul says we can please God by growing more and more in holiness and by doing more and more acts of love for others. He challenges us to get more and more holy, and be more and more loving. As some try to get more and more physically fit, Paul says we need to be more and more spiritually fit. While you and I may try to lose pounds, Paul says we need to gain spiritually. Here is one area of life in which we can never gain too much.

Amazingly, Paul says that for the Christian, we never, in this life, have enough of, first of all...

Purity of life

Much like in our Western culture at the beginning of this third millennium, the ancient Greco-Roman culture was sexually self-indulgent and hedonistic. The Greek mystery religions included cultic prostitution as part of their religious observances, both heterosexual and homosexual. New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce says that it was typical for a wealthier man to regard his wife as little more than a household servant, to raise his legitimate children and heirs. In addition to his wife, he would also have a lover, who provided intellectual as

well as sexual stimulation, and a concubine, who was a slave to satisfy a wide range of pleasures. This average, respectable Roman would also pay a prostitute to engage in casual, occasional sex.

Anyone who is aware of our Western European and North American culture realizes the similarities with that of the sex-saturated First Century Greco-Roman culture. So, when Paul addresses the Thessalonian believers the Holy Spirit is surely speaking to us today about the need to grow in purity through...

Being made pure

Paul says to these newly converted citizens of the Roman Empire, "You have a higher citizenship and calling. You are citizens of God's holy nation, and are called to live on a higher ethical plane." To be sanctified is a word that refers to the life-long process that begins at the moment of rebirth, when the Holy Spirit enters the believer. It's the process of being separated from old, pre-conversion attitudes, thoughts and actions that dishonor God, and to be enabled to live a life that pleases God. It's the life empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to fulfill all the righteous requirements of the law of God. As Paul says,

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

There were present in the church in Thessalonica and in Corinth, those who said that the body and soul were separate, and if the soul was saved, one could do whatever he or she wished, to no detriment to the soul. Paul countered that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and though we are saved by grace, we are not saved to live an immoral, but rather a moral life, one that reflects the person of Holy God (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). True, we are not saved by keeping the law, but we are saved in order to keep the Moral Law, not just by the letter, which means we don't commit adultery and fornication, but also that we don't continue to lust in our hearts (Matthew 5:17-48).

Just as the Greek, pseudo-Christian libertines were averse to Judaism's legalism, so today; there are those among the church who are afraid we'll be branded as legalistic, Pharisaic Puritans. Actually, the real Puritans of the 17th Century were not prudish, but were joyful, life-affirming people, who seemed to have the secret of an abundant life. They've "gotten a bad press" from those who don't understand classical Puritanism. Legalism can creep in, to be sure. There are certainly the prudish, and who erroneously think that sex is evil. What Paul and the entire Scriptures condemn is sexual activity outside its God-given place. The Bible says sex is a blessing from God, to be enjoyed with in a monogamous marriage.

Recently, a well-known women's magazine published an article about sexual gratification, giving results from a survey. To their surprise, the authors discovered that religious, church-going women with traditional family values

report a higher level of sexual fulfillment and satisfaction than women who rejected traditional biblical values and who were seeking sexual fulfillment through casual sex with multiple partners. This should come as no surprise to those of us who understand the place for sexual fulfillment and enjoyment, and the attitude of giving pleasure to our spouse, to whom we are committed for a lifetime.

We are made pure by the rebirth, but also we are God's separated people who are...

Becoming pure

And we are becoming pure first through...

Negative holiness

Paul says that to please God, we must more and more grow in this holiness, which is a fleeing from sexual immorality. This is an admonition for what has been termed negative holiness, which simply means what we do not do in order to be holy. Negative holiness is positively essential before we can have the positive holiness of proper conduct. We must stop doing certain things in order to be able to do other things that please God. For the immorality we must stop committing Paul uses the word *porneia* (verse 3), which covers every sexual sin, from fornication, i.e., sex before/outside of marriage, and adultery, which is sexual unfaithfulness when one is married. These sins include both homosexual behavior, which is always a sin, and heterosexual behavior that is outside a loving, faithful marriage relationship.

[Footnote:

I read a United Nations report on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is rapidly spreading, not only in sub-Saharan Africa, but now in Asia as well. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, there were over 3,000, 000 additional persons infected, and 5,000,000 worldwide. There are an estimated 38,000,000 infected worldwide, and since the detection of this pandemic in 1981, an estimated 20,000,000 people have died from AIDS. One of the great tragedies of this disease is that the majority of the victims are women, youth and children. AIDS has killed one or both parents of an estimated 12 million children in sub-Saharan Africa alone, many who are orphans in desperate need of care. In the year 2000, there were parts of Africa where 50 to 70 percent of adults were HIV positive, and now this statistic is even worse. This disease threatens to destroy a whole generation of Africans. Missionary friends in a small country in Southern Africa told me there are on average 1500 AIDS deaths a week in that small country alone, and the fastest growing business is the manufacture of simple wooden boxes used for coffins.

In a weekly newsmagazine there was a cover story several years ago on the AIDS pandemic. What was really sad in this article was the total absence of any moral comment. A lot was printed about trying to educate and distribute condoms, and improve drug research and distribution, but not a word about the need for sexual activity to be within the context of monogamous marriage. This is the only truly safe sex, because it's sex as God created and intended it. Not a word was said about the

success our missionaries and African church leaders are having with True Love Waits, a campaign to call for commitments to reserve sexual activity for marriage.

Perhaps you realize that the Prime Minister of Belgium and other politicians want to legalize prostitution, saying it's a better way to keep the practice and the brothels under some type of regulative control and also to collect taxes from a legalized business. But the Netherlands, which has made prostitution legal, and has turned its once beautiful cities into areas of moral blight with rampant drug and sexual abuse, has been unsuccessful in collecting taxes from the prostitution business. One Dutch bureaucrat noted that it is difficult to collect taxes on the street.]

Paul says that to please God we must continue to be sexually pure, to enjoy and celebrate sex as a creation gift to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. Paul says in verse 6, others are wronged, hurt and betrayed by your sexual sin. Fornication, sex outside of and before marriage, robs one another of sexual purity and virginity, which are precious gifts to be given at marriage. Adultery cheats spouses, who are betrayed, and fornication robs the guilty of their virginity, which is a precious gift to give the spouse God has chosen for you.

We are to please God by this negative holiness, by fleeing immorality in sexual misconduct (1 Corinthians 6:18; 2 Timothy 2:22). Because these sins begin with the eyes and mind, we are to "more and more" be careful and selective in what we allow our eyes to see. This means avoiding pornography, which is so readily available, on the Internet and even on basic television that in our cultures might be rated for family viewing. Sometimes I think primetime TV sitcoms are more dangerous than steaming R-rated movies because of the casual, off-handed way sexual themes are treated. Casual sex, living together outside marriage, are regarded as an assumed way of living in our Western culture, and so our young people, who often view this trash, assume it's the way even Christians in our culture live.

More and more, Paul says, to please God we must live counter-culturally. Unplug the computer and TV, if you can't refrain from watching the garbage. Avoid magazines and certain websites and other opportunities for temptation, if you are drawn to pornography. Break off relationships that draw you into inappropriate behavior. Stop your flirting and spending an inordinate amount of time in the office with those who tempt you, and to whom you feel attracted toward a wrong relationship.

More and more do that which will keep you holy. And to the married, practice sex in marriage with your partner in a way that pleases God and honors your spouse, not that gratifies your appetites. As John Piper says, "If God isn't the God of our bedrooms, then he isn't God at all." Every aspect of our lives is under the Lordship of Christ. (www.soundofgrace.com/piper84/120484.htm).

I like Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*, that translates verse 7 as "God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside."

In Year 2006 let's please God by growing in negative holiness, but also, as *The Message* implies, by growing in...

Positive holiness

Negative holiness, getting rid of negative behavior, prepares us for positive holiness. By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we replace the old patterns of behavior with the new. Paul says we should grow more and more in being like Jesus, which is what holiness is all about. The character of Christ-likeness is a goal that certainly pleases God. This character of holiness is described as the fruit of the Spirit, in Galatians 5: 22-23, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This positive holiness requires more than living by a list of "don'ts," but requires that we listen to and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd (John 10:4).

This is very life affirming as we accept the will of God, who intends to satisfy our creation appetites, in his way and time, or will give us grace to redirect our appetites into doing his will. For example, there are those God calls to a life of singleness. These singles still have sexual desire, but because God has called them to be single, they are able to redirect and sublimate sexual desires, and remain sexually pure, serving the Lord, and finding joy and peace in the process.

This positive call to holiness is the call to wholeness, being whole persons, growing in all ways that please God, and enable us to better live for him and serve him. We are not called just to "get our souls saved," whatever that means in a Gnostic sense, but we are called to be mature, complete, Christ-like people. As Paul makes clear, any time we disobey God we involve not only our minds and spirits, but our bodies as well. Our physical bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

The alternative to pleasing God in 2006 is not pretty. Paul talks about the Lord's punishment for those who reject him in this matter. Sometimes the punishment is immediate, in terms of a lost witness and a truly useful life in the Kingdom. What Paul feared in 1 Corinthians 9 was that he would end up being a castaway, a reject. He would still be saved, but God could not use him effectively. How many do I know about, who because of a moment of weakness and disobedience, that led to sexual temptation and sin, have lost their ministry and effectiveness and opportunity to serve!

There will also be final accountability before the Lord, whom our sexual sin violates. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6, talks about how sexual sin is against our bodies, which are temples of the Holy Spirit. Other sins, Paul says, are outside the body, but sexual sin violates the presence of the Holy Spirit, who resides in our bodies. Paul says anyone who united himself with a prostitute, and claims to be a Christian, unites Christ within us with that prostitute. We thereby drag the Holy One into an act of sinfulness (1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

I think Paul is here addressing something even more perilous than the loss of one's kingdom witness and usefulness. In verses 6-8 I think Paul cites the fact that those who continue in immorality and willful disobedience are in danger of being eternally lost. To reject God's word and will is to reject God (verse 8). The assurance of our salvation is based on a relationship with Christ that continues to the very end. To live in willful sin is to reject that relationship and to fail to persevere to the end (Matthew 10:22; 24:13). A professing Christian who willfully disregards God's word and will concerning holiness is demonstrating that he or she has at best only tasted God's grace and not been transformed by it (Hebrews 6:4-8; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:19-21; 6:7-8). I fear for the many who have been deceived into thinking that salvation is simply accepting the "plan of salvation" and then resting on false assurance from those who tell them "once saved, always saved," regardless of how these professing believers live.

The believer's desire for sexual purity and moral holiness is not to be motivated by fear of judgment, but by the fear of losing the most precious gift we have—our love relationship and fellowship with Jesus Christ. Immorality and impurity grieve the Holy Spirit and render any fellowship with God an impossibility.

Our resolve must be to please God by our growing in purity of life, but also by growing in...

Priority of love

Paul reminds us that it's not enough to shield ourselves from sin by negative holiness and purity. We must fulfill the overriding obligation of love. Too easily we think that just by refraining from sexual and other more obvious sins we are pleasing God. Easily we become proud of our negative holiness and harsh toward the weak and those who have fallen into immorality. We must balance our purity and discipline with another way we are to please God, by growing in love for one another.

The older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son maintained his sexual purity, perhaps, but he failed in the area of love for his sinful, errant, and impure brother. Thus he showed himself to be the brother who was in "a far country," even though he never left home. His heart was more unlike his father's forgiving heart than that of the errant, repentant and returned prodigal son. We are to shield ourselves from impurity, and must guard our hearts, but we must also go into the world that so needs our love.

Just as being sexually pure was counter-cultural in Paul's day, so also being concerned for others was counter-cultural.

A God-like love

In verse 9 Paul reminds us that from the beginning we were taught about the primacy of love. But we so easily forget. And also in this way out day is no

different from the first century. To resolve to be more loving and others-centered in this self-centered culture is to be counter-cultural. Yet, this also is the only way to please God in Year 2010.

In verse 10 Paul encourages the believers by saying they in fact do love one another, but says there is always room to grow in love.

I suppose one could reach a condition of near-perfect physical fitness, and would find it hard to resolve to get more fit in 2010, but not so in love. Our standard and example in this area of love is none other than the Lord Jesus himself.

In his epistle, John simply says we are to love one another because God is love (1 John 4:8). This is not all we can say about God, because God is also holy, almighty, faithful, and so on. But, as Paul Scherer says, it's all we can say about love (*The Word God Sent*). The first word Paul uses is *philadelphias*, and is saying we all need to live in Philadelphia, that is, in brotherly/sisterly love for one another. (The NIV in verse 9 reads, "brotherly love," but the New Living Translation communicates more inclusively with "loving each other." In verse 10, the NLT says, "Indeed, you already show your love for all the believers throughout Macedonia. Even so, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you to love them even more.")

Next, he uses the word "agape," meaning a God-like love that is disinterested, that is, with nothing selfish to gain. Agape love is sacrificial and practical involvement in meeting the needs of others. It's being helpful and considerate towards those in need, and doing and giving, even when nobody knows about it but you.

Growing in love means you understand you were saved by love, and saved to love and then to...

A growing love

Paul says we are already God-taught in love and in how to love. Just do it, he in effect says. *The Message* does these verses justice: "You're God-taught in these matters. Just love one another!"

I'm reminded of the old farmer in the American South who was visited by a recent graduate of agriculture school, who gave him a lot of unsolicited advice on the latest techniques of agriculture. After letting him expound for an ample time, the old farmer said, "Sonny, I already know more'n I'm a-doin'."

Paul says we probably don't need more information. We know Jesus gave us the New Commandment to love one another as he loved us (John 13:34). He reminded the legalists that the greatest commandments were to love God with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). Jesus also commanded us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). So, how much more, Paul implies, should we love our brothers and sisters, those for whom also Christ died (1 John 4:11).

Caring

What we need to do is simply begin caring about and doing more and more for others, and less and less for ourselves. Christian love is more than sentiment and mere words, although words are important in communicating love. Our actions and sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others authenticates our love. As we begin this New Year we need to ask ourselves if we are becoming more and more caring about and involved in meeting the needs of others, of the less fortunate, in the true Spirit of the indwelling Christ.

Christian love and caring is the motivation behind our purity of life in our conduct toward one another. We refrain from exploiting one another for personal gratification because we deeply care how our actions will impact a brother or sister in Christ, as well as a negative impact on our witness to the lost world.

Four years ago I read a story on a religious press release about a prominent pastor in the US who was arrested this past week for “seeking lewd behavior” (Baptist Press, January 7, 2006). The tragedy will be the detrimental effect this pastor’s immorality will have upon his church and its witness in their city, and even the damage that will be done to the work of the gospel throughout the nation. This pastor was guilty of one of the sins he had been publicly denouncing in his moral crusading as a denominational leader. When responding to the fact that his colleague’s moral fall will hurt the witness of the Gospel, one denominational spokesman understated the situation:

“Regardless of what others may say,” he said, “the failure of one does not negate the witness of many faithful Christians to the power of Jesus Christ in their lives. The hypocrisy of a messenger does not compromise the integrity of the message.”

But in fact, though the witness of the faithful is not negated, the cause of the Gospel message is damaged and Satan rejoices. As followers of Jesus, we must care deeply about how our actions will impact others, both inside and outside the kingdom of God. We will have to give an account to God for every soul that has been adversely affected by our action and even by our willful neglect to love. (<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=22401>)

Giving

Even our giving to the church and outside of the church should become an act and expression of genuine love. There is an important implication in our text that unifies the thought in verses 9-12. We have opportunities to express our love for one another through our giving to one another. Verses 11 and 12 remind us that Paul is writing to folks who were being influenced by an over-zealous eschatology. Some in the church were thinking that the Second Coming was so immanent that there was no need to keep a job, and so in the time remaining, these folks were content to sponge off of those who were earning a wage. *The Message* paraphrases the last verse of our text by saying, “We want you living in a way that will command the respect of

outsiders, not lying around sponging off your friends.” Paul says such *freeloaders* were a detriment to the church’s witness to the outside world. In the second letter to the Thessalonians, in the third chapter, Paul sets forth the principle that if a person won’t work, then don’t let him eat (2 Thessalonians 3:11). Here in our text, verse 11, Paul is not confining honest, God-honoring work to manual labor, but, as John Calvin noted, “every useful occupation” can be pleasing to God and helpful to ourselves and one another (Page 362, volume 8, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*).

Instead of being sponging freeloaders, we are to seek opportunities to make an honest living, not for our self indulgence, but in order to have more to give to others. This is the principle Paul is using when he writes to the Corinthians about wealth (2 Corinthians 9:10-11). Interestingly enough, Paul tells the Corinthians that the Macedonian believers learned the secret of giving. They learned that it’s impossible to “out-give” God. When your purpose is to give to others, God is able to prosper you, so you can give to others. Also, in 2 Corinthians 9:8, Paul says there is to be not equal giving but equal sacrifice. Those who are blessed with exceptional wealth are given a greater stewardship responsibility to use that wealth to share with the needy and to support kingdom work. And we are to also commend those who forsake lucrative careers in order to adopt a simpler lifestyle for the purpose of kingdom service. We need to love more and more by the way we share with each other in the Body of Christ.

As John also makes clear, Christ-like love expresses itself in very tangible ways, such as sharing material needs with a brother or sister in need. To fail to respond to the needs of others is indicative of the presence of the love of God. And, John’s argument concludes that the loveless and uncaring are bereft of grace and have failed the assurance of salvation test (1 John 3:16-20). Certainly Paul would maintain the responsibility of the church to care for the truly needy among them. He even collected a sizable offering for the poor Jerusalem believers. Both James and John maintain that faith is not valid if it doesn’t cause us to care for those in need (James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:16-20). And, the Jerusalem church folks sold off property in order to aid those who had lost their income during the persecution of the church (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37).

Producing

Those who resolve to be more physically fit in 2006 are hopeful of producing and maintaining a healthier lifestyle that will result in a more productive life in other ways as well. For people my age, going to the gym in order to pursue vanity of appearance is a vain pursuit indeed! But some of you younger people still have the possibility of pursuing the gym routine in for appearance’ sake. But whatever we do, as Paul says, is to please God and not make us look better or even feel better about ourselves. The Christian life is not about ourselves, but is about pleasing and glorifying the heavenly Father by living spiritually productive lives.

Interestingly enough, Paul uses an oxymoron, as he tells us to make it our ambition to live a non-ambitious life. In Thessalonica, folks understood an ambitious person to be one who was always “tooting his own horn,” that is, one always touting himself as being important by looking and sounding important. These folks were big talkers, and he may have been referring to some who considered themselves superior to Paul because of their philosophy or oratorical skills.

Paul says, in contrast to these noise-makers, meddling in other’s affairs, and sponging off hard-working people, Paul says we must be hard-working people, focusing on the contemplative, quiet life of godliness and humble service, not caring who gets the credit, but careful that God alone receives the glory. The kind of life we are to live gains the “respect of outsiders” and produces a positive witness for Christ. We need, at the beginning of this New Year, to take inventory of our lives to ask ourselves whether or not we are bearing fruit for Christ and his kingdom.

Paul says we are to keep growing more and more, in holiness, love, and quiet productive lives.

Conclusion:

What parent doesn’t want his/her child to some day be fully grown? It pleases parents to see growing signs of maturity in children who should be maturing. A key phrase in our text that appears in verses 1 and 10 is “more and more.” God is pleased when we seek to please him more and more.

I hope you’ll have the opportunity to meet our 22-month-old grandson, Aedric, who has been visiting us, along with his parents, during these holidays. He’s a perfect 22-month-old, who is a joy to be around *almost* all of the time. His parents and grandparents are entirely pleased with Aedric and love him unconditionally. But when he’s 22 years old, his behavior and maturity will be more mature and appropriate, and even if it’s not, he will be loved unconditionally. Our expectations and desire will be that he will have grown in his discipline and love, which will please and honor his parents.

The heavenly Father is pleased when he sees us maturing, sees us growing in ways that are counter-cultural. In other words, he knows we are growing, even against the tide of the world, and this pleases him.

Did you make resolutions at the beginning of Year 2010? Are they as important as the resolution to please God? A resolution to lose weight may make you appear better, or feel better about yourself, but a resolution to please God will glorify him, and make a difference for eternity. I’m not disparaging a resolution to lose weight, which for you may be important to your stewardship of your body, and your usefulness and good health. But, I want you to decide the greater importance, the bigger issue of pleasing God, by resolving in his grace to grow, more and more, in holiness, in love that results in a productive life, for his glory.

Many who began 2010 by going to the fitness gym will begin to fall away. Perhaps there's not much commitment to begin with. Or maybe, they lack motivation because they haven't made themselves accountable to a personal trainer. But you and I are saved by the precious, priceless blood of Jesus and have been called to be holy and to be loving, caring people. The heavenly Father will be pleased and glorified as we simply keep on coming to the "gym" of personal and corporate worship, and faithful involvement in the spiritual disciplines, and service together in the Body of Christ.

As we prepare for the Lord's Table this morning, let's give thanks to God for his saving grace and for the new and everlasting Covenant through his sacrifice for us. Let us in gratitude, repentance and humility renew our covenant commitment to be fully his and to keep on growing in grace for holiness and Christ-honoring love.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Have you ever made a New Years resolution? Can you recall how effective it was?
2. Can you summarize the resolution Paul is encouraging in our text?
3. How do you define holiness? What is negative holiness and what is positive holiness?
4. What are some aspects of our culture that militate against holiness, particularly sexual purity? Is a holy life easier or more difficult today than it was in Paul's day? What are some similarities and differences?
5. Why do you think Paul balanced his admonition to holiness with the reminder for the Thessalonians to love one another?
6. What are some practical ways we can grow in love for one another?
7. Reading verses 11 & 12 in the context of verses 9 & 10, what do you think is the reason we are to work and earn an honest living? Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 as you formulate your answer.

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