

March 4, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Excel in Holiness - Abstain from Sexual Immorality (Part 1)

1 Thessalonians 4:3

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1. What is sexual immorality?
2. What does it mean to abstain?
3. How can we abstain?

Tonight, we are going to look the topic of sexual immorality. Not because we have simply chosen the topic from out of the blue, but because in our continuous exposition of the epistle to the Thessalonians, God talks about it in his word. If you look, in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4 and verse 3, Paul writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you abstain from sexual immorality." So, open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4. We will focus tonight on one verse: verse 3.

Tonight, we are going to talk about the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." This is a difficult commandment for children to grasp sometimes. In a Sunday School classroom once, a teacher was instructing the children on the importance of not committing adultery. One child spoke up and said, "I wouldn't want to commit adultery. I'm a child, not an adult, and I like acting like a child."

In our effort to catechize our children, we have found that they often have had a difficult time remember the order of the Ten Commandments, so we have made up hand motions to all of them. Here is the hand motion we have taught our children for the seventh commandment: hold up the number seven with your hands (five fingers on one hand and two fingers on the other). Next, with your hand that has only two fingers, pretend that they are walking away from the hand with the five fingers. This shows the picture of a husband walking away from his wife, which is one form of sexual immorality. For the children with us this evening, this will be a good picture to help you understand what we are talking about this evening. We are talking about when a husband of a wife leaves his family and lives with another family.

Last time, I sought to give you a broad overview of the section of scripture before us. In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, Paul turns the corner in his epistle and begins to focus of some pastoral instruction -- seeking to instruct the people of God in how they should live. We surveyed verses 1-12 and found out that Paul's overriding concern in this section was for the holiness (or sanctification) of God's people. We noted that the word "holy" or "sanctification" comes up 4 times in these 12 verses and forms our theme, all of which stems from his prayer in the last verse of chapter 3, "that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father."

"This is the will of God, your **sanctification**" (4:3).

"that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in **sanctification** and honor" (4:4).

"For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in **sanctification**" (4:7).

"Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His **Holy Spirit** to you" (4:8).

There are three areas of life that Paul covers ...

Verses 3-8 deal with sexual purity

Verses 9-10 deal with loving the brethren

Verses 11-12 deal with living before the world.

So, we deal tonight with this topic of sexual purity.

The question that immediately comes into my mind when I read this passage is this: "why did Paul begin with this issue?" Of all the issues that Paul could have begun to address with these dear people, why did he choose this one to begin with? Why did Paul begin addressing the issue of sexual immorality? Well, might I suggest simply, because sexual immorality was a problem in Thessalonica! For the same reason that Paul writes in chapter 2, defending his ministry, because it was probably under attack, so in chapter 4 does Paul exhort the Thessalonians away from sexual immorality because it was a problem.

With respect to this, I think that we need to keep 2 things in mind. First, those in Thessalonica were new believers. It was only a matter of months since Paul was in Thessalonica, when many of them were converted. Second, those in Thessalonica were from a society the openly celebrated immorality. On author wrote that in their society, "chastity was an unknown virtue."

Thessalonica was probably not so different than other cities in Greece at the time. Demosthenes expressed the entire mind-set of the society

at that time. He said, "We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes." Thessalonica would certainly have been influenced by the culture in Corinth, where nightly 1,000 prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, would descend upon the streets to ply their trade. Thessalonica would certainly have been influenced by the culture in Samothrace, where foul orgies took place in the Cabiri cult worship. On top of that, Thessalonica was a popular Greek seaport, which would have afforded it temptations of its own. Seaports have always been notorious for the riff-raff who come upon the city by way of the sea.

Thos in Thessalonica were new believers, who were trying to live out their Christianity in the midst of an openly immoral society.

To abstain from sexual immorality was probably a new concept to them. Perhaps they saw this in the lives of the Jewish men and women at the synagogue, but they were definitely the minority. Those in Thessalonica were new believers, who were trying to live out their Christianity in the midst of an openly immoral society.

Today, the situation, for us, is no different! Perhaps we don't have 1,000 prostitutes roaming around the streets of Rockford every night, but we have access to far more today. Sexual immorality abounds in our society. I don't need to convince you of this, I think that you know this.

Since the sexual revolution of the 1960's, our society has come quickly to the philosophy that we have "absolute sexual freedom." Today, we are told "to express your sexuality ... in any way you want, ... for any reason you want, ... whenever you want, ... with anyone you want," As one public figure who recently fell to adultery said, "A feeling like this only comes around once in a lifetime, and you should seize it." The legalization of abortion and the skyrocketing divorce rate in our land has been merely symptomatic of this concept of "absolute sexual freedom."

Sexual immorality is all over our media. It is on the TV. It is in our movies. It is in our magazines. It is on the internet. It is in our books. It is in our music. **If you want it, you can have it. But Paul says, "abstain from it."** The will of God for us, is quite simple: "this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you abstain from sexual immorality." God calls us to a life of sexual purity. Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians stands as a very timely admonition for us this evening.

1. What is sexual immorality?

The Greek word is porneia, (porneia) from which we derive our English word, "pornography." It is translated many ways in the scripture. The KJV always translates it, "fornication." Other translations translate it, "fornication, immorality, sexual immorality." It is a very broad word, which encompasses a whole host of sexual sins. Adultery, prostitution, incest, fornication, ... This is made clear in 1 Cor. 6:18, "Flee immorality (porneia) Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man (porneia - the one who practices immorality) sins against his own body." You are talking about any illicit sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage. You are talking about improper sexual activity.

2. What does it mean to abstain?

The Greek word for "abstain" is the word apechw (apecho). Literally, it means, "to hold yourself apart from, to be distant, to keep away from." The verse just quoted, "Flee immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18) is a good picture of this meaning. God tells us here that we ought to totally keep ourselves from improper sexual activity. We should flee from it. We should stay away from it. We should keep distant from it.

This is just like the command, which was sent for from the Jerusalem counsel, two years before, which Paul, himself, had carried into Thessalonica. You remember when the entire discussion came about in Acts 15 concerning the Gentiles and whether or not they should be circumcised? On Paul's second missionary journey, he was to carry a letter to the churches, part of which said the following: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain (apechw) from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication (porneia, same word) if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:28,29).

This isn't some new command of Paul. He received apostolic warrant to spread this command (Acts 15). He declares it plainly in 1 Cor. 6:18. He declares it plainly in 1 Thess. 4:3. Paul uses it in lists of sins, common to the unbelieving world in seven other epistles (Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:9; 2Co 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:10).

I don't think that there is anyone in this room that would deny this a clear and repeated warning from God. I don't think that there are churches in Christendom that would deny this truth. And yet, beloved, it is transgressed often in the church. It is one thing for it to happen in the world, the world believes it is OK. For them to involve themselves in such activity is simply being consistent with their beliefs. But for it to happen in the church is another story!

I read of an astonishing poll that Leadership magazine took polling 1,000 pastors. The results were terrifying! When asked, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse with someone other than your spouse since you have been in local-church ministry?" 12 percent of these pastors said, "Yes!!!! One out of every eight! Furthermore, 23 percent of these pastors said that they had done something that they considered sexually inappropriate. That's one out of every four! (Quoted by Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man, pp. 21-22). Over the years, I have heard of many godly pastors falling to sexual immorality. Many Christian leaders have also fallen to this. When I hear of these things, I ask, "God, how can this happen?" Then I find out that these things have been going on for years, undiscovered! Brethren, these things ought not to be!

It begins by rejecting God's command right here to abstain from sexual immorality. It begins by thinking that you can stand on your own. But the Bible says, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor. 10:12). It begins when you think that Paul's command here "to abstain from sexual immorality," doesn't mean, "run away from sexual immorality." But you think it means, "don't commit sexual immorality." See, there is a difference from abstaining (i.e. "To hold yourself apart from, to be distant, to keep away from.") and from "not

committing." When you think that the command is "don't commit" sexual immorality, you will find yourself getting closer and closer and closer and closer to the sin itself. And when you are on that road, you will not be able to turn around.

Often on the interstate highways of our country which are in mountains, the civil authorities have build run-away-truck ramps. These are simply roads which merge off the highway to the right, turn uphill slightly, and are filled with a soft surface (i.e. loose gravel), which can stop a speeding truck. There are times, when a semi-truck loses its brakes, after applying them continuously as it travels down hill.

The one who thinks he can get close without committing sin, will be like the run away semi-truck going down the hill at full-speed, who lost his brakes. However, in the area of our passions, there is no stopping them. There aren't any run-away-truck ramps in the area of sexual immorality.

Children, suppose this next week, it warms up outside and you are allowed to go outside and play. Since all of the snow has melted, there is lots of water on the ground and it is making puddles. Suppose that in your backyard, there was a big mud puddle in it. And your mother told you, "Jimmy, you can go out and play, just don't go in the mud puddle." What is the best way to deal with this? Should you go over and look at the mud puddle? Should you see how close you can come, without going in it? Or, should you play on the other side of the yard? The answer is obvious, right? We should stay far away. So with sexual temptations that comes our way. We should run. We should flee. We should head in the other direction.

Parents we need to learn this. But we also need to teach this to our children, because it is as serious as life and death. Turn over to Proverbs, chapter 7. The first nine chapters of Proverbs are written from a father to a son. This teaching is for children!

Proverbs 7

1. My son, keep my words, And treasure my commandments within you.
- 2 Keep my commandments and live, And my teaching as the apple of your eye.
- 3 Bind them on your fingers; Write them on the tablet of your heart.
- 4 Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," And call understanding [your] intimate friend;
- 5 That they may keep you from an adulteress, From the foreigner who flatters with her words.

(Notice the purpose of this teaching: to keep the son from an adulteress.

6. For at the window of my house I looked out through my lattice,
- 7 And I saw among the naive, I discerned among the youths, A young man lacking sense,
- 8 Passing through the street near her corner; And he takes the way to her house,
- 9 In the twilight, in the evening, In the middle of the night and [in] the darkness.
- 10 And behold, a woman [comes] to meet him, Dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart.
- 11 She is boisterous and rebellious; Her feet do not remain at home;
- 12 [She is] now in the streets, now in the squares, And lurks by every corner.
- 13 So she seizes him and kisses him, And with a brazen face she says to him:
- 14 "I was due to offer peace offerings; Today I have paid my vows.
- 15 "Therefore I have come out to meet you, To seek your presence earnestly, and I have found you.
- 16 "I have spread my couch with coverings, With colored linens of Egypt.
- 17 "I have sprinkled my bed With myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
- 18 "Come, let us drink our fill of love until morning; Let us delight ourselves with caresses.
- 19 "For the man is not at home, He has gone on a long journey;
- 20 He has taken a bag of money with him, At full moon he will come home."
- 21 With her many persuasions she entices him; With her flattering lips she seduces him.

(Notice the destruction language that follows).

- 22 Suddenly he follows her, **As an ox goes to the slaughter, Or as [one in] fetters** to the discipline of a fool,
- 23 Until an arrow pierces through his liver; As a bird hastens to the snare, So he does not know that **it [will cost him] his life.**
24. Now therefore, [my] sons, listen to me, And pay attention to the words of my mouth.
- 25 Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, Do not stray into her paths.
- 26 For **many are the victims** she has cast down, And **numerous are all her slain.**
- 27 Her house is **the way to Sheol**, Descending to **the chambers of death.**

I have only scratched the surface in dealing with all of the Proverbs passages. There are others and they teach the same thing: the path of sexual immorality is a path to death. The solution is that you should abstain from it. Flee from it! Listen to a few more...

"The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it" (Proverbs 6:32).

"For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, And smoother than oil is her speech; But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, Her steps lay hold of Sheol. She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable, she does not know [it]. Now then, [my] sons, listen to me, And do not depart from the words of my mouth. Keep your way far from her, And do not go near the door of her house" (Proverbs 5:3-8).

These passages sound like Paul's exhortation to "abstain" from sexual immorality (1 Thess. 4:3). We should keep far from it. We need to

learn from Joseph, when Potipher's wife came after him. When Joseph came into the house alone, and Potipher's wife "caught him by the garment and said, 'lie with me!'" The Bible says that Joseph, "Left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside." (Gen. 39:12).

What do you do, when you see a sign that says, "Danger, High Voltage!""?? Do you come close to look? What about the third rail at a subway station? Do you venture out onto the tracks? We should view any temptations in this area as warning signs of the coming danger. Listen to one more passage from Proverbs, "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go unpunished" (Prov. 6:27-29). Sexual temptations are like fire. If we play with it, we stand likely to be burned or scorched.

May I simply list a few danger signs? Soap operas. Romantic novels. Music. Magazines. Many movies. Much of what is on television. I recently read a study that found out that during prime-time, 75% of the shows on television contain sexual content -- defined as sex talk, characters planning to have intercourse and scenes of intercourse. Think about it, you turn on your television in the evening, and you have a 75% chance of viewing or hearing something about immoral sexual activity. I'm not saying that you should get rid of your television or that you should never go to movies. I'm saying that you should realize that much that is on television and much that are in the movies should alert you, "Danger, high voltage!"

3. How can we abstain?

So, how can we abstain from sexual immorality, especially if it is all around us?

First, we need to realize our particular danger today. Our society isn't so much like that of Thessalonica, where monogamy was a foreign concept in their culture. Their religion included and endorsed sexual immorality (much like the animism in Africa today). Our danger is different. We are in danger of simply drifting into a sensual lifestyle. Today, we are bombarded with images, fashions, and talk which is filled with sensuality. I see it with many young people today.

In the past eight years, I have severely limited my television watching. Whenever I see something today, I feel like Rip Van Winkle, who has been asleep for twenty years and notices the changes. I am often astonished at what is on today. The dangers are all around us.

Paul tells us what we should do in the next three verses. He gives us one thing to do and three things to avoid. The thing to do is found in verse 4 and the things to avoid are found in verses 5 and 6, which we will examine next time.

Let me give you a few practical things we can hold onto this evening...

1. Pray, pray, pray, pray for strength.

We must not forget that our sanctification comes from God (1 Thess. 3:12). We need to depend upon Him to overcome this temptation.

2. Understand the seriousness of this battle.

The battle with sexual temptation and the resulting immorality is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of eternity. When Jesus addressed this issue in the Sermon on the Mount, He described this battle as one that affects eternity: "I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:28-29).

Paul repeated the seriousness of this when he said, "Do not be deceived; neither **fornicators** (porneia) no idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

May I never hide from you the seriousness of this temptation. It is a matter of life and death. Yet, there is hope for those who fall. May I never hide from you the glories of the gospel of Christ! Paul said in the next verse, "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

There is forgiveness in Jesus Christ to those who repent of their sin.

3. Be accountable to others.

Have somebody periodically ask you how you are doing in this particular area. Have somebody be a reminder of God's presence. This is simply a way to remind yourself of how serious this battle is.

How often does a thought enter our mind and we go forth, as if God isn't really there. But the presence of another will change our action. God is always there. You need to be convinced that God is always looking upon the evil and the good (Prov. 15:3). An understanding of God's presence is enough to thwart your sin.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 4, 2001 by Steve Brandon.

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