

April 1, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Excel in Holiness - Abstain from Sexual Immorality (Part 2)

1 Thessalonians 4:4-8

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1 Thessalonians 4:4-8

1. How to abstain from sexual immorality (4:4-6a)

2. Reasons to abstain from sexual immorality (:4:6b-8)

Please take your copy of the Bible and open it to 1st Thessalonians. We have been expositing this great letter which Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. We have come to chapter 4, which is really a turning point in the book. He has finished describing his great affection for the people in Thessalonica and has begun to direct them in how they should live.

For three chapters, Paul hasn't issued a single command to the Thessalonians. His intent is to focus our attention on God's work among the Thessalonians, Paul's integrity in his ministry to them, and Paul's great heart of love for them. But, beginning in chapter 4, Paul begins to put his finger on some of the issues in Thessalonica, which deal with their practical living.

In chapters 4 and 5, we will see Paul issue 35 commands. In chapter 4 there are 10 in chapter 4 and 25 in chapter 5. It is like a big crescendo! He starts slow, yet ends with rapid-fire instruction for the people of the church. To get a taste of these, look to chapter 5, ...

5:16 - Rejoice always

5:17 - pray without ceasing

5:18 - in everything give thanks; [for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus]

5:19 - Do not quench the Spirit

5:20 - Do not despise prophetic utterances.

5:21 - Examine everything carefully;

hold fast to what is good

5:22 - Abstain from every form of evil.

Our focus this evening will be upon the following passage:

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

(3) "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; [that is,] that you abstain from sexual immorality; (4) that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, (5) not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (6)[and] that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is [the] avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned [you.] (7) For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. (8) Consequently, he who rejects [this] is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

We are once again going to address this issue of sexual immorality (as found in verse 3). Last time, we simply looked at this command - "that you abstain from sexual immorality." I simply placed forth before you **the standard** the Scripture sets forth.

- complete abstinence
- complete non-participation.
- not touching at all

This might be summarized in Paul's admonition to "abstain from every form (or appearance) of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). We ought to run from it. We ought to "Flee immorality!" (1 Cor. 6:18).

I spent much of our time last week **warning** you to stay away. It is a matter of life and death. Simply read through the first seven chapters of Proverbs and you will hear statements like this:

Prov. 6:32 - The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it.

Prov. 5:5 - The feet on an adulteress go down to death, Her steps lay hold of Sheol.

Prov. 7:26 - For many are the victims of the adulteress And numerous are all her slain. (7:27) - Her house is the way to Sheol, Descending to the chambers of death.

Let me just put it this way. Do you want to destroy yourself? Do you want to destroy your family? Simply involve yourself with sexual immorality. Begin looking at things you shouldn't be looking at. Begin developing intimate friendships with men or women of opposite sex. And you will destroy yourself and your family.

Parents, you need to warn your children of the dangers of these things. As your children get older, please make sure that you teach them of the dangers of sexual immorality! Proverbs is a very practical book written to children to learn how to live a godly life. You will save your children from years of heartache if you will teach them Proverbs.

If you saw your children playing with fire, what you say? If you saw your children on the border of a cliff, ready to fall over, what would you say? "STOP!!!" The dangers of sexual immorality are no less dangerous.

Last time, I sought to press home to you the **importance** of abstaining from sexual immorality. Tonight, I give you **help** in this area. Help is needed, because we live in a sex-crazed society.

How can we abstain from sexual immorality, if it is all around us?

Should we remove ourselves from the world, be like monks, and hibernate? No, the Bible nowhere tells us to do that. Because this doesn't work. Even if you were to be a monk, living apart from society and rarely, if ever encountered another person, I know that sexual temptation would be present. Anywhere you go with your body, sexual temptation is near! It is like trying to flee from your shadow.

No, we aren't called to be excluded from the world, the Bible always instructs us to live purely within the world. Let's look at Paul's advice.

1. How to abstain from sexual immorality (4:4-6a)

This phrase, "to possess his own vessel" has created a certain amount of discussion in the Christian world.

1. Some say that this means, "to acquire his **own wife** in sanctification and honor." The idea being that a Christian man isn't supposed to go out and sleep around with everybody, but should keep his sexual activity with his wife alone. This is how the RSV translates the text before us.

There are three difficulties with this view....

1. The word vessel (in the Bible) normally refers to earthenware, when used literally, but when used figuratively, it always refers to people, in general. In the supposed exception to this, in 1 Pet. 3:7, where the wife is called a "vessel," she is a weaker "vessel," implying that both the husband and the wife are vessels.

2. This passage isn't dealing with marriage. It is dealing with sexual immorality. To bring in marriage would be foreign to the context.

3. You don't fundamentally solve your immorality problems by going hog-wild in your sexual passion for your wife.

2. Others say that this means, "to possess his own body in sanctification and honor." The idea being that a Christian ought to know how to control himself in the area of sexual temptation. This is how the NIV translates this phrase, "that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

I believe that this understanding best meets the context. Paul is talking about how to walk in holiness and purity. He is directing his teaching to each and every one of us (not just the married men, who have wives). He is writing to men and women, married and single. It is applicable to us all.

The focus is how each of us should be in control of our bodies, not out of control like the Gentiles, who don't know God. Believers are commanded to be sexually pure, whether married or not.

Paul says that we need to know how to control our bodies!

There is a skill involved here. The thought here isn't so much that you need to know something in your head. Nor is it that you need to know something in your heart. It isn't mere knowledge about a subject. It is skill in handling an object.

For instance, an airplane pilot knows how to fly an airplane. A pilot's knowledge isn't so much that the pilot knows how airplanes fly. I know about flying an airplane. I understand the physics behind flight. I can tell you about Bernoulli's principle and how airplane wings create lift - through the difference in pressure above the wing and below the wing. I can tell you how the propeller works, how it's easier to take off into the wind, rather than down wind, and what putting your flaps up or down does to the speed of the aircraft. But, I don't know how to fly an airplane!

I know a lot about what's involved with how an airplane flies, but don't jump in an airplane with me at the controls (unless you are ready to jump out!). Here's the point: I know a bit about flying, but I don't know how to fly.

When Paul says here that each of us "know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,"...

- ... he isn't talking about head knowledge.
- ... he isn't talking about theory.
- ... he isn't talking about whether or not you understand.

He is talking about practice and training. He is talking about having the ability to put your body under your control to do what God wants you to do.

We have a man in our congregation, Elroy, who is a pilot and owns a Libscomb plane (one of the first tail-dragging planes made). When he flies, he takes the stick and maneuvers it how he wants the airplane to fly.

- When he pulls back, the plane goes up.
- When he pushes forward, the plane goes down.
- When he pulls to the left, the plane turns left.
- When he pulls to the right, the plane turns right.

So likewise, when we pull the stick in our bodies, we want our bodies to go as we direct them. We are told to "possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor." When life presents itself with two choices: One is honoring to God and the other isn't, we need to pull our stick to honor God and expect our body to follow.

But, sometimes it doesn't do this. Our body wants to do its own thing. This is sort of like flying. When Elroy pushes down on his stick to direct the plane to descend, a curious thing happens. The plane picks up speed and naturally resists efforts to descend. The plane gives resistance. The pilot has to keep the pressure on the stick to keep the plane descending. Similarly, our body wants to do its own thing.

If you don't train your body to be your slave, you will be susceptible to this temptation that will come. You remember when Paul said, "I buffet my body and make it my slave" (1 Cor. 9:27). The picture here is of Paul beating his body into subjection to himself, so that it can't fight back. You remember how this verse ends? "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Cor. 9:27). In other words, Paul says, "I exert great control on my body, so that after I preach, I might continue to walk Godly and upright before others. If I fail to do so, I disqualify myself."

The key to this is "self-control" is it not? The ability to control yourself! The ability to control your body. Living by principle, not by spontaneous impulse. Living according to conviction of what is right, not being controlled by feelings or impulses of your body. Our goal is to be able to say, "I will not be mastered by anything!" (1 Cor. 6:12).

Knowing how to possess your body in sanctification and honor requires two things: effort and reliance.

1. Effort to train your body to avoid the temptation.

"All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11). How does Shane Battier score 38 points in the NCAA semi-finals? Practice. Practice. Practice. Training. Training. Training. It doesn't "just happen." The athlete chooses his food carefully. The athlete pushes his body to do what he doesn't want to do (i.e. run wind-sprints or lift weights), to achieve a desired end.

Similarly, with sexual temptation, you need to make great effort to train your body to avoid the temptation. Don't let your body do what it wants to do. Train it by repeated practice.

With regard to sexual temptation, you need to see it as a battle to be fought. There are two battlegrounds upon which this war can be fought. You can fight the battle in your mind or in your flesh. If you seek to fight the battle in the flesh, you will lose the battle before it begins. I guarantee it. You need to battle it in the mind.

You might liken it to home-field advantage. If you are an athletic team, you want to play on your home field. On your home field, you don't have to travel, you have the fans cheering you on, and you know the peculiarities of your own playing field. With regard to sexual temptation, your home-field is the mind. Sin's home-field is the flesh. Resolve today to fight the battle on your home field -- in your mind.

2. Reliance upon God to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in your life - self-control.

Self-control is first and foremost a work of God. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 6:22-3). Self-control is the outworking of regeneration.

It should be obvious, that we need to trust in God's strength to overcome sexual temptation. As one man said, "Have not repeated defeats taught us the need of calling in better strength than our own?" We must not forget that our sanctification comes from God (3:12).

It is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is ready and willing to come to our aid. He is our high priest who ever lives to make intercession for us on our behalf (Heb. 7:25). He is the one who will give mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

We are teaching our children from a catechism which demonstrates our need of dependence upon Him for our victory over sin.

Question: Why do you need Christ as your priest (who will pray for you)?

Answer: Because I am guilty of breaking God's law.

Question: Why do you need Christ as your king?

Answer: Because I am weak and helpless.

The good news of the gospel is that God has given us strength to overcome. I am here to tell you that "No temptation has overtaken you, but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor. 10:13).

It is the Christian who is able to do this. (Romans 6). It is the Christian who has died with Christ. It is the Christian who has been crucified with Christ. It is the Christian who is no longer a slave to sin. Paul wrote, "our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. ... Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:6,14).

It is the non-Christian who cannot control his body. The non-Christian will willingly walk in sin and **loves** to walk in his sin. The non-Christian will willingly walk in his lusts. In 1 Thessalonians 4:5, Paul describes the Gentiles who walk in "lustful passion."

Which brings us to a contrast....

If you look at the text, there is a contrast in how it is that we should possess our body. Positively, God is calling each and every one of us to possess our own bodies "in sanctification and honor."

We have seen the first word, "sanctification." This simply means, "purity, cleanliness, righteousness, set apart." The second word, "honor," simply calls us to use our bodies in a way in which God is pleased with our action.

You don't take your fine China to Bowman Park for a picnic. Your fine China doesn't belong there! You will dishonor your fine China by possibly breaking it. You don't wear clothes you use when painting when you go to eat dinner at fancy restaurant. Your grubby clothes don't belong there! You will dishonor the restaurant.

So likewise here, for the honor of the body that God has created for us to use and enjoy, we are not to use it for dishonorable things. Sexual immorality will dishonor your body in the process, which in turn will be a disgrace to God.

Negatively, God is calling each of us not to let our bodies go in "lustful passion."

Literally, this is in a "passion of lust." This is the uncontrolled behavior on the non-Christian, who seeks fulfillment only in his own pleasure. This is the person who is looking to gratify his or her own lust. The picture here is almost of one who is out of control. The one who will devise all sorts of plans and schemes so as to satisfy his own sexual lusts.

I've known people like this. People whose minds are filled with the over-riding desire to talk and comment about everything from a sexual perspective.

I remember reading sociology books in college, which sought to make sense of society. Several of them had at their most basic principle that we all live to do two things: (1) satisfy our sexual longings and (2) produce an offspring that would propagate our genetic code.

I remember reading about Sigmund Freud's "Pleasure Principle" which basically states that we all seek our greatest pleasure (which often-times) implied our greatest sexual pleasure.

Paul gets it exactly right here, when he describes the "lustful passion of the Gentiles who do not know God." Such is the society in which we find ourselves.

Please observe with me, that the thing that allows the Gentiles to continue on in their lustful passion is their ignorance of God. They don't know God. Therefore, they do not believe themselves to be accountable to God. Therefore, they can do as they please. Therefore, they let their lusts control and dictate their lives.

That is what Romans 1 teaches. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident in them, for God made it evident to them." (Rom. 1:18-19). God gave them over "to degrading [sexual] passions." (Rom. 1:26-27).

The Gentiles do not know God, therefore, they can do as they please, because ...

- there is no accountability
- there is no understanding of God's character
- His holiness,

- His purity,
- His righteousness,
- His mercy,
- His grace,
- His forgiveness,
- His hatred of sin,
- His greatness
- His worth
- His glory
- His power

But, also, do you see the thing that aids one's victory over sin? Does it not follow that a knowledge of God will thwart sin? The Gentiles don't know God, so they behave how they want to behave. But we know God, therefore, we cannot behave as they behave, because we have come to know and trust things that are true about the character of God. The thought of the presence of God is sufficient to thwart the sin.

Here is the great practical out-workings of proclaiming what our God is like!

"Our God is in the heavens, He does whatever He pleases." (Ps. 115:3).

"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things." (Acts 17:24,25).

Yet, He is the one who has cared for us.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, watching the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3).

"If God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?" (Matt. 6:30).

He is the one who had died for us to give us life! He is the one who died in our place, as a substitution. As we reflect upon and think of God, He will become so precious to us that we will desire to worship Him, as they do in heaven ... "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. ... To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." (Rev. 5).

To be honest with you, one of the great benefits of gathering weekly with a church body is that the weekly reminders of God's majestic greatness and Christ's abounding love and mercy, is the very thing we need to dwell upon to follow our Lord in obedience!

As we approach verse 6, we see that Paul continues to explain how to combat sexual immorality by prohibiting two actions: "that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter."

1. Transgress - To step over (to step over the bounds)
2. Defraud - To over-reach, defraud

These words are essentially synonyms. Paul is telling us not to take what belongs to another. Sexual immorality is nothing less than an act of theft. John Chrysostom rightly explains, "it is more cruel than any robbery, for we grieve not so much when our wealth is carried off, as when marriage is invaded." This is a manifestation of the eighth commandment, "do not steal."

In Thessalonica, people were satisfying their sexual appetites, with those who weren't their spouse. In effect, they were transgressing and taking what belonged to another.

So, you say, "Steve, what is appropriate?" May I simply say this.... Don't have any physical contact with another person, for which you would not feel comfortable doing in front of your wife or husband (or future wife or future husband)." Here is our goal: complete abstinence. As Paul said, "Abstain from sexual immorality."

We have looked at "how to abstain from sexual immorality (4:4-6a," let's now turn our attention to the ...

2. Reasons to abstain from sexual immorality (:4:6b-8)

There are three simple reasons given in the text tonight. They are conveniently found in verses 6,7,8. They are clear as a bell.

1. The Consequences - "Because the Lord is the avenger in all these things" (:6b)

You take from God and God will take from you. These words are to stir up fear in our hearts. God is spewing forth threats to those who think that they can partake of sexual immorality without consequences. Today, our society is seeking to make sex free from all consequences. This is what our sex education classes across our land teach. This is essentially the motivation behind the abortion movement.

But God says, that there are consequences to your actions. He will avenge. "Fornicators and adulterers, God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). This ought to create two responses:

1. Fear transgressing God's clear command.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay (Romans 12:19; Deut. 32:35).

2. If you have been (or will be) defrauded by another, don't seek your own revenge, but seek forgiveness.

2. Our Calling - "For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification." (:7)

We have touched upon this before. When someone repents and becomes a follower of Jesus Christ, their life will change. God calls us to live a pure and holy life.

"He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Ephesians 1:4). Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me," (Luke 9:23). This is dying to self and living to God. "You shall be Holy for I am Holy." (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16).

God calls us to live differently than the world. God calls us to control our bodies and not being out of control.

3. The Truth - "He who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you." (:8)

I know that in delivering this message, there are two typical responses. Either ...

1. You love this teaching and embrace it as entirely true.

This is what you want to live by. Any failures on your part to live up to this standard have been regretted, confessed and forgiven by the Lord. You are humbled by your own failure, but embrace this entirely. It is what you are going to teach your children. It rings true to you and you have a desire to live a life of sanctification.

Or, a second response ...

2. You hate this teaching and want to avoid it and deny it at all costs.

If you are in this camp, I know how the deceitfulness of sin works. You will seek with all of your intellectual ability and all of the effort you can put forth to deny this teaching any way you can.

One way to deny the teaching is simply to say, "Well, that was Steve's interpretation," or "That was Paul's teaching, it wasn't of the Lord." God is a God of love. He isn't so restrictive on these sorts of things.

Church family, many in the professing Christian world have come down this track! I have met many professing Christians, who believe that premarital sex and living together before marriage is compatible with Christianity.

It is a shame that many in the church are being divorced, due to immorality. I have heard of immorality among pastors and their children and they act as if nothing is wrong -- as long as you are loving! It is a shame that churches aren't making a stand on abortion (which is usually the result of a pregnancy outside of marriage).

Brethren, these things ought not to be! This isn't Paul's teaching, it is God's inspired word. May I tell you that we as a church always need to stand firm on the truth of the Scripture. May God give us the grace to be courageous warriors for the truth of the Word of God. My heart is to so represent this message that God is accurately represented in my teaching. The best way to do this is to pour forth from His word as clearly and as convincingly as possible.

May God have mercy on any here tonight who would reject this teaching.

I dread the day when I find out that the lure of the flesh has conquered one of our numbers. I dread the day when I have to confront the rebellious who has been snagged by this sin. Oh, the terribleness of it! I have seen it devastate others. I have seen it control people.

May God protect Rock Valley Bible Church from this terrible sin!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 1, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.