

**“Maintaining Sexual Purity”
I Thessalonians 4:1-8**

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INTRODUCTION: When Paul visited Thessalonica (Acts 17 records the story of that eventful visit) he preached the gospel; and when they believed that gospel, they were saved. But Paul did not stop his instruction there. He also taught them HOW THEY OUGHT TO LIVE as Christians, HOW THEY OUGHT TO WALK. The Christian life is referred to as a walk (*peripateo*). We begin it with the step of faith in God’s Son and the work that he accomplished for us. It is a beginning step. But then we don’t stop. We continue to walk.

Here Paul instructs them that the Christian walk is a walk of sexual purity. Immorality was a way of life in the Roman Empire. Demosthenes wrote: *“We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the bearing of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”* There was no shame in having extra-marital relationships. But the holy God does not tolerate this kind of life-style for His children who have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light. God has called His people to be holy as he is holy, and to faithfulness in marriage relationships and to sexual purity before marriage.

BIG IDEA: As God's children, we are to maintain sexual purity FOR FOUR REASONS:

First of all...

1. TO PLEASE GOD.

“Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”

“We instructed you how to live in order to please God...” When I was with you, Paul says, I not only preached the gospel to you, but I instructed you how you ought to live in order to please God.

The Christian’s primary motivation in life should be to please God. We owe it to God to please him! Paul tells us why, here and in other passages. It is because Jesus has done a great thing for us. In Second Corinthians 5 the apostle writes, "He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised," (2 Cor. 5:15 RSV).

The great truth that every Christian must learn is that, as the apostle says in his Corinthian letter, "you are not your own," (1 Cor. 6:19b RSV). You no longer belong to yourself. You must no longer let your own desires take first priority in life. Rather, "you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:20a}. Jesus died on your behalf, in your place. You

deserved that death, I deserved it, but he took the penalty himself. Now we belong to him. He has invaded our being by the Holy Spirit, and the purpose of our lives has been dramatically transformed. We are to live no longer for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again from the dead.

That is the first priority in the Christian life. Every appeal to the Christian in the New Testament is made on that basis, and that is why Paul puts it first here. The Christian is to learn how to live to please God. We ought to remind ourselves every day that our business is not to do what we want done but to please the Lord who has redeemed us at such fearful cost. In this passage we learn that sexual purity pleases God.

A second reason Paul gives us for maintaining sexual purity is...

2. TO OBEY THE WILL OF GOD

It is in keeping with the will of God, Verses 2-3: ***“You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”*** The Greek word can be translated “orders.” These were authoritative commands from the Lord Jesus. Paul was the transmitter but not the originator. Paul is now reaffirming those orders.

Specifically, *“It is God’s will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality;”* “Holy” means “set apart for God.” The English word wholeness is derived from the same root word as holiness. Everybody wants to be a whole person. The Old Testament speaks about “the beauty of holiness” {1 Chr 16:29, 2 Chr 20:21, Psa 29:2, 96:9}, the inner attractiveness that is apparent when someone begins to function inwardly as he or she was intended.

What this says is that God is designing beautiful people! That is what he wants. And not merely outwardly beautiful people like those we see on television, but inwardly beautiful people. He is more interested in inward beauty. That is what God calls *wholeness*, and that is his will for you. Isn't it exciting that God wants to make you a whole person?

The second thing Paul says about wholeness is that it includes moral purity. “... abstain from immorality.” Moral purity is part of wholeness. You cannot be a whole person if you indulge in sexual immorality. We need to be very clear about these words. Words like immorality do not seem to register with many people. Let us put it plainly:

Avoid sexual immorality means avoid sexual wrongdoing;

No pre-marital sex; no sex with somebody you hope to marry someday, or maybe not; (no fornication);

No extra-marital sex (no messing around with someone else's wife or being unfaithful to your own husband or wife);

No homosexual sex (that is very clear in the Bible)

No pornography (no standing in the news section at the airport and flipping through Penthouse or Playboy magazine and getting yourself turned on by looking at the pictures; that is sexual fantasy and that is wrong, too, as Jesus clearly pointed out).

The Bible says “flee immorality.” That means to have none of those things going on in your life. The reason is, it destroys the wholeness that both you and God want.

Some here may be thinking: “It’s too late for me; I’ve already messed up my life.” But the glory of the gospel is that when we come to Jesus, through his work on the cross on our behalf and his resurrection from the dead, he can actually give us a new start. All the past is wiped out and forgiven. We are restored (II Cor. 5:17). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“I have espoused you [I have betrothed you] as a chaste virgin unto Christ,”* (2 Cor 11:2 KJV). The Corinthians had already messed up their lives in many sexual ways, yet Paul declares that because they had come to Christ they were now a chaste virgin. Even as a Christian, if we have messed up, the Word of God makes very clear that we can be restored. If we acknowledge that we have done wrong, and accept God’s forgiveness through Christ, we are a chaste virgin again in Christ. What glorious good news that is!

Now the question is HOW? How can we maintain moral purity? If you are serious about being a whole person, about wanting to find the wholeness, the inner beauty that God provides for you, listen to Paul’s instructions found in verses 4-5: *“that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;”*

The first step is to learn to control your own body ***“in a way that is holy and honorable,”*** that is, in holiness and honor. God gave us our bodies. We did not design ourselves. And God gave us sexual desires. Sexual desire in itself is good, because God created it. **But that sexual desire was made to be regulated or guided by two concerns: HONOR toward the other person and HOLINESS toward God.** *“not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.”* Lust is what sexual desire becomes when honor and holiness are missing from it. Take honor, for instance. God established a relationship called marriage. In it a man and a woman make a life-long covenant to honor each other with faithfulness and love. Sexual desire becomes the servant and the spice of that covenant bond of mutual honor. Therefore, to say to another person, I want you to satisfy my sexual desire, but I do not want you as a covenant partner in marriage basically means: I want to use your body for my pleasure, but as a whole person I don’t want you. And that is dishonoring and therefore lustful. Lust is sexual desire minus a commitment to honor the other person.

But that’s not all. The text says, control your body ***“in holiness . . . not in passionate lust.”*** Holiness has to do with God -- being set apart for God. So verse 5 goes on like this: *“Not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God.”* Lust is sexual desire which is not regulated or guided by a supreme regard for God. God created sexuality. He created it good and beautiful. He created it for the good of his creatures. He alone has the wisdom and the right to show us how to use it for his glory and our good. Lust is what sexual desire becomes when we misuse it, in disregard for God. If your sexual desire is not guided by RESPECT for the honor of others and REGARD for the holiness of God, it is lust.

Society tells us that those urges that boys and girls feel in their bodies are natural and therefore ought to be satisfied whenever the opportunity affords. But God says that our sexual desires must be fulfilled in a way that is holy, not in passionate lust like the Gentiles “who do not know God” (See also I Corinthians 6:12-20).

That is the cause of their sin, and that is the key to our victory. The cause of the sin of the unsaved world—the reason why sexual immorality runs rampant among the non-Christian is that they don't know God. And they don't know God's standards and they don't have God's enablement. But the Christian knows God and that's the key.

The command is to avoid sexual immorality to please God and to obey the will of God. In the third place, we maintain sexual purity...

3. TO ESCAPE THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

Verse 6: ***“and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.”*** The KJV says, “That no one go beyond and defraud his brother...” What he is saying here, is that the person who engages with another person in an immoral sexual act is defrauding that person, because he is bringing himself and that person under the judgement of God. Hebrews 13:4: ***“Marriage is honorable in all and the bed undefiled, but fornicators and adulterers, God will judge.”***

Believer and unbeliever alike cannot escape the painful results of sinful choices. That is the law of inevitable consequences. If we choose to sin, there will be evil results. We cannot avoid it. We can be forgiven, but that does not change the evil results. Forgiveness restores the broken relationship and gives us strength to walk on in freedom in the future, but it does not change or eliminate the hurt of the past.

Every believer must face that. God tries hard to teach us this. All through the Old Testament he sought to impart to Israel the fact that if they violated what he told them was right, if they refused to hear his word, ugly and terrible things would happen to them. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 31 where God is speaking to Israel about their disobedience:

“Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they shall be consumed and many evils and troubles shall come upon them, so that they will say in that day, 'Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?'" (cf, Deut 31:17)

That discipline took the form of famine, war and diseases. The final judgment would be a break-up of families:

“Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people while your eyes shall look on and yearn for them continually but there shall be nothing you can do.” (cf, Deut 28:32)

That is what has happened here in the United States, where one half of all children today live with single parents. Families have been broken and children parceled out to strangers. The final step, God said, would be ***“despair of soul,”*** that awful depression of spirit that makes one want to commit suicide rather than to go on living. As a faithful father, Paul solemnly forewarned the Thessalonians that this would happen. God's standards cannot be violated. He has ways of bringing to pass his judgments and nobody can evade it.

So, a third reason we maintain sexual purity: to escape the judgement of God.

In the fourth place, we maintain sexual purity SO THAT WE MAY...

4. TO WALK WORTHY OF OUR CALLING

The apostle recaps this teaching in two wonderful verses: Verses 7-8: ***“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”*** (see also I Peter 1:15-16).

God has called us to wholeness. That is what he can create if we obey what he says. If we disregard his instructions, says Paul, we are not only turning our back on what man has said but on God himself, and, furthermore, on his supply of power to enable us to do it.

God has provided a special resource for believers, the Holy Spirit. Remember the wonderful promise of Ephesians 3:20, ***“Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that is at work within us,”*** (cf, *Eph 3:20 KJV*).

No believer can give the excuse that he could not do what God told him to do. If he offers that excuse, he is but kidding himself; or else, he is forgetting that he has been provided with an extra resource. **Resting upon the presence of the Spirit of God, God has told us we can live a holy life.**

CONCLUSION

The people of this world laugh at the standards of God's Word, while they reap the tragic consequences of disobedience to it in their broken hearts and broken, mixed up lives. God wants us to be different. He wants us to be a community of beautiful people whose lives are under control and kept so by the Holy Spirit. Such a people will constitute an island of refuge and resource for the drifting multitudes, the slaves of lust, who are damaging and wrecking their lives all around us. May we be that community of beautiful people as we submit our lives to the authority of God's Word, in dependence upon the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

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