

PURITY IN AN IMPURE WORLD

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

INTRODUCTION: I love God's Word and I love to preach God's Word.

- That is why I can get home on Saturday from a long and tiring mission trip and be filled with energy on Sunday morning.
- That is why I wake up every Sunday morning, eager to come to church.
 - Yes, I love to see each of you.
 - Yes, I very much love to enter into worship together.
 - But to be honest, because I am eager to preach!

But not quite as much this morning. This is an uncomfortable sermon. It is uncomfortable to me, and it is going to be uncomfortable to most of you, and very, very uncomfortable to some of you.

And I can do nothing about the discomfort because the discomfort originates in the text itself. So if I preach the text honestly, it is going to make us all uncomfortable. And you know my commitment to the Lord to preach the text honestly.

My only alternative today was to pick a different text to preach. And I had another text in 1 Thessalonians that I would love to preach this morning. 1 Thess. 4:13-18 is one of the classic passages about the coming rapture of the church, and it is a passage I dearly love.

1 Thessalonians 4:16–18 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

And I would have been greatly comforted if I had been awakened by the Lord this morning telling me to switch to this grand Scripture about His soon coming. But He did not so instruct me today.

Instead He left me with the conviction that I must preach what is the heart of the letter Paul wrote to one of his favorite churches that he helped to plant on his missionary journeys. It is Paul's primary challenge in the entire letter because Paul was addressing the Thessalonians primary challenge of living in their culture.

If you have not already guessed or looked ahead at the Scripture, the subject of the passage is sex. OK, are we all uncomfortable together, now? Why would the Holy Spirit give this instruction to Paul for the Thessalonians?

Because **the sexual culture of the Thessalonians was even worse than ours.**

- The Greco-Roman culture was even more perverse and debauched than that which is accepted in the most liberal of Western Societies today.
- Fornication, adultery, homosexuality, transvestism, and pedophilia were accepted as common and normal practices.
- There was a wide variety of pornographic and erotic entertainments available without any societal condemnation or even rebuke.
- There were no civil laws nor social stigmatism that fell upon those who practiced the grossest manifestations of immoral behavior.
- In fact, the dominant pagan religions encouraged these practices, through the sanction of temple prostitution, which legitimized sex with a priestess as an act of communion with the deity. There were reported to be a thousand temple prostitutes in service at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth.
- The practical result of all of this was that in almost all the cities of the Greco-Roman world which had not had the influence of the Old Testament upon their lives was that even among married couples, it was not uncommon to have adultery on the part of the husband and harlotry on the part of the wife.

And thus Paul wrote

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

1 Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;
2 for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.

7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. 8 Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

Talking about this text, hearing this text, even thinking about it may be embarrassing or uncomfortable, but the text is not difficult to understand. It is exceedingly clear in its message.

There are only two parts to the message, which in and of itself makes it difficult for a Baptist preacher:

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL CONCERNING HUMAN SEXUALITY?

WHY SHOULD WE DO WHAT GOD SAYS?

I. GOD'S WILL: ABSTAIN FROM SEXUAL IMMORALITY.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;

The only word in this verse we might not readily understand is sanctification.

Sanctification – God's process for making us holy, for growing us in the likeness of the Lord Jesus in character, attitude, and practice.

Is it not interesting, if not disturbing, that what the Holy Spirit puts on the list as the number one step toward becoming more like Christ and growing in practical holiness is to get our sexual lives lined up with the standard of God.

Abstain from sexual immorality!

Now here is the key, is it not? What is sexual immorality? If we did a survey of every sexual practice that could be named and submitted it to people to mark yes or no whether a particular practice was immoral, we would without question get great variety in our responses.

Sadly, even if we did such a survey in churches, we would get a wide variety of opinion. So let us not trouble ourselves with that.

Let us ask, how does God define sexual immorality? It is this.

Sexual immorality – Any sexual activity outside the marriage relationship of one man to one woman.

Sex inside of a marriage relationship is not only undefiled, it is encouraged, even commanded. Sex is God's wedding present to a man and woman when they are married. Sex in any other context is labeled sexual immorality in the Scriptures.

God's instruction: Abstain from sexual immorality.

Then the Holy Spirit through Paul tells us three ways to obey His Word.

A. By controlling your body

1 Thessalonians 4:4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

Own vessel – your own body, what your soul and spirit live in

Some have mistakenly said the vessel refers to a man's wife, but this is not consistent with the biblical view of marriage that a man possesses his wife like one possesses a vessel.

God is telling us, to control our bodies not to allow our bodies to control us.

The advice, "If it feels good, do it." is not found on the pages of Scripture nor was that philosophy born in heaven.

All of us know what stirs thoughts of sexual immorality in us.

All of us know what encourages us to move from immoral thoughts to making immoral plans.

All of us know our bodies well enough to know what motivates us to move from immoral plans to immoral actions.

It may well be the nature of a horse to run, but if you do not want the horse to run away, do not loosen the reins, put a spur in his flank, and say giddy-up! Do not let your body do as it pleases, running away in sin.

The second way to abstain from sexual immorality:

B. By not accepting the standards of our culture. Control it!

1 Thessalonians 4:5 **not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles** who do not know God;

Passion – uncontrolled desires

Lust – out of control cravings

Like lost people who have neither the power nor desire to live in a way that honors and pleases God. Don't live sexually like lost people! You have Christ in you. Be different!

The third way to abstain from sexual immorality:

C. By not taking advantage of others

1 Thessalonians 4:6 **that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter ...**

Do not take advantage and lead a person to share in your sexual immorality by

- Using position
- Using influence
- Using money
- Using force
- Using attractiveness

While all of these can be misused by male or female, ladies, the last tool especially belongs to you. And you can take advantage by the way you dress, or by the way you don't dress, by the way you act, by the way you talk.

And while we may normally think of it being the male who takes advantage, and I am not denying that this is true, this is a door to sin that swings both ways.

We have certainly not exhausted the subject, but I think all of us are pretty clear on God's command. Abstain from sexual immorality.

What we probably need more of is the second part:

II. THE MOTIVATION Because the motivation of the flesh and the old nature is ferociously strong, and it was against the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 4:6-8 ... because the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. 7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. 8 Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

A. The Lord avenges sexual sin.

1 Thessalonians 4:6... because the Lord is the avenger of all such,

Now here I know there is argument from some of you. You are saying, but I believe in the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, the mercy of God.

So do I! So does Paul. So does the Holy Spirit who gave Paul these words.

The Book of Hebrews is written to believers.

Hebrews 12:6 *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.*"

Hebrews 13:4 *Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.*

The Lord chastens believers for sexual immorality because of the very serious nature of this type of sin. The judgment may come in the form of destroyed marriages, broken family relationships, financial hardships, disease, even death.

The second motivation:

B. God's calling in our lives is to holy living.

God's purpose for us is to save us, but He saves us to transform us to live holy lives with Him forever.

He does not save us to let us live in sin and disobedience for eternity.

The third motivation to abstain from sexual immorality:

C. Living in sexual immorality is the rejection of God.

1 Thessalonians 4: 8 Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

Listen folks, this preacher did not write this.

You can say, "That preacher is so old fashioned, so conservative, so right wing,..."

But this preacher is not the source. I am just reading the message from the King.

This does not mean that sexual sin cannot be forgiven. It can. Remember David. Remember the woman caught in adultery and the woman at the well.

When a person repents and puts their faith in Christ, any and every sin can and will be forgiven.

If a person who is truly saved repents, any sin can and will be forgiven.

But if a religious person persists in sexual immorality with no repentance, there is much reason to question whether that person is saved.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

What is the answer? Repent
If not saved, be saved.

Abstain from sexual immorality! Brings freedom, victory, and blessing.