

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH**

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

### **A Passion for Purity**

(1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

Study #6

#### **Introduction: It's on our minds...**

One of the major themes of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is prophecy. Now, we haven't emphasized prophecy to this point in our study. Still, Paul has mentioned the fact of Jesus' return at the end of each of the first three chapters of this letter.

And, if you've looked ahead, you'll see that the fourth and fifth chapters contain some of the most explicit teaching about end times events we find anywhere in Paul's writings.

After the Christmas break, when we return to wrap up 1 Thessalonians, we'll spend time seeking to understand what happens to believers when they die, what we mean by the term, "the rapture," and something about the chronology surrounding Jesus' Second Coming.

So, somewhat unusually, prophecy will be on our minds in the weeks to come because Scripture will draw our attention to it. I say "somewhat unusually" because we may not often think about prophecy, the end times, or Christ's Second Coming in a given day.

By contrast, the theme for this morning's study does not take us out of normal thought patterns at all. This morning, Paul talks about sex. And sex is on our minds.

I'm not for one moment suggesting that sex is more important than prophecy! But while prophecy is something we may consider occasionally, sex is something many of us think about pretty much daily/all the time.

Thankfully, the Bible does not leave such a prominent theme as sex unaddressed. In fact, there are lots of places in the Bible where sexuality and sexual themes are dealt with. Where sex is mentioned, the Bible deals with it forthrightly - no embarrassment, no giggling, no punches pulled.

The Bible provides sexual boundaries, letting us know what is and isn't allowed. And the Bible provides sexual wisdom, guiding us past good to better and to best.

And Paul's words to us today makes it clear that if we would enjoy our walk with God and make an impact on our world for Jesus, we will become more and more committed to sexual purity.

Paul brings us to the second half of the letter with the word, "***Finally***." Don't believe him!

This "***Finally***" is a preacher's finally. He's still got a long ways to go. What he means by "***Finally***" is that he's starting to wrap things up. He's nearing the homestretch. He's coming to the last sections. But he's nowhere near done.<sup>1</sup>

To this point, Paul has expressed his love for the Thessalonian believers, has cheered them on to keep living for Jesus in a hostile environment, and has prayed for their spiritual progress.

NOW, he turns his attention to areas of practical concern. And the first area of concern he addresses is that of the pursuit of personal, sexual purity.

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<sup>1</sup> In this last section, there are a number of issues he wants to address: the personal growth of the individual Christian; instruction about future events; what life in the church is supposed to look like.

## Live for the Pleasure of God! (vv. 1-3a)

### The Basis for Paul's Call

*Family love*

**[1] Finally then, brethren...**

Paul starts off by reminding his readers that they are family with the word, "**Brethren.**"

A brother may be the one you fight with, but he's also the one you'll fight for. Everything Paul says here comes straight from the heart, like a brother speaks to a brother when the stakes are high.

Paul is urging (requesting! exhorting!) us, his brothers and sisters, to a certain style of living. And it's not just "*brother Paul*" doing the exhorting. He's speaking on behalf of the Lord, Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

*The authority of Jesus*

**[1] Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you IN THE LORD JESUS, that as you received from us instruction<sup>3</sup> as to how you ought<sup>4</sup> to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. [2] For you know what commandments we gave you BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD JESUS.**

The instructions that follow don't arise from Paul's mind, his will, or his initiative. These directives come straight from Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul says in verse 1 that the exhortation comes "*in*" the Lord Jesus. In verse 2, using only slightly different words, he recalls how he and Silas and Timothy gave the commandments to the Thessalonians through (or "by") the Lord Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> Makes us think that Paul had left instructions, perhaps in the form of rules, with the Thessalonians.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Paul says that Christians OUGHT to live in a certain way. There are some contexts in which "ought" is nothing but narrow legalism. "Ought" sometimes ought to be avoided! But, there are times when "ought" is a healthy word and concept - and here (obviously) is one of those places. A Christian has become a slave of Christ. He or she has been bought with a price. And Christian living is not an optional extra for those who like that kind of thing. It is a compelling obligation lying on each one who has been saved by Jesus.

In fact, the word in verse two - *commandments* - is a word taken from the battlefield. It is the way a directive is given by a commanding officer to troops in combat. There is the ring of command authority to what Paul is about to exhort.<sup>5</sup>

He reminds them and us of these things, because he is about to be specific in his call to distinctively Christian living.

### The Content of Paul's Call

*To increasingly please God*

**[1] Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.**

Everybody lives to please somebody. Some of us struggle with the temptation to please the people around us - and that's a tough way to live. Believe me. I've tried.

But no matter how hard we try, everything we do will displease somebody. Living for the pleasure of the people around us is a surefire path to neurosis! People - wittingly or unwittingly - impose their expectations on us. And, then, even if we succeed in pleasing someone, we won't please someone else. AND, what we do to please someone may not in their best interest, anyway!

Living for the pleasure of another human being is a trap. Paul has a way out of that trap, though. He calls us to live for the pleasure of God.

There is nothing more **fulfilling**, more **therapeutic**, more **humanizing**, more **satisfying** than to live for God's "Well done, good and faithful slave!" Living for the pleasure of God is what life is all about!

And that is the way the Thessalonians, these very young Christians, had been living.

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<sup>5</sup> Note Paul's frequent use of military terminology in his letters; cf. 2 Timothy 2:4.

Paul commended them for the way their lives pleased God, and then added, “*Excel still more! Guys, I love the direction you are traveling. Keep the course and increase velocity. Don’t be satisfied with the progress you have made, but seek to please the Lord more and more and more!*”

And the course to follow to lead a life that pleases God is the path of sanctification. That - sanctification - is God’s will for His every child.

*To travel the road to sanctification*

**[3a] For this is the will of God, your sanctification...**

Sanctification is a big word that means, literally, “*to be set apart for a special purpose.*” And the word is used in at least a couple of ways in the New Testament.

Sometimes, the word speaks to a finished act. We who are in Christ ARE SANCTIFIED, meaning, we have, in fact, been set apart for God’s purposes.<sup>6</sup>

But, many other times, sanctification is considered as a process. It is something into which we increasingly enter as we mature as Christians. We have been set apart for God’s purposes - and we become more so as we mature. That use of the term surfaces in verses like these:

- Romans 6:19 - ***I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in SANCTIFICATION.***
- 2 Timothy 2:21 - ***Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, SANCTIFIED, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.***

God’s will for every believer is that he or she will progressively become more sanctified, more set apart for Him.

In this passage, Paul wants to zoom in on one aspect of the Thessalonians’ sanctification: their sexual purity. He tells them that they are to abstain from sexual immorality.

### **Passionately Pursue Purity! (vv. 3b-6)**

#### **Abstain From Sexual Immorality (v. 3b)**

**[3] For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality**

*Thessalonian society*

Just because he gives this instruction, we shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that Timothy brought back a bad report from Thessalonica, or that the Christians there were engaged in sexual sin. Yet even if there was no bad report, Paul still felt compelled to write bluntly and boldly about the need for sexual purity.

Remember, Paul was writing from the notoriously immoral seaport city of Corinth. Corinth was known far and wide as a hotbed of sensuality. And he would have remembered that things weren’t so different in Thessalonica.

Paul’s not rebuking them. He’s warning them. And his words warn us, too.

In the Greek society of the first century and in San Antonio, AD 2007, trips and falls into sexual sin are real possibilities.

In Paul’s day, it was largely taken for granted that men would seek satisfaction of their sexual desires outside of marriage. In that society, fidelity was deemed an unreasonable demand on a man. So, sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage was a “given.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Archaeological discoveries at such ancient sites as Pompeii and Herculaneum bear painful testimony to the moral depravity that was present even in that, the most civilized portion of the ancient world.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11

The best known stories of the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were stories of their sensuality. Adultery was a common subject in ancient poetry. Sexual activity was ritually sanctioned in certain religious cults of the day.

And the word that my Bible translates “sexual immorality” was a word that covered all the possible manifestations of sexual sin.

It was an all-inclusive word that brought all forms of illicit sexual activity under one umbrella. Paul wanted them (and us) to understand that sexual impurity was one of the great enemies of Christian sanctification, and drew their attention to it here by the use of the word *porneia*.<sup>8</sup>

Homosexual and heterosexual sin, private affairs and public orgies, premarital sex and religious cult prostitution were all “givens” in the world of the Thessalonians. And, for the sake of the believers’ sanctification, Paul warns them to stay away from all of it.

Which is NOT to say that the believers were to stay away from sex!

*God’s plan for sex*

God created sex - He thought the whole thing up. In the beginning, He created Adam and Eve and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, which certainly required that they had sex with each other.

Throughout the Bible’s story, husbands and wives are encouraged to enjoy the pleasures of sexual union. One whole book of the Bible (The Song of Solomon) is dedicated to physical, marital love.

The book of Proverbs commends sexual activity between husbands and wives, and in 1 Corinthians Paul gave this instruction:

***[1 Corinthians 7:3] The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. [4] The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.***

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<sup>8</sup> “Fornication/Sexual immorality” - is a translation of the word from which we derive our English word, “pornography”: *πορνεία*.

***[5] Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.***<sup>9</sup>

If the Bible is clear in its insistence on the beauty of loving sexual relations in the covenant bond of marriage (and it is), then it is equally clear that sexual activity with a partner who is NOT one’s spouse is devastatingly destructive and wrong.

Now, having just said that, what I’m about to say is very important. And it is important to say it because we have been very careful to say that sexual sins are wrong. Ready? OK.

Sexual sins are not unforgivable sins.

Jesus died for ALL our sins - and not only for non-sexual ones. He died on the cross for sexual sin of all kinds as surely as He died for the sins of lying and cheating and stealing and murdering and gossiping.

Today, if you have sinned sexually, come to Jesus for forgiveness. Taste His grace! His offers you cleaning and grace.

But Christians have always placed a high premium on sexual purity. And the reason we have is because we have understood that purity - sexual purity - is the will of God.

Today, we affirm that. And I’ll go you one better.

If God’s will for us is sexual purity (and of course it is), then we are **WISE** to run as fast as we can away from any behavior that would lead us toward sexual impurity.

Remember, *porneia* does not only refer to adultery, but to all forms of impure sexual behavior. And there are so many ways in which we might trip and fall, sexually, in the real or the virtual world today.

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 13:4 is even so bold as to declare, “***Let the marriage bed be undefiled!***” - which is to say that God’s plan is for a husband and a wife to lovingly enter into intimate physical union.

Now, we're not surprised to find an exhortation to sexual purity in an equipping letter written by an apostle to a church. But, in this passage where he dwells on things sexual, Paul goes well beyond the simple, "*Thou shalt not.*" He goes on to urge each of us to get "*know how*" when it comes to playing it smart with sex.

### Get Sanctified "Know-How" (vv. 4-5)

*[4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel<sup>10</sup> in sanctification and honor, [5] not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;*

#### *Sexuality expressed as lustful passion*

The mindset Paul had observed in his travels through Asia Minor with respect to sexuality was one of slavery.

The message was, "*Sexual urges are overpowering and irresistible. There is no use trying to rein in sexual lust. It is too strong. Might as well give in to the 'lustful passion.'*"<sup>11</sup>

And because this was their mindset, the Gentile world, as Paul knew it, was consumed with sex. For them, sexual experience was not a source of deep, satisfying, marital joy. It was an insatiable appetite that mastered an ungovernable nature. (If you are tracking with me, you'll see a close parallel between Paul's culture and our own.)

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<sup>10</sup> There is some debate among commentators as to what Paul was referring by the use of the word "vessel." While many understand it to refer to the physical body (or more specifically, the sex organ), some believe Paul is referring to a man's wife. I reject this view, believing that (1). a wife would not be something Paul would speak of as being in a man's possession; (2). a wife would not be considered a "vessel" any more than a husband is considered a vessel, as, for instance, both are in 1 Peter 3; (3). in the context, it is much more natural for Paul to address himself to the need for a man - married or unmarried - to conduct himself (not possess his wife) with sanctification and honor.

<sup>11</sup> "Passion" - always used by Paul in a negative sense. "Lustful" here is all about strong desire (cf. 1 Thess. 2:17 "with great desire", same word as used here in 4:5, for "lustful").

He knew men (and perhaps women, too, but the words are clearly written with men in mind) who had given themselves over to their lusts.<sup>12</sup> He says that the problem is rooted in the fact that these folks don't know God.

By contrast, Christians, who do know the Lord, are to conduct themselves in a completely different way when it comes to sex. We are to conduct our intimate life in sanctification and in honor.

#### *Sexuality expressed in sanctification*

Paul speaks pretty bluntly here. He speaks of a man's "*vessel*" - a clear reference to a man's physical body.<sup>13</sup> And he says that a man is to "*know how to POSSESS his own vessel*" (i.e. - gradually attain complete mastery of the body<sup>14</sup>) in such a way that enhances his sanctification.<sup>15</sup> This would be in direct contrast to the frantic, lustful passion of the Gentiles.

The Christian man is to rule his body. The Christian woman is to rule her body. They are not to be mastered by the sex drive. They are not to seek satisfaction wherever or whenever they can.

They are to wait until marriage to give themselves to a husband or to a wife. In marriage, they are to see sexual union as an opportunity to demonstrate love and to give.

The Bible teaches that there is a beautiful and a HOLY use for sex in God's grand scheme of things. And he exhorts you and me, today, as he did his Thessalonian friends, to keep our bodies pure.

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<sup>12</sup> These thoughts are more fully developed in Romans 1, where those who refused the knowledge of God were given over to unnatural lusts.

<sup>13</sup> Paul's Greek readers would have been familiar with the idea that the body was the vessel of the soul. Paul's Jewish readers would have remembered 1 Samuel 21:5, "the vessels of the young men were holy," which clearly refers to the sexual life of the young men in David's army.

<sup>14</sup> So Moulton - Milligan in The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament.

<sup>15</sup> Please note that there is application for the woman here, as well, although it is hard to miss the idea that Paul is addressing himself primarily to the men in the church. My remarks will be mostly to the men, too, understanding that women have opportunity to enhance their own Christian growth by their sexual purity, too.

So, Scripture has laid out the will of God for us. We are called to purity. To sexual sanctification. It's the way to live that best honors God.

But, it is still possible that we might know the will of God, and seek to travel a different path. If any of us are:

- playing with the idea of violating God's will in this matter;
- currently involved in a relationship in which God's will is being violated;
- involved in sexual activity which is neither sanctifying nor God-honoring,

Paul offers a strong rationale for reversing course and pursuing purity.

First, we should pursue purity with passion and we should abandon impurity like the plague it is because it is unloving.

### **The Price Exacted by Impurity (v. 6)**

*[6] and that no man transgress and defraud his brother<sup>16</sup> in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.*

*Immorality is loveless? YES!*

There are all kinds of ways to view sexual sin. Here, Paul views it as defrauding a brother. For a man to misuse his vessel (that is, to use his sexuality with someone other than his spouse) cheats someone else.

Adultery is an obvious violation of the rights of another - the other husband! For the woman involved in adultery, it cheats the other wife.

And adultery also cheats children and friends and extended family. For a Christian to commit adultery is to do damage to a testimony for the Lord.

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<sup>16</sup> "Brother" here might have a broader reference to the human population and not just to the church, as Paul would have envisioned a defrauding of any man (either Christian or not) as taking place if a believer committed adultery with his wife. Although it would seem that the real thrust of the apostle's concerns are with adultery and fornication within the church family.

Sexual involvement before marriage robs the other of a gift which ought to be brought into a marriage. The future spouse of the one you have slept with, if it turns out to NOT be you, has been defrauded.

And even if you do marry that woman or that man, there is overwhelming evidence and testimony that sexual involvement prior to marriage will bring baggage into your marriage that may take years to work through.

Friends - my dear brothers and sisters - we cannot sin sexually without in some way cheating someone else. All sexual sin hurts someone.

What the Bible has declared for thousands of years is that the best way to preserve trust and the best way to enhance love is to build a wall around sexual activity, namely, the wall of marriage.

To engage in sexual immorality is to commit an act of lovelessness. And, it is also to invite the Avenger into your life.

*God, the Avenger in all these things*

The Avenger here is not the wronged/defrauded brother or sister who is going to beat you up for your affair with their spouse. The Avenger is the Lord!

As an argument against sexual sin, Paul might have appealed to the bitter physical, psychological, and social consequences of immorality. And those consequences are real and cannot be dismissed lightly.

But, his final warning against impurity is an appeal to the consequences for the believer in the presence of God. A just God and a coming day of judgment are factors which can't be left out of consideration when dealing with sexual sin.

God will take action against these sins. Some of that action does come, I believe, in the form of the bitter physical, psychological, and social consequences of immorality. Those consequences are reaped here and now.

But, for the believer who refuses to repent, who continues to engage in immoral behavior, who hears the command of Scripture yet puts off the pursuit of purity, there will be judgment.

Not condemnation or eternal separation from the presence of God. Jesus' death on the cross guarantees the believer's final salvation.

But the Christian who flaunts his sin and does not pursue purity and sanctification, there is the inescapable prospect of standing before a Jesus who is both the Savior and, at the Judgment Seat, the Judge.

It is TRUE that the Christian is not under God's condemnation (John 5:24; Romans 8:1). It is NOT TRUE that the Christian is exempt from the Law of the Harvest (we reap what we sow). So, friends -

- How much better to accept the commands of Jesus with respect to our sexuality as the loving instructions they are?
- How much better to receive God's commands as the pathway to life - which they truly are?
- How much better to obey as we remember that the Jesus who commands is the Savior who loved us and died for us and lives for us?

In the final two verses of this passage Paul comes full circle as he reminds us of God's call on our lives.

### **Sexual Purity In The Grand Scheme Of Things (vv. 7-8)**

#### **Commitment to Sexual Purity Reflects God's Call (v. 7)**

*[7] For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. [8] So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*

When God saved us, it was not so that we could be free to lead a life of impurity (DUH!). He did not save us so that we could live any way we pleased. He saved us with a definite purpose - that we might be set apart for His purposes.

God provided you and me with a whole new set of resources for living - a new nature and the Holy Spirit within us, the Body of Christ surrounding us, the Word of God directing us - that we might increasingly enter into that set-apart-ness.

And as you and I are more set apart for Him, we are increasingly fit to shine for Jesus in a dark world that desperately needs to be rescued by His love.

One of the ways in which we can shine like the sun in our own dark world is by a passion for purity.