

Abounding in Sexual Purity

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

Halifax: 15 October, 10:30 AM

Introduction

What wonderful things God has in store for His people in His salvation!

- His salvation is so comprehensive.
 - He has not only sent His Son to redeem us from the everlasting torments of Hell,
 - But He has also provided for us that we might be fully conformed to Him...
 - sanctified—
 - delivered from the wretched creatures we became by the fall to live in the beautiful holy ways that please Him.

Last week, we looked at the call to holiness that we have in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3a.

- It is the introduction to the second part of Paul's letter which is found in chapters 4 and 5.
- In these last two chapters, Paul is going to call them to holy living,
 - and in this two and a half verse introduction, we saw how Paul earnestly pled with them to abound more and more in their walk with God.
 - He reminded them of how he and Timothy and Silas had given them commandments from the Lord about how to live lives that please God...
 - And how it was God's will for them to be sanctified—
 - that is, to be brought into a life that is in full harmony with God as their God and Saviour who is entirely separate from all that is corrupt and sinful.
- Even though the Thessalonians were commended for doing well in their walk,
 - they still had a long way to go and that is why Paul is telling them to abound more and more in their sanctification.
- What an encouragement that in Christ, we who are accepted in Him are now able to grow and grow and grow in our walk—
 - This would be discouraging if we were cut off from God until we reached the mark—for we could never attain,
 - but it is very encouraging to know that we have been accepted in Christ and are now able to make progress by His enablement as those who are already fully accepted.

And my brothers and sisters, today we get to look at the first of the ways that Paul spells out to the Thessalonians to abound in.

- Here is a church that was doing well when it came to following the Lord.
 - They were growing in faith and love and hope in the face of severe persecution,
 - and what is the first thing that Paul addresses for them to abound more and more in?
 - It is in sexual purity!
 - He treats of this subject in verses 3-8—chapter 4, verses 3-8.

Please give me your attention as I read to you these words which God's Spirit gave Paul to write for the whole church to receive, not as the word of a man, but as it is in truth, the word of God that effectively works in you who believe. I will begin with chapter 4:1.

1 Thess. 4:1-8: 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.

May God bless these words, written to help us to abound in sexual purity!

- Yes my brothers and sisters, that is what God has graciously given you in this text, words that will help you to abound more and more in sexual purity that pleases God!
 - He loves us so much that in Christ, He gives us a new way to live.
 - Isn't that a marvelous thing?
 - Let's explore what He says to us.

I. Our Lord begins by showing us, in verse 3, that conformity to God involves a clean break with sexual immorality.

- You can see how He says that our sanctification is the will of God—
 - And then He gives us this first thing—that we should abstain from sexual immorality.
- A. The word **abstain** speaks of complete severance from it.
 - Leon Morris explains that the words here signal a complete separation.
 - J.B. Phillips translates it as “a clean cut with sexual immorality.”
 - 1. In other words, there is to be no compromise here.
 - No playing with it around the edges, no indulgence in the heart...
 - You are to have nothing to do with it.
 - It is not fitting for those who belong to Christ.
 - 2. Let there be no excuse making about it.
 - There is a great delusion in the church that this is a sin that cannot be helped—and because we have believed this lie—
 - it is slaying many who profess Jesus Christ.
 - We like to talk about how weak we are and use that as an excuse...
 - Of course we are weak—that is why we have a Saviour and why we have the Holy Spirit who has given us a new heart so that we can live a new life in Christ.
 - But we *do* have a new heart and a new life in Christ, so quit whining and making excuses and start living for the Lord as you have been taught.
 - Those who fall into this sort of sin always seem to be full of self-pity.
 - They act as though God has given them something unreasonable.
 - Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves and playing the victim, we ought to be filled with disgust and shame about the filth that is in us!

- If you are toying around with this sin, you need to make a clean break with it and consider it to be out of the question for you as a follower of Christ.

B. What all is included in the term, *sexual immorality* or *fornication* (*por-ni'-ah*)?

1. It includes any kind of sexual relation outside of biblical heterosexual marriage.
 - Fornication, adultery, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, and bestiality are all condemned in scripture.
 - In the Old Testament, the helpful term “uncovering nakedness” is used to show that any kind of sexual gazing or touching of anyone but your lawful spouse is prohibited.
2. In Ephesians 5:3-4, we are reminded that even unclean speech—what we might call “dirty talk,” is forbidden
 - **Eph 5:3-4: But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; ⁴ neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.**
 - A Christian (and everyone else, really) is to have nothing to do with these things.

TRANS> We looked at the sexual sins that are forbidden in more detail when we studied the seventh commandment not too long ago—

- And you know what these things are, so I won't go into detail here—
- Instead, we will move on to the next verse to look at what Christians need to know to keep them from sexual immorality...

II. You must know that you are to possess your own vessel in sanctification and honour.

- You can see what it says in verse 4: **that each of you should know how (how is not in the original so...) that each of you should know to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honour.**
- It is not really saying that you should know *how* to possess your own vessel,
 - but rather that you should know *that* you are to possess it—
 - You all need to know that God has something different for sex than fornication for His people—and that is, that each should possess his or her own vessel in sanctification and honour.

A. But what does it mean to “possess your own vessel?”

1. There is much discussion about what the vessel refers to.
 - a. Many believe that it refers to one's own body.
 - This certainly makes sense, and there are various examples where the word *vessel* is used in that way...
 - for example, in 2 Cor 4:7 where Paul says, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels,” where vessel refers to our bodies.
 - b. However, there is also good warrant for looking at the *vessel*, in this context, as your spouse or your wife.
 - For example, in 1 Peter 3, the wife is referred to as the weaker (or the more fragile) vessel.
 - This would indicate that both she and her husband are vessels.

- Although the grammar is somewhat ambiguous, this second understanding seems preferable—that Christians are to know that the place for sex is in marriage.
2. The teaching that believers should take a spouse instead of fornicating is certainly consistent with the teaching of scripture and with rabbinic writings.
 - a. For example, in Proverbs 5:15-18, it clearly refers to having your own wife instead of running around with many different women:
 - **Prov 5:15-18: Drink water from your own cistern** [here the wife is referred to as a kind of vessel], **and running water from your own well.** ¹⁶ **Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets?** ¹⁷ **Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you.** ¹⁸ **Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth.**
 - b. And in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, Paul actually shows that there is a mutual ownership in marriage—where the husband owns the wife and has authority over her body, and she owns her husband and has authority over his body...
 - and again, this possessing of each other is instead of sexual immorality:
 - **1 Cor 7:1-5: Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.** ² **Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.** ³ **Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, 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 the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.** ⁵ **Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**
 - c. And among the rabbinic writings, we have a similar relationship between possessing your own spouse and being immoral:
 - Tobit 4:12 which says: **Beware, my son, of every kind of fornication. First of all, marry a woman from among the descendants of your ancestors; do not marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father's tribe; for we are the descendants of the prophets. Remember, my son, that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our ancestors of old, all took wives from among their kindred. They were blessed in their children, and their posterity will inherit the land.**
 - d. And in the Testament of Levi 9:9-10, young men are advised not to delay marriage: **Be on guard against the spirit of promiscuity... Therefore take for yourself a wife while you are still young.**
 3. The two most common objections to the vessel being a spouse can be refuted.
 - a. One objection to this is that the Thessalonians would not have understood this way of speaking of a vessel,
 - but that objection cannot stand since Paul is writing to them about matters that he had already spoken to them about before.
 - b. Another objection that I am sad to say is very common is the objection that it would be demeaning to speak of a spouse as a vessel—
 - especially as if they were a possession that you own.

- I would take issue with such an objection!
 - It betrays a common misunderstanding of marriage that needs to be corrected.
 - It is a very common misunderstanding that has caused great harm to the church.
- In fact, I believe that the failure to see that spouses own one another,
 - which is clearly taught in the Bible,
 - has contributed to the dreadful problem we have with sexual immorality and marriage in the church today.
 - To put it in a different way, we have problems with immorality because as Christians we do not know what Paul says we should know:
 - that we are to possess our own vessel in sanctification and honour!

TRANS> This is something every Christian needs to know.

- It is not that every Christian is to possess a spouse, but that every Christian is to know that sex is to be experienced only with the one you own in marriage—no one else.

B. Taking ownership of a spouse is not a bad thing, it is a good thing.

1. Possessing a spouse is, in fact, the very foundation of true marriage.
 - a. The whole point is that in marriage, I give myself to another person so that we can say to each other, “I am yours and you are mine.”
 - “You belong to me and I belong to you.”
 - “You are my vessel and I am your vessel.”
 - b. This is highlighted in the one flesh relationship in which the two become one flesh, as it says in Genesis 2:24, when marriage is first instituted:
 - **Gen 2:24: Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.**
 - Jesus refers to this when He is asked about divorce when there are no legitimate grounds for it...
 - He reminds everyone that in the original institution of marriage, the two become one flesh, and then He adds,
 - In Matthew 19:6, He adds: **So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.**
 - Paul marvellously applies this idea of being one flesh in Ephesians 5 when he commands husbands to love their wives as their own bodies...and then adds:
 - **Eph 5:29: For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.**
 - Just as Jesus treats us as His own body, and so nourishes and cherishes us, so husbands are to recognise that their wife is their own body...
 - as that which they own as a precious possession and cherish!
2. Satan has deceived our society to make us think that it is a dreadful demeaning thing to be owned by another person!
 - a. And it is true that it is very demeaning and dehumanising to be owned by a selfish person that treats you like an object that exists for him (or her)!

- Slavery that involves man-stealing—taking people against their will and forcing them to be your slave—is soundly condemned in the Bible.
 - In fact, it is a capital offense unless there are just grounds for doing it (for example if your enemies invade you and you put them forced servitude).
 - And likewise, it is demeaning to a woman to be owned by a man who treats her like an object that exists for him to do with as he pleases.
 - We could all give sad accounts of such relationships, but that is not at all what the Lord instituted.
- Nevertheless, in our day, Satan has used these wretched examples to make us think that **all** ownership of another person is wicked when that is completely contrary to the teaching of the Bible.
- He does this because he is still promoting his original lie that it is wretched to be owned by God our creator and to be His slave.
- b. But being owned by another person can be marvellous...let's consider some examples...
- 1) First, there is marriage... the kind in which a husband and wife own each other as one flesh...
- Where they live as one, and cherish each other until death separates them.
 - Where they are no longer their own, but give themselves to each other.
 - Where they each their lives for the other.
 - Where a husband takes responsibility to lead her, to cherish her, to protect her, to love her, and even to lay down his life for her.
 - And where she responds to him with loving service respect.
 - Satan has made us think a marriage involving ownership is a very negative thing.
 - We don't want to be owned by another person.
 - We have taken that whole idea of owning each other out of marriage, even though we still have marriage vows where the question is asked, "Do you take Sally to be your lawfully wedded wife... and Bill to be your lawfully wedded husband..."
- Satan has also made us think that all slavery is bad.
- 2) Yet, in the Bible there is slavery in which an Israelite could choose to become a permanent slave to an Israelite master because he wanted to...
- For example, if after seven years of service, which was the limit, a servant so delighted in his master that he did not want to depart,
 - if he found the protection and care of that master so delightful that he wanted to make his servitude permanent for him and his children, he could do that...
 - he could go before the elders and have his master pierce his ear, declaring that he was his permanent possession.
 - Our society cannot fathom a relationship like this.
 - But it happened.

- Wouldn't it be great to be a servant in the house of Boaz, for example?
- 3) And there is the biblical focus of children belonging to their parents until they marry or are given in marriage.
- Our society wars against that...
 - We want children to belong to the government instead of to their parents—
 - and we bring them up, not to belong to their family, but to belong to their peers.
 - Even at church, their identity becomes the junior highs instead of the Smiths and the Joneses.
 - Is it any wonder that many children grow up not knowing where they fit in?
 - They are not loved and cherished as part of a family, but are pushed to be independent.
 - They really don't belong to anyone, but are lonely and isolated and they look for connection in fornication and fantasy and gangs.
- 4) The Bible also shows us the glorious ownership that Christ has of us!
- The whole problem with the fall is that we, who rightly belong to God, severed our ties with Him...
 - We were cast out as unclean because of our sin and rebellion.
 - We were cut off.
 - But in Christ, we are restored to be God's slaves—not just His *servants*, but His *slaves*—happy slaves who would not want to be anything else.
 - We want to be owned by Him
 - We want to be directed in His ways
 - We want to live our whole life for Him if we are real Christians.
 - We glory in belonging to Him again!
 - You know how Paul and other apostles love to speak of themselves as the servants, or literally, the slaves, of Jesus Christ.
 - It is their great delight to belong to God!
 - As our Master, He treats us as His own possession, nourishing and cherishing us as His own body, defending us and protecting us.
 - He does for us what Adam should have done for his wife when Satan led her into sin...
 - Our marvellous husband saw it, and instead joining us in our sin, He came to slay Satan and He said to God the Father,
 - Do not punish them, but punish Me in their place!
 - He looks after us in the deepest, most self-giving way, because we belong to Him!
 - It is a marvellous thing to be owned by Him.
- 5) Yes, even Jesus Christ Himself is called the servant or the slave of God.

- He tells us repeatedly that He came to do His Father's will...that He was sent by Him and always does what pleases Him.
 - He belongs to the Father and gives all things to Him.
 - He delights in the Father and the Father delights in Him.
 - It is not some kind of oppressive demeaning slavery, but a glorious ownership that is mutually cherished.
- c. Because we have spurned ownership in our relationships,
- we are left destitute, empty, and alone; belonging nowhere...
 - Our marriages deny the very relationship they are supposed to establish.
 - So we end up roaming the earth, living in fantasy, running from one superficial relationship to another...never really belonging.
 - We are fundamentally isolated and alone.
- That is why we need to know that instead of fornication, we are to possess our own spouse in sanctification and honour, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God.

C. What does it mean to possess our own spouse in sanctification and honour?

1. To possess them in **sanctification** means that we belong to only that one person.
 - That is why we call it holy marriage—because it is an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman.
 - This is where all sexual contact is to occur—with your own spouse and with no one else.
 - You are not supposed to have sexual contact with anyone else, nor are you even to fantasise about it.
2. To possess your spouse in honour means that you are to hold them in the highest esteem...
 - You should esteem them as much as you esteem yourself.
 - It is in this relationship, above all others, that loving your neighbour as yourself and doing to others as you would have them do to you is to be brought to its highest expression.
 - A husband is to look after his wife's needs as he does his own...
 - Even to the point of laying down his life for her as Christ did for us as His bride.
 - And a wife is to honour her husband by obeying him and respecting him with cheerful submission as the head of the home...
 - Respecting him as the one that God has appointed to lead and finding unity by walking in harmony with him in the Lord.
 - Not that she is to follow him doing evil—but in doing good.
 - More and more the two grow in their love for each other—
 - More and more they abound in their relationship as one, cherishing each other and living for each other.
3. You are to possess your spouse in sanctification and honour like this instead of in **passion of lust like the Gentiles**...that is, the unbelievers.
 - as it goes on to say in verse 5.

- **Passion of lust** means that instead of self-control that channels your love and affection to your spouse,
 - you follow your feelings...you are driven about by your lust and your sexual appetite so that you channel your passion everywhere.
 - You do not live for others, but only to satisfy your own passions and drives—running from one partner to another looking to be satisfied.
- And even if you are able to achieve a certain amount of satisfaction from this,
 - it is a wicked, destructive, selfish path that leads to isolation and emptiness.
 - You go deeper and deeper into the bondage of sin and corruption.
 - It is the very opposite of love.
- The irony is that the Gentiles who despise being owned in marriage as being degrading are the ones who end up treating others like mere objects that you use and then discard when you get tired of them.
 - They become so deep into selfishness that they will even abort their own offspring simply because they find them inconvenient...
 - Nothing can get in the way of me and of what I want.
 - So you see, the selfishness began in refusing to take their own spouse in sanctification and honour,
 - and it ends up with isolation and degradation.

TRANS> So sexual immorality ends up cutting you off from other people that God calls you to love.

- But it does something even worse than that...

III. Sexual immorality cuts you off from the living God!

- Paul lays this out for us in verses 5-8...
 - A. First, at the end of verse 5, he points out that that fornication is the way of the Gentiles who do not know God.
 - Remember how 1 Thessalonians 4 began?
 - With a call to abound more and more in a holy walk that conforms to God...a life lived in harmony with Him in all that pleases Him.
 - It is a life in which you are growing in love for God and for others.
 - Obviously, running after your sexual passions is not the way to do that.
 - That is not the way of those who have come to know God through Christ—that is the way of the Gentiles who do not know God.
 - Indeed, you may struggle with your passions and lusts to be sure,
 - But if you know God, you will put them to death...
 - Following them is the way of Gentiles who do not know God.
 - If it is your way, it means that you do not know God.

TRANS> But it is not just that you are not knowing God when you do this...

- B. Verse 6 shows that you turn God against you as an avenger!

- Look at what it says: **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.**
1. Let me tell you, when you pursue someone sexually that is not your spouse it brings harm to many people!
 - a. What destruction comes when a man seduces a married woman or she seduces him.
 - His affections that are supposed to be devoted to his wife are drawn off elsewhere—he disrupts the relationship he has with her...
 - And he siphons off his affection for his children as a father—
 - What collateral damage is done to those dear sweet children who have a father that, despite what he may pretend, does not love them, for he has defrauded them!
 - And then there is the woman’s family—
 - She defrauds her husband and her children—all to pursue her own selfish passions and to find superficial love.
 - It is, as Chrysostom said, more cruel than any robbery—for goods can be repaid, but when marriage is invaded, those defrauded can never be repaid.
 - b. Similar things occur with porn...
 - Here a man (or a woman) siphons off the affection that is meant to be given in marriage to some dream person in fantasy land.
 - Our love is weak and anemic enough even without doing this.
 - But it is sucked right out of man when he turns his heart over to lust.
 - Young men, I warn you, if you indulge in such things, you are making yourself weaker and weaker as a competent husband.
 - You are defrauding your future wife and children.
 - This is all the more so when you are fornicating before you marry.
 2. And I tell you, God will avenge those that you have defrauded!
 - That is what it says in verse 6.
 - To avenge means that He will pay you back for what you have done to them.
 - It turns Him against you when you defraud your neighbour.
 - Even if your neighbour wants to be degraded—and seduces you—God will still punish you for destroying the beautiful order that He established with marriage and family at creation.
 - You are siphoning off that seductress’s love that should be for her husband, and she is siphoning off your love that ought to be for your wife,
 - and the Lord will punish you both if you don’t repent.
 3. These are not empty words as those who indulge would like to think!
 - The Apostle reminds the Thessalonians that he had warned them of the vengeance of God and solemnly testified to them about it.

- You will not escape unless you repent and turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and restoration.
- C. Don't pretend that you are following Him if you are following your passions.
1. Verse 7 hits you head on if you are pretending to follow Him while following your sinful passions and lusts!
 - It states the obvious—**For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.**
 - It is an interesting thing when a person is following their lusts...
 - They act as if they have been called to uncleanness—they dream of it and they pursue it like one who is called...
 - But you can be certain that this is not God's call!
 - Don't kid yourself.
 - You are not following God if you are following uncleanness...
 - He did not call you to uncleanness.
 - You are going in the opposite direction of God.
 - God calls you in holiness...in the realm or sphere of holiness...
 2. If you reject this, what I am saying to you about sexual immorality...
 - And that is what those who run after their passions and lusts do—
 - They disregard all of this as empty talk.
 - They imagine that somehow they can escape the judgment of God even though they follow the dictates of their own heart...
 - But the apostle says it right here in verse 8...
 - **Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.**
 - It is a clear evidence that you have rejected God, whatever you might say to the contrary, if you are pursuing uncleanness.
 - You can go to church and you can read your Bible and talk theology and say your prayers,
 - But if you are following uncleanness, you have rejected the Lord.
 - He is the one who gives you the Holy Spirit—
 - Actually, the construction is different here and it says, the Spirit, the holy one...to emphasise that His Spirit is holy.
 - He gives His Spirit to those that He redeems...those who have truly come to Christ...
 - And the Spirit is holy...
 - He changes your heart—He writes God's law on your heart so that you follow Him and walk in His ways—
 - so that you abound more and more in doing His will.
 - If you are following after uncleanness,
 - You show that you have rejected the Saviour who gives His Holy Spirit to all who receive Him.

- You need to be born again.

Conclusion:

But for you who have come to Jesus to be saved!

- What an encouragement all this is for you!
 - That your gracious God has pardoned you for your sins.
 - That they are all nailed to the cross with Jesus—He has borne them all for you.
- And your God is this God who is at work in you that you might abound more and more in doing the will of God...
 - in being sanctified...
 - in abstaining from sexual immorality...
 - and in knowing that God has called you in holiness where sex is reserved for marriage in which you wholly give yourself to your spouse.
- What a marvellous thing for you to now walk with God, pleasing Him, living in holiness and having your God give you His Spirit to help you abound even in sexual purity and not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.
 - Your future is not with immorality leading to isolation and selfishness...
 - but with God, leading to holiness and glory and sacrificial love.
 - Press on, dear Christian, press on!