

## **Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World**

### **God-Driven Purity 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8**

#### **Introduction**

Our text this morning begins with the words, "Finally, then . . ." We might think "finally" means the *finale*, the last thing. But they literally read, "for the rest . . ." Rather than signaling the end of the letter, these words mark a shift of focus from what Paul prays for the Thessalonian as believers facing pressure for their faith to the practical behavior and actions that must characterize their daily lives as true followers of Christ. *True Biblical doctrine never remains theoretical and academic. It always generates and corresponds to practical lifestyle. Knowledge alone is never enough. By itself, it generates smug pride. We must live what we know. When we do, our lives are marked by humility and love.*

Paul has just related to them that he prays God will establish their hearts blameless in holiness before the Lord. That raises the practical question, "what does that holiness of heart look like, and how does our relationship to God produce it?" 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 will

help us answer the question: God-Driven Purity.

<sup>1</sup> Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

1. The Pleasure of God: We abstain from sexual immorality to please God (1-3).
2. The Knowledge of God: Those who know God honor Him with holy self-control (4-5).
3. The Justice of God: God avenges those against whom we sin in this area (6).
4. The Call of God: God has called us to holiness by the power of the Holy Spirit (7-8).

## **1. The Pleasure of God: We abstain from sexual immorality to please God (1-3).**

<sup>1</sup> Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;

Paul is reiterating what he and the other missionaries already taught the new believers in Thessalonica, even though the missionaries were there only a short time before they had to leave. Making disciples is not just sharing the good news of the gospel, but also teaching those who have received it and have thus identified with Christ to observe His commands, as Jesus put it in the great commission. Observing His commands produces a life of good works—"good" in that they are both in line with God's definitions of right and wrong and beneficial to others.

God has been completely clear about this area of human life. Note the progression of the words Paul uses: we ask, urge (exhort), instructions (directives, like military commands or orders from a civil magistrate) we gave you, the will of God—what God wishes and desires (v. 3)

How you ought to walk—how it is necessary for you to walk (live)

To please God

*As children of God we want to obey the law because we love the Lawgiver and therefore want to please Him.* It brings us pleasure to please those we love. That is especially so for those who love God. We delight to bring Him pleasure.

As you are doing, do so more and more. We need ongoing growth in living to God's pleasure—we do so as the Holy Spirit progressively sanctifies us toward greater Christlikeness.

Sanctification—to make holy. The foundation of our holiness is our belonging to God. Because of who God is and what He's like, our belonging to Him as His born again children causes us to grow in holiness and purity that looks like His own character.

Christians today are under tremendous pressure to conform to a culture that practices and celebrates sexual immorality. They are accused of being unloving if they do not accept and affirm these sins against God's perfect design for human sexuality. Proponents of the new sexual ethic argue that times have changed from the prudish Victorian era and that our practice of

Christianity needs to change with them. Some even go so far as to say Jesus would approve our embracing these sins and our welcoming professing believers who practice them as members in good standing.

But such false teaching utterly ignores that *the early church was founded in a culture even more committed to sexual sins and perversions than is our own—at least so far. The NT commands for sexual purity were profoundly counter cultural in Paul's day.* Both Thessalonica and Corinth, from where Paul is writing, were infamous for their sexual immorality, to the degree that it had for centuries been part of sacred worship in the fertility cults.

The Greco-Roman world was intensely sexually immoral. It was considered normal for a married man to have a mistress for companionship, concubines (slaves), along with using prostitutes whenever he wanted. "The function of his wife was to manage his household and to be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs." F. F. Bruce, 82

In this world where sexual immorality was widely practiced as normal and even celebrated as a sacred rite of worship, the apostles boldly declare, "Abstain from sexual immorality"—cut it off totally; it is not an area to exercise moderation, let alone to affirm in

order to ingratiate yourself to the pervasive culture of the times.

The Greek word translated "sexual immorality" is *porneia*. The very word tells you the nature and goal of what we know as porn today. *Pornography* is by definition images and literature portraying sexual immorality. Its design is to lead us into sexual sins of mind and body. God calls us to abstain from *porneia*. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil."

1 Peter 2:11

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

God commands purity and holiness of mind and body, inward and outward. That is the ruling of the Highest Court in the universe. That is the order of the Lord of angelic armies.

### **Applications**

- What are your strategies for abstaining from any form of sexual sin?
- In what ways are you letting the dogma of the world in rebellion against God shape your thinking regarding sexuality?
- What voices are you heeding contrary to the voice of God, how much time do

you spend listening to them rather than words from God Himself?

- What would your daily living look like if the pleasure of God were your greatest goal?

## **2. The Knowledge of God: Those who know God honor Him with holy self-control (4-5).**

<sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;

Knowing the true and living God is what makes the difference in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica compared to those around them. The pagan ethnicities worship idols—gods that are not actually gods. *Idolatry deified human lust and sanctioned immoral worship and living. To live in the passion of sexual desire is the lifestyle of idol worshipers not the life pattern of those with an experiential knowledge of God.*

Romans 1:24-25

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

God's will is that each of us would know to control his own body—literally, how to possess his own vessel

The language can refer to one's monogamous devotion to his wife, as marriage is God's gift to humanity: "to acquire a wife for himself." Only in the marriage relationship do we fulfill human sexual desire legitimately and to God's glory. It is part of the creation mandate and blessing.

Paul writes these words from Corinth, where sexual immorality was pervasive. Here's what he says to the Corinthian believers trying to live for God in such a culture:

1 Corinthians 7:2-5

<sup>2</sup> But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. <sup>3</sup> The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

<sup>4</sup> For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.

Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.



Our translation reflects another interpretation: "possessing one's vessel" could refer to exercising control over one's own body, in contrast to letting the passion of lust rule your body.

In holiness and honor  
When we use the body for sexual immorality we dishonor God and we dishonor ourselves just as we've read in Romans 1.

"According to God's purpose the context for sex is marriage and the style of sex is honor."  
John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*

"There is a world of difference between lust and love, between dishonorable sexual practices which use the partner and true lovemaking which honors the partner, between the selfish desire to possess and the unselfish desire to love, cherish and respect."  
John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*

But what if you're not married? How can you maintain purity? A practical question, because there are many in the body of Christ who are not married. Even those who are married are not married their entire lives. There are significant years before they were married, and unless God takes both you and your

spouse home at the same time, one or the other of you will be single again.

John Stott, who himself never married, writes for his fellow singles: "We shall not become a bundle of frustrations and inhibitions if we embrace God's standard, but only if we rebel against it. Christ's yoke is easy, provided that we submit to it. It is possible for human sexual energy to be redirected . . . both into affectionate relationships with friends of both sexes and into the loving service of others."

Paul himself was unmarried. He testifies in 1 Corinthians 9:27  
I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

### **Applications**

- In what ways does your public and private behavior relating to sexuality show you know and love the living God?
- In what ways does your public and private behavior convey that you worship the idols of the age instead?
- In what ways are you controlling your body and protecting your marriage in holiness and honor?

### **3. The Justice of God: God avenges those against whom we sin in this area (6).**

that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

Transgress—to cross a forbidden boundary

Wrong—to take more than is rightfully yours, selfishly disregarding the rights of others

*Sexual sin harms others. It wrongs whomever you use to satisfy your selfish appetites. It breaks faith with your spouse, your family, your friends, your brothers and sisters in Christ. It directly disobeys the Lord and dishonors Him. It gives the enemies of God reason to ridicule Him and His people. It calls into question whether the gospel of Christ really has the power to deliver us from sin.*

No wonder then—

The Lord is an avenger in all these things! He is the one who will execute justice against those who commit sins in this area. There's nowhere to run or to hide from Him.

1 Corinthians 6:18

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

We told you beforehand and solemnly warned you—intensive form of bearing witness, to solemnly testify as in a courtroom; the same word Paul uses in 2 Timothy 4:1-2

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word . . . .

### **Applications**

- If the Lord avenges crossing the boundaries and wronging others in this area, how can you expect to escape His justice if you do not repent from such sin and make it right with God and with one another?
- How can knowing that God is watching and will call you to account help you avoid making provision for the flesh or falling to these sins?

### **4. The Call of God: God has called us to holiness by the power of the Holy Spirit (7-8).**

<sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

The call of God to turn our hearts to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ is a call to holy living—living that reflects being restored to a vital relationship with Him. The

human race lost that close relationship when Adam and Eve chose to sin against God in the Garden of Eden.

His power is a clean power. He calls us to purity or cleanness of heart and life. He washes us with the water of His Word. We have been rescued from corruption and death and have been given life and health and peace. Our filth has been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

God's call is powerful. It transforms who we are because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God's life in us through the person of the Holy Spirit purifies us from the inside out.

1 Peter 1:22-23

<sup>22</sup> Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

<sup>19</sup> Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Contrary to the popular argument today that sexual purity is just conformity to outdated human tradition, our text declares that the call to purity and holiness is from God Himself.

1 Thessalonians 4:8

Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Closing your heart to God's call to sexual purity and holiness is rejecting God Himself, and in particular the Holy Spirit and His transforming work in your life.

*He is the Divine Helper (John 14-16) who comes alongside to strengthen you. He indwells you, motivates, and empowers you to do God's will. You are not an orphan. You are not alone. God is with you all the days. His life is in you and is powerful enough to raise the dead. The Spirit of God enables you to fight this battle for purity and to succeed to the glory of God.*

Galatians 5:16-21

<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

<sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not

under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Why is that? Because living this way shows you are rejecting the King of the kingdom.

### **Applications**

- How certain are you that you actually belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ His Son?  
If God is powerful enough to raise your body from the dead, don't you think He can empower you to live in newness of life in the area of sexual purity?
- What would happen if you were to be regularly praying for God to keep you pure and to make you holy each day?
- In what ways are you actively leaning on His power to accomplish His will in your life for your sanctification?

### **Conclusion**

1. The Pleasure of God: We abstain from sexual immorality to please God (1-3).
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Closing Song: Free from Guilt and Free from Sin

### **Summary of Applications**

- What are your strategies for abstaining from any form of sexual sin?
- In what ways are you letting the dogma of the world in rebellion against God shape your thinking regarding sexuality?
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- What would your daily living look like if the pleasure of God were your greatest goal?
- In what ways does your public and private behavior relating to sexuality show you know and love the living God?
- In what ways does your public and private behavior convey that you worship the idols of the age instead?
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- If the Lord avenges crossing the boundaries and wronging others in this



area, how can you expect to escape His justice if you do not repent from such sin and make it right with God and with one another?

- How can knowing that God is watching and will call you to account help you avoid making provision for the flesh or falling to these sins?
- How certain are you that you actually belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ His Son? (If God is powerful enough to raise your body from the dead, don't you think He can empower you to live in newness of life in the area of sexual purity?)
- What would happen if you were to be regularly praying for God to keep you pure and to make you holy each day?
- In what ways are you actively leaning on His power to accomplish His will in your life for your sanctification?

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

1. What are some effective ways to guard against being drawn into sexual impurity?
2. What do you think pursuing God's pleasure looks like in everyday living?
3. What is the connection between loving God and finding pleasure in His pleasure?
4. Why does it make sense that those who worship idols or believe in no God at all

would pursue fulfilling their sexual desires beyond divinely appointed boundaries?

5. Why does it NOT make sense for those who have an experiential relationship with the living God of the Bible to pursue fulfilling their sexual desires beyond divinely appointed boundaries?
6. What are some examples of real harm you've seen done by sexually immoral lifestyles?
7. How does knowing that the Lord takes vengeance against sexual sins help us fight the battle for purity?
8. How does God's gift of the Holy Spirit empower God's call to purity and holiness in our lives?