

To What End?

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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If you have your Bibles with you this morning, let me ask that you turn them on or open them up, whatever the case may be, to the book of 1 Thessalonians as we continue in this important letter from Paul to the city of Thessalonica. You may remember, if you are a parent, reading to your child fairytales as they were growing up and you reached the end and the parting words are, "And they lived happily ever after." When you read the end and as the child learns about stories and narrative arcs, you begin to see that that's the only way it could end. In fact, that was the best way it could end. And then you begin to look at that ending, "They lived happily ever after," and you begin to put together the pieces of the story, the struggle, the ups and the downs, the uncertainties, and that was the best way for it to end. But now that you know the end after the first time of reading it, now you read it again and again and again and the child begins to expect that ending. And it begins to bring deeper meaning and not so much stress as they're going through the difficult parts of the story because they're holding out for the end, "And they lived happily ever after."

In this passage this morning, Paul teaches the church as Thessalonica through the framework of the ending. To what end were we created? For what end is our greatest purpose? For Paul, because he preaches the gospel and unpacks it, that end is holiness. But not holiness as an abstract concept, but holiness in the sense of purity because we are united to Christ. That when He comes again, all the dead will be raised, and we will be in fleshed souls with a new heaven and a new earth and all things restored. And we will be with Him in perfect unity. Everything else, all the imperatives throughout Paul's writings are embedded in this reality. They are not imperatives because he's trying to be a killjoy or telling us what we should do and should not do. They are never abstracted from the ending. They are never abstracted from the relationship that we are bound to Christ.

And so, this morning we're looking at this passage together seeking to answer the question, to what end? You'll hear this morning that he was dealing with some specific things which we will unpack together. Let's look together, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8.

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. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 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. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Now we ask you, O Lord, through the abundance and the power and the presence of your Holy Spirit that you would teach us as your church, a part of the body of Christ, as those who call upon you by faith and are united to you. We are united to you because of the work of Christ and through the gift of faith and through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Now will you, by your word, teach us, correct us, lead us, and renew us that we might understand the end to which we are called for holiness. In Jesus Christ alone, in whose name we pray. Amen.

So, you might wonder if you're visiting with us, you'll notice that the series title is, An Advent People. And you might be wondering, wasn't advent before Christmas? You would be correct. But of course, we worship Christ on this side of the resurrection which means He's no longer dead. He has been raised and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and He promises that He will come again. So, we find ourselves continuing as an advent people waiting for the coming of the Lord.

And so, it is important for Paul to teach the nature of what it means for the church to wait individually, corporately. And so, we reach this part of the passage which has already been unpacked for us over the last couple of weeks, pastor PD and pastor Song. And one of the things we find first and foremost is to be reminded of the culture of Thessalonica. So, when you see the word here, "Gentiles," he's not using it as a racial epithet. He's using it as a name which was to represent the culture of the people. That is, Christianity was an alien faith. It was one among many. But prominent within Thessalonica as throughout the Greco/Roman world is there were ample numbers of cults, particularly in Thessalonica the Dionysus cult which was known for its sexual immorality as a part of its festivals and its worship.

So, here as Paul's writing the letter to these converts who have been converted from their ways that they once believed and practiced in these cults, they are now belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ and yet they are still living in this place. And so, we see what he has to teach them. In fact, he even tells us, we've even solemnly warned you before and we're warning you again. So, this is of utmost importance for Paul.

As we look at this passage together, we're going to look at it in two ways. First, God's will. Secondly, our bodies. God's will and our bodies. So, as we look together at God's will, what I want you to see is in many ways the way Paul opens this portion of the letter and the end of it are very much the same. And so, I want you to see this is where he's explaining God's will. So, if you look at verses 1-2, we understand that what he's calling us to is that what God is concerned about is our growth. But also, in verses 7-8, he looks at the nature of what our end is. So, let's look together.

This idea of, what is God saying when Paul says here in the opening three important phrases. He says, "I'm teaching you this in Christ Jesus." By that, he doesn't simply mean that he's teaching it in the name of Christ. He's appealing to them as a brother in Christ. He is acknowledging implicitly that we are not individuals unto ourselves, that those who call upon Christ are united to Christ and, in fact, united to one another. So, he's teaching us as those who are united together in Christ Jesus. And then he says how we're to walk, how we're to please God. And then this wonderful phrase at the end of verse 1, he says "that you do so more and more." That's a tip-off to us as readers, as hearers, that he understands this is a process. It is a process of growth and of advancement, of falling and of getting back up. So, everything we hear today is said within this context. It is God's will. It is in Christ Jesus. And it is done so as a process that we might live unto holiness and in holiness more and more.

But specifically, our growth. What we notice when he says the following in verse 2 and 3, he says, "For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus." Again, that preposition, much like "in Christ Jesus," "through the Lord Jesus." With His authority, but also acknowledging that we are united to Him. He says in verse 3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." So, "sanctification" translated is a Greek word and it specifically has in mind this idea of process of becoming. Where we use the word "sanctification," it is an ongoing work of God that we might be made holy more and more, increasingly, increasingly reflecting the glory and beauty of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

For Paul, this idea that God's will is that we grow, that we are in this process of growth. But embedded in this idea is, how do we do that? He tells us in verse 8 when he says, "Therefore whoever disregards this disregard not man but God, who gives his holy spirit to you." So, in the same section, he's saying, this is God's will but God does not will what He does not give strength to do. Let me say this loudly and clearly. There is not a single imperative which is said ironically, sarcastically, or in jest. It is with utmost seriousness. So, we have been declared holy. We are united to Christ. We are holy as those who believe. But we are becoming more holy and will ultimately reflect perfectly the holiness and glory of our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And it is done so by the Holy Spirit, which means the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead through God's will, that means that Holy Spirit has been poured out on His people which means that what He calls us to do, He has given us His Holy Spirit to say yes to holiness and no to ungodliness.

This is something important for us to remember because He doesn't just say, do the best you can, go about your way. No, He is saying, you are called to holiness. And, in fact, isn't that the first part of the name of the Spirit, Holy Spirit. And by His enablement, we are in a process of becoming more and more holy.

But then he tells us also of our end. When he tells us of our end, we see that indeed it's verse 7, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." So, what is interesting is he's telling us, then, growth is the process through sanctification enabled by the Holy Spirit. Our end is holiness which is purity which is to be undefiled. And holiness, for Paul, becomes the framework for how he states all of the imperatives of the gospel, what we are called and commanded to do.

This is what Nancy Piercy in her latest book *Love Thy Body*, she talks about how we need to recover this idea of the study of our end. What is our purpose? And this, for Paul, frames everything because holiness is our end, it is our purpose. But it is done so in relationship with Christ. He is with us. So, let me be clear. If He is with us, if we are in the Lord Jesus Christ, we've been called by Him to be holy. That means if we've been given the Holy Spirit, that Jesus and the presence of His Spirit, is with us in our obedience and in our sin.

Do you know that when we sin, it's not like Jesus takes a vacation? It's not like the Holy Spirit leaves us. The whole ground of being called to holiness is not imperative or law simply to keep us and make us good people. It is because fundamentally, the human being who now rests in salvation in Christ Jesus no longer belongs to yourself. We belong to another. We are united and, therefore, because we are united with Him, when we sin what is happening is that Jesus is present which is why we become defiled and we defile others. And it's not just you singular, or me, it's us corporately as a body of Christ so that the body of Christ is impacted by your sin and my sin individually, whether other people know it or not.

Unfortunately, over the last year and a half, it's not just been about the MeToo movement, it's been about the ChurchToo movement. And what we've learned through the news and reports is that pastors, one after another, and leaders in the church – even though no one knew it, even though the church may have been growing during the time of their sin – that their sin was beginning to pollute them and it dishonored the name of Christ and it brought division in the church. May God in His grace heal these churches. May He restore these men and women. May He restore them in a relationship with Him. But the realities are whether others know our sin or not, our sin impacts others.

This, for Paul, is foundational. And because we've been created in His image, we have been redeemed. What that means is we've been redeemed and meant for holiness. It begins to take a whole different view of how we understand our bodies, of how we understand life whether in the extraordinary or the mundane. And before I get to the section on our bodies, I want to stop and say again, we need to hear seriously what this means for the Christian regardless of the imperative, regardless of the call to obedience that Paul gives us or any other biblical writer gives us. It is done so with the utmost of seriousness and we must embrace and choose the reality that we can't have Christianity 50 percent. We can't have it as a nice little accessory. It is everything.

And what's interesting is, I was reminded of this by reading an atheist author. Now this atheist author is a contemporary writer named Julian Barnes. Julian Barnes is also critiquing the new radical atheists. But in looking at the Christian faith, this is what he says.

"There seems little point in a religion which is merely a weekly social event as opposed to one which tells you exactly how to live, which colors and stains everything. What's the point of faith unless you and it are serious – seriously

serious – unless your religion fills, directs, stains, and sustains your very life?
The only religion worth embracing and rejecting is one that sustains and
stains everything.”

We can't have Jesus for Sunday. We can't have Jesus to be our person that we call on to meet our daily needs when we really feel them. Everything we have, every part of our being, belongs to Him and all of it is going to be restored.

And this is important for us to remember because as one who was converted to Christ in 1986, early on in my faith, I came up against fundamentalist believers. And what I mean by fundamentalist believers are those who simply saw the gospel as getting my soul saved so that I can go to heaven but scarcely gave me any understanding of what it actually means to be, an in fleshed soul disciple of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God, the gospel is not about just saving our souls for a disembodied heaven. Thanks be to God that the gospel of Jesus Christ encompasses every corner and square inch of life. And it will all be restored as far as the curse is found.

But we must also reject an atheistic worldview that merely sees our bodies as a lump of material human matter and, therefore, it doesn't matter how we live. Simply do as you choose as an individual. Just don't hurt others and don't infringe on my rights. This is the expressive individualism which we live in today. But both do not give us a proper understanding of our end. It's not just a disembodied soul that is with Jesus forever, and it is not just a lump of material flesh which has no ultimate purpose. Using the words of an atheist, the Christian faith, the Christian gospel, calls us to a fully robust, complete body, mind, soul, and spirit, existence and belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no sacred and secular. All that we do, our words, our work, our joys, our play, is all done in Christ Jesus.

So, with that in mind and only that in mind as a foundation, and our end of holiness, does Paul then begin to talk about what this sanctification specifically means for this people and for us because we live in a day that is more like the Thessalonica to which Paul wrote. He is calling us to understand, how do we live out in an in fleshed existence as disciples of Christ, specifically with regard to sexual ethics?

When Paul says to us here, he says very clearly, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Let me be clear, this is not the only thing that Paul thinks about when it comes to sanctification. It's just one of a number of very important things as it should have been because of the cultures to which he was writing. These were Christians that were converted in spaces where there was rampant sexual immorality and endorsed by the religious cults of the day. And it was enforced. And Christianity was coming into this world.

And so, Paul says that it is a part of our sanctification that we abstain from sexual immorality. The word there “sexual immorality” translated is the word “porneia” which has a whole range of meanings that covers not only physical relationship with someone who is not our wife or our husband. It has everything to do with our thoughts, our lusts, as well as our keyboards and our screens. It encompasses all of it. And so, for Paul, he's saying that a part of God's sanctifying work in us is that we ought to avoid, abstain from. Now this word “abstain” is a rather weak word in English, but in Greek it means “flee.” Rid yourselves of it.

Now we don't know what the specific case Paul was working on or teaching about or addressing at the church at Thessalonica. We have no outside evidence either internally or through historical work whether he was dealing with a particular relationship in the church that was causing division. But it actually doesn't matter because he's writing to a people – as I said – who are living in a culture in which sexuality was rampantly practiced. Men had more than one wife. Women were encouraged to use their bodies in ways that would certainly not be for this polite company this morning. And the ridiculous festivals that would parade through the streets with all kinds of symbols of human body parts.

But the reality is, I say that it is absurd and ridiculous, but isn't that what we would also say – and what Paul would say – about our own day? That while we look back at that period and think, they're

doing a parade, that's crazy, that's below us. And yet, Google searches don't lie. The number one topic on which searches are made in the United States, far outnumbering every other single thing we all get riled up about, is sex. We live in a culture that has sex that is available everywhere. And yet, it seems by our searches and by our actions that we seem to think that we're starved.

And so, Paul is saying to us – and here, I'm speaking to the Christian – men and women, this touches both genders. We must deal directly with this problem among the Christian community. We must be willing to find accountability partners. We must be willing to speak to someone. We must be willing to begin to start the road of acknowledging that this has become an area that isn't just something you do once in a while, but it's become a problem. And to think that it is being done in private, that no one else can see, is a lie and a deception of the evil one because every time we give ourselves to such things, it involves other human beings. It involves us, it involves those who are participating in it, whether we're doing it in person or we're doing it through a screen, and we have absolutely no clue whether that person is doing it because they're being forced or because they've been abused. And yet, we traffic in it all the time.

I don't know what the percentages are among Christians, but I'll tell you this. Being a 48-year-old man and being a pastor of almost 22 years, I know for a fact that it is far more rampant than many of us are willing to acknowledge. And it's not just men, it's women, too. We must be willing to acknowledge that we want Jesus. But do we want Him to the sense in which we want to recognize our bodies do not belong to us? They belong to Him. And that when we sin in this way, the Lord is present, and it dishonors His name.

But Paul calls us when he says "abstain," he tells us that we ought to learn "to control his own body in holiness, in honor." This idea of control, it's the word to "acquire." But he's not using it in that sense, because that wouldn't make sense to acquire one's body in holiness and honor. But rather he's using it in a verb form in the present tense used in this way, to gain mastery over and to possess. It means, ladies and gentlemen, we must realize that as in fleshed disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ who have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, there is not a Christian here who cannot learn how to self-control their own bodies. But it begins by understanding it.

For so many Christians for so many decades, and now having conducted well over 50 weddings, I can't tell you how many young people, frankly, are uncomfortable in talking about this subject, who don't understand their own bodies, who don't really understand how they really work. And understanding, when are you most susceptible to sexual sin? Is it the afternoons? Is it when you're on vacation? Is it when you're on a business trip? Is it after you've had a glass of wine? If you don't know how your body works, if you don't know how you're susceptible to this kind of sin, then we can't begin to learn self-control. But self-control includes not just prayer and Bible study – thanks be to God we are called to that – but it also requires that we understand how our bodies work. That how we feed it, how we treat it, how we discipline it, whether we're exercising or not – and yes, that has an enormous impact – but if we lack order in our physical lives, we become susceptible to temptation. It's not a full proof way, but it's one of the ways in which we gain mastery and self-control of our own bodies.

And so, he's calling us to take seriously, to flee from sexual immorality, by acknowledging its presence, our susceptibility to it, but also knowing through the Holy Spirit how we can begin to control our own bodies. Because he says, it has implications. Verse 6, he says, "so that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter." The implication is that when we sin, we are sinning against others whether we realize it or not. We scandalize ourselves, and we also scandalize the other. And so, what is left in its wake is a lot of hurt and broken relationships. And frankly, the thing which the temptation promised, it can never truly deliver. Where we're finally able to say, you know what? I'm satisfied, I'm all good. No, it gives us the promise, this will be enough. But then we find ourselves right back in that cycle again.

This is something which Nancy Piercy writes about in her book as she interviewed a number of college students, two of whom were women, when they were speaking about the hook-up culture. One young woman said, "The hook-up culture is very scripted. You learn to turn everything off except your body and you make yourself emotionally invulnerable." Another senior student named Stephanie chimes in, and she says, "It's body first, personality second." But then [the author] says a researcher

"interviewed hundreds of college students who admitted that they are disappointed with their meaningless sexual encounters. They feel hurt and lonely. They wish they knew how to create genuine relationships where they are known, and they are loved. They are trying to live out a worldview that does not fit who they really are."

The very thing we pursue doesn't actually satisfy that which we really are. We were people created in God's glory, in the image of His glory. And we reflect that glory. Our bodies reflect that glory. And they are mysterious, but they are also frustrating things. And yet, that is the mess we are in. But it is a mess which the gospel speaks into. It doesn't call us to hate our bodies. It doesn't call us into self-loathing. It doesn't call us and say that sexuality is dirty or ugly. It's saying that God has designed you for holiness which means in this area, that you are married to a man or a woman with whom you have committed yourself, who knows you and you know them, and it's a monogamous relationship. But even there, we are not safe. It is an ongoing reality that we call the Lord by His Holy Spirit enabling us even in marriage to honor the other as more important than ourselves, to serve the other with our bodies that we might glorify God and love the other selflessly.

It is an ongoing work that we cannot give up on, but that is innately human. That God has given us this gift and the implications are not just hurt and broken relationships, not knowing that we're loved, but it is also the warning of God's vengeance. He says here that if we disregard these things, we disregard the Lord and not just man.

What am I saying? He's saying that if we choose to go about this way of life without repentance, without acknowledgement and need for forgiveness, we are rejecting the Lord God. And, therefore, we're rendering our faith that we once professed as being untrue. And he says that the Lord will return, and He has called us to holiness. This is why he is warning us to make sure that even in this, we do not reject Him.

And so, I recognize that I've had to go slower today because of my voice. And so, thank you for your patience. But I want to end with this. And I'm grateful that we're doing so by ending the service in celebrating the Lord's Supper together. It's important that we come to the Lord's table because of this reason.

First, there are men and women in this room who recognize that for them, this is a pattern of sin which has wreaked havoc whether others know it or not in your own life. It has caused hurt and brokenness, loneliness, despair. But you need to hear that in this table, the Lord calls us to Himself for Christ died for sinners like us. He died for sinners like you. That there is wholeness and healing on offer in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ which is why Paul recognizes it's a process. But we come acknowledging our sin, asking for forgiveness, and asking for the Spirit to renew us, to understand our purpose and to walk in self-control. There is healing on offer.

But I also want to speak to those of you who are not just sinners who fall into this temptation, but I also want to speak to you as one who has also been sinned against in this area. There are many here this morning who have been sinned against, perhaps, either as a child or as an adult. Not your choice, and so you feel dirty and you don't know what to do with the memories that you have in your head. You don't know how to process them. You want to blame yourself, and you're afraid to speak about it. Trust me, I understand exactly what that feels like. But I want to say to you that glory be to God, that were it not for the Holy Spirit, I would not be standing here today.

As an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I can tell you as a man, nobody talked about it. And this is also as a person who grew up in the '70s with a last name like mine – for some of you, that will make sense. It feels like it's always been everywhere. But I am grateful to God that I have been healed and made whole, that the Lord has demonstrated to me that His forgiveness is greater than all my sin, but it is also greater than the sin of others. If you are out there today and you've never talked to anyone, please talk to me. Call me. E-mail me. I want you to get the help I got and those who walked with me and showed me what it was like to walk in holiness with the Lord as one who's restored.

This is what is on offer, that when we eat of this bread and we drink of this cup, we are saying, Lord Jesus, you are my Redeemer. You are my Savior. Make me whole again. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace to us for your grace is greater than all our sin. Lord, this is an area which we as the church of Jesus Christ must begin on our knees in asking you for forgiveness, to walk in humility recognizing that we are sinners in the sight of a holy God who have given ourselves to these sins and fallen to these temptations. And yet, you promise that forgiveness and grace is offered to us. So, I pray for healing for individuals, for couples, and for this body that by your Holy Spirit we might learn to walk in self-control, upright lives, who understand that we have been made in the image of God redeemed through Christ who have as our end holiness and purity. Help us, O Lord, in our brokenness, that we might reflect you more and more. In Jesus's name. Amen.