

1st Thessalonians 4: 1-5: “This is your Sanctification”, Sermon # 16
in the series – “A Persevering Faith”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on April 8th, 2018, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

Paul’s benedictory prayer, at the end of chapter 3, concluded with his heart's desire and his prayer for the believers at Thessalonica, that God would “establish their hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all of His saints.” Our hearts ought to often be meditating upon that Day, the Day of our Lord’s return, the Day of Judgment, when each of us will give an account of ourselves to our God, and to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the deeds which we have done in the body. For that Day will surely come. When Christ appears, all sanctification will have come to an end, and the glorification of all the saints will take place. These verses teach us one important and major way that we as Christians can be prepared for that great day. The goal of the Christian life, we now know, is that each and every Christian would be established in holiness. These verses, verses 1-12 of Chapter 4 tell us how we come to be established in holiness. So what I would like to do this afternoon is to 1st of all - Define this the commandment. Then 2nd – I would like to show you the great duty which is entrusted to every Christian in relation to this commandment. And then the next time I speak to you from this Chapter I will give you the Apostolic warning attached to this commandment. But let’s proceed on to the exposition of the text.

1st – Let’s define the commandment. (verse 3)

There is the way that we ought to walk and to please God, it says in verse 1. And from this we can also infer that there is also a way not to walk and not to please God. It is my desire, and I hope that it is yours as well, to learn to walk in a manner which is pleasing to God. To learn to please God is to learn to do His will, by taking the steps of obedience which are given to us here. Verse 3 tells us what His will is. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” The way that this sentence is worded makes it seem as if all our responsibility in keeping the commandments of God, all of our sanctification in sight of our living Lord, is bound up in the keeping of this one commandment; that we should abstain from sexual immorality. That is the way that this sentence is given to us. And so we must ask ourselves – In what sense is this true? What does the Apostle Paul mean by this? Because there are many other commandments which are given to us in the New Testament letters of Paul and the other Apostles of the Lord. They are also the will of God.

In what sense is this one commandment the all-encompassing commandment which defines whether we are sanctified? It must be true in this sense; that your keeping of this commandment to abstain from sexual immorality really does affect the keeping of all the other commandments of God. And thus, your entire sanctification is either progressing or it is by your keeping it, or not progressing by your not keeping it. It is the most basic matter related to your being faithful to our Lord. This is what I believe that Verse 3 is teaching us. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” The commandment is related to your sexuality. The Christian is to be a sexually moral person. The sanctification that is being spoken of here is a person’s pursuing of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. Sexual purity is something that each and every person who is old enough to understand it needs to pursue and to find by the grace of God.

God has given you your sexuality and it often begins to manifest itself as a tremendous curiosity about your own sexuality and the sexuality of others. It begins when you are 11 or 12 years old; sometimes younger or sometimes older. But it is God who gives a young man or a young women the hormones that they have which lead to sexual feelings and desires. These feelings and desires, as God gives them, are not evil in themselves because God created them.

But sin within a person's heart can tempt a person to use this gift unwisely. What, then, is a person supposed to do about these feelings and these desires? That is the question which is related to your sanctification. Well, I think that to begin with, you are to realize that the reason that God has given them to you, is in relation to the person who you will marry. And if you are not married, or you may not marry even for a long time yet, nevertheless you are to think about these feelings and these desire in terms of what the Lord would want you do about them; to think about them in relation to Him, the giver of every good and perfect gift.

For the vast majority of people He wants you to think about these feelings in relation to marriage. God gave you these feelings in relation to the person whom you will someday marry. What does he want you do with them now? He wants you to abstain from any immorality which you might be tempted to commit, in relation to them. He wants you to reserve the sexual fulfillment you will find in these feelings, for the time when He gives you the Biblical permission to use them. This is a trust. He has given you these feelings, but He has given them to be used in this certain context; the exclusive relationship of marriage; the marriage of one man and one woman in the bonds of holy matrimony as the wedding ceremony says. I think that I can realistically say that you are not going to be able to be totally free from these feelings and desires which God has entrusted to you, and so it is what you will do with them and about them; that is what this commandment is addressing.

When these feelings are pursued and developed so that we are trying to find sexual fulfillment in them before marriage or outside of marriage, the Bible describes it using these words: sexual immorality, unchastity, uncleanness, fornication, or adultery. The word there in the Greek is *Porneia* (πορνεία). We are to abstain from *Porneia*. The word encompasses the whole range of sexual sins that a person can fall into if they do not abstain. To abstain means not to participate in acting upon these sexual desires and feelings that you experience. You should know from this commandment that if you participate you will subvert or you will pervert what God has planned for you in marriage. This commandment contains within it many prohibitions; many sexual practices that we should not pursue or engage in.

It would include incest; pursuing a sexual relationship with a member of your immediate family or close relatives. It would include fornication; that is, pursuing a sexual relationship or many relationships before marriage, or without being married. This would include couples that live together before marriage, or who do not intend to marry at all. It would include homosexuality which is the pursuit of sexual pleasures with a person of the same sex. It would include bestiality; the pursuit of sexual fulfillment with an animal. It would include all of these things or any of them individually. This would include masturbation, or self-stimulation sexually. I am sorry even to have to bring the names of these things up. It is not my intention to defile your minds by mentioning them, but instead to define objectively and warn you concerning them. Because unless we are told what sin is, sometimes we will unwittingly think that it is alright to engage in some of these things when it is not; it is sinful.

The word *Porneia* is the word from which we get our English word pornography. Pornography is sexually explicit pictures which expose the nakedness or the sexual activity of a person or persons. The sin here, is in pursuing sexual gratification through those pictures instead of reserving those desires and pursuits for the person whom you will marry. I want you to understand that within marriage, that God would have you to be delighted and satisfied sexually, by you and your spouse lovingly giving each other sexual pleasure. This is a most wonderful and beautiful and a powerful gift of God, but God would not have it be abused. Turn to Proverbs Chapter 5, verse 15 with me. Here we see the beauty of God's design in marriage. "Drink water from own cistern, and running water from your own well." "Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets?" "Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you." "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth, as a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love."

“For why should you be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?” This is the beauty and the strength of marital love.

This is the sexuality which God intends to be freely by a married couple. He would have them to enjoy this gift in a holy way. It is called, “drinking water from your own cistern”. It is called “fountains of refreshing water”, and these “fountains” should be contained in the cistern of marriage, and they should not be flowing out in the streets to just anybody. When a man and a woman marry in sight of God, then they can truly expect to rejoice in Biblical marital love; you can really take pleasure in it. The wife is described here as a loving deer and a graceful doe in the sexual relationship, and her breasts are to be given to her husband to satisfy him always. And then the question of questions is asked in verse 20, “For why should you be enraptured with an immoral woman and embraced in the arms of a seductress?” It is the moral insanity of a sinful heart. God would prevent it with all of his good commandments concerning adultery.

The seventh commandment of the ten commandments deals with sexual immorality under the title of adultery. Thou shall not commit adultery. Adultery is the sexual unfaithfulness of one or both of the partners in a marriage relationship. It involves pursuing a sexual relationship with another person besides your husband or wife, and this is a sin. It is not limited to the sexual act itself alone; but it also applies to all the words, and looks and actions which may or do suggest to a person that you are not married to, that you would like to pursue a sexual relationship with them. This is why you can be committing the sin of adultery whether you are married or whether you are single. You remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5: 27 , that if a man even looks upon a woman to lust for her in his heart that he has already committed adultery.

So we see that our text says abstain. The sinful heart of a person is easily led astray and can be enticed by these thoughts and lusts which say to the one who is being deceived, “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” “But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of hell.” (Proverbs 9: 17 and 18) This is not where the pleasure oriented youth wants to end up, but it is where he will end up unless he repents and makes a covenant with his eyes. Whether you are young or old, listen to the words of Job in Job chapter 31, verses 1-4 – “I have made a covenant with my eyes; Why then should I look upon a young woman?” “For what is the allotment of God from above, and the inheritance of the Almighty from on high?” “Is it not destruction for the wicked, and disaster for the workers of iniquity?” “Does He not see my ways, and count all my steps?” Oh, if you are tempted to go astray in this way, or even if you fall in this way, will you not see that Christ Jesus would have you come to Him for salvation from this sin, and cleansing if you fall into it; the sin of the eyes.

And what about the single person? What should they do to guard and protect themselves from sexual sin, even if they have a gift from God not to marry? It is for them to think about their sexuality in terms of their being wholly devoted to God. Isaiah 54: 5 – “For Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; and Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.” And listen to 1st Corinthians 7: 32 – “But I want you to be without care.” “He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord – how he may please the Lord.” “But he who is married cares about the things of the world – how he may please his wife.” “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.” “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.” “But she who is married cares about the things of the world – how she may please her husband.” “And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.” This leads us very naturally on to my 2nd point which is:

2nd – We find here, the great duty which is entrusted to every Christian in relation to this commandment. (Verses 4 and 5)

Paul says in verse 4, "...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God." What does Paul mean by this obscure terminology? What does it mean for a man or a woman to "possess their own vessel"? A vessel is often spoken of in the scriptures as a jar of clay which contains water or wine or some other life-giving or life-strengthening substance. It could be any container in which precious substances are placed and kept. I believe that the term vessel here in this verse can only refer to a man's own body or his own wife. The wife is termed "the weaker vessel" by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3, verse 7. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel...." There, the word "vessel" refers to her bodily strength. So the word vessel could have been used by Paul and the Holy Spirit here in 1st Thessalonians 4, in such a way as to refer to both; the man's own body and the sexuality which God has entrusted to him; and also that he should know how to possess his own wife. Both are to be done "in sanctification and honor".

A good passage of Scripture to reference here would be 1 Samuel 21: 3-5. David is fleeing from Saul and he has fled for help to Ahimelech the high priest who is in the city of Nob. He wants Ahimelech to give him the showbread, the bread which had been consecrated on the altar, which is reserved for the priests after the fresh loaves are placed there. David says, "Now therefore, what have you on hand?" "Give me five loaves of bread in my hand, or whatever can be found." "And the priest answered David and said, 'There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread if the young men have at least kept themselves from women.'" "Then David answered the priest, and said to him, 'Truly women have been kept from us about three days since I came out.'" "And the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in effect common, even though it was consecrated in the vessel this day." You see, the priest was concerned with ceremonial cleanness related to David and the men who were with him, in relation to their sexuality. Had they been with their wives, sexually, recently, and were their vessels holy? David answers that they were ceremonially clean in accordance with the law. Therefore they could receive this bread.

Similarly, when we come to our duty, in relation to our sexuality, we find that it is "to possess our own vessel in sanctification and honor", not in a ceremonial way, but in a moral way. We are to learn to come to terms with our sexuality in the sight of God. We have all of these strong feelings and desires, but we learn by obedience to the teaching of God's word and instruction from our parents, how to have the control over them so that we abstain from sexual immorality when the flesh is begging to be satisfied. How does this come? It comes by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and from no other. We must come looking for help from our great high priest. We must possess our vessel in sanctification and honor. In other words, we come to learn the when and the where of how this vessel of our sexuality should be used. We learn when to abstain, and we learn when it is appropriate to give ourselves to our wife or husband.

It is appropriate only in the context of marriage, but even in marriage we pray to God to teach us what is right and good and loving. And then when we enter in to this blessed marital estate then God can truly bless us to be free and joyful in the use of His gift of sexuality to satisfy our partner and they to satisfy us. Even in marriage, sexuality is not to be pursued in the passion of lust, as those Gentiles who do not know God. It is that the Christian understands that his sexuality is expressed and possessed within the greater framework and duty of his love to his wife. His love includes the sexual expression, but it is actually much greater and broader than that physical relationship and intimacy. His love has the spiritual component and dynamic of Christ's love and the love of the Holy Spirit included in it. This love knows how to behave itself in an honorable, soul-satisfying, and God honoring way. This is the kind of relationship that each Christian should strive to have with his wife, and the wife with her husband.