

KEEP AWAY FROM SEXUAL IMMORALITY

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. I felt like church has been boring the past few weeks. I've been noticing a lot of nodding off, although I'll not mention any names. So I asked myself, "How can I live things up? How can I bring some fun and energy and excitement to church? How can I make things more interesting at church?" And then it hit me. Talk about sex!
2. Actually, we're going to talk about sex this morning because we're studying 1 Thessalonians, and it comes up in the text.
3. **Andy Stanley** "Nothing has stolen more dreams, dashed more hopes, broken up more families, and messed up more people psychologically than our propensity to disregard God's commands regarding sexual purity."
4. I don't think there's anyone here who would disagree with that statement. Sexual sin causes a lot of pain, and a lot of problems. So, let's study what God's word has to say about it so that we can grow in this area.

II. TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

1. 3 For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, 4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God. 6 This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. 7 For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness. 8 Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.
2. God wants us to avoid sexual sin, and to live in sexual purity. This passage tells us how to do it.

III. FOUNDATIONAL INSIGHTS ON SEXUAL PURITY

1. God's will is your holiness.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:3a** "For this is God's will, your sanctification"
- ii. NLT: God's will is for you to be holy
- iii. Holiness means conformity to God's character; moral blamelessness; moral purity.
- iv. God doesn't just want your belief. God doesn't just want your religiosity (baptism, communion, tithes, church attendance). God doesn't just want your service (volunteering in church). God wants your holiness.
- v. Holiness means cleaning the sin out of your life.

2. Holiness includes keeping away from sexual immorality.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:3b** "that you keep away from sexual immorality"
- ii. People tend to compartmentalize their life. They live by God's rules in some areas, but ignore God's rules about money. They live by God's rules in some areas, but they ignore God's rules about sex. Even your sexual life is under God's jurisdiction.

- iii. God cares about your sexuality.
 - 1. Why does God care? Isn't it the same as playing a sport like tennis? What's the big deal?
 - 2. God loves you, and He created the gift of sex to be a very powerful experience. God made sex for the context of marriage for purposes of procreation, intimacy, and enjoyment.
 - a. Sex can create life.
 - b. Sex can strengthen the bond of marriage.
 - c. But, sex can lead to an unwanted pregnancy.
 - d. Sex can lead disease and even death.
 - e. Sex can destroy a marriage, family, ministry, reputation, career, finances, etc.
 - 3. Sex is like fire. When fire is kept in the fireplace, it provides beauty and heat. But if the fire gets out of the fireplace, it can burn down the house. In the same way, when sex is kept in the context of marriage, it is a wonderful gift. But if taken out, it is very destructive.
- iv. **1 Corinthians 6:18** "Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body."
 - 1. The Bible warns us against the dangers of sexual sin. There is something special; something different; something unique about sexual sin.
 - 2. Consider pornography.
 - a. The media portray pornography as harmless. Far from it.
 - b. Researchers are finding that the average age that a boy first encounters porn is nine years old. By the time he is an adult, he has been consuming porn for more than a decade. How does this affect his relationship with his wife? Many of them are unable to experience a sexual response with a real live woman. They are only able to respond to pornography. Porn has destroyed their ability to relate to their spouse.
 - c. Married men who watch porn are twice as likely to get a divorce.
 - d. Watching porn actually shrinks the brain and reduces neural activity.
 - e. Studies show that porn is addictive, leads to violence, destroys relationships, and feeds sex trafficking and prostitution.
 - 3. Consider oxytocin.
 - a. Scientists first learned about it because of its role in childbirth and breastfeeding. The chemical is released in a mother's brain when she nurses her baby, and it stimulates an instinct for caring and nurturing. It's often called the "attachment hormone." It creates a strong attachment between a mother and her newborn child.

- b. Scientists were surprised when they found that oxytocin is also released during sexual intercourse (in men, the chemical is vasopressin). When you have sex, a chemical is released in your brain that creates a strong attachment between two people. It stimulates an instinct of caring and nurturing for one another. It even creates a sense of trust for the other person.
- c. So, sex isn't a mere physical activity like tennis. There is no such thing as casual sex, or no-strings-attached sex. When you have sex, you form a strong emotional bond with that person. So, when you break up with that person, it is emotionally devastating.
- d. This is one reason why God wants you to keep away from sexual immorality.
- v. **Mark Driscoll** "All sin is equally damning, but all sin is not equally devastating."
- vi. So, God wants you to be holy, and holiness includes keeping away from sexual immorality.

3. Sexual purity must be clearly defined.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:4** "that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor"
- ii. To pursue sexual purity, you need to know what it is. What is sexual sin? What is sexual purity?
- iii. In the Roman Empire in the first century, people did not know how God wanted them to live. What was considered normal was miles away from God's standards. For a woman, it was similar to today. A free woman (non-slave) was expected to remain a virgin until marriage, and then to be sexually faithful within marriage. But for men it was totally different. It was socially and morally acceptable for a man to be married, yet have sex on the side with his slaves (male and female), prostitutes (male and female), and teenage boys. Homosexual acts were acceptable for a free man as long as he was not the passive, effeminate partner.
- iv. So, when a person from that time period became a Christian, they had to be taught a completely different way of living. They needed to be learn how to control their bodies in holiness and honor.
- v. It is similar today. "Normal" sexual behavior for the world is drifting further and further from what God wants. If you want to live a holy life and keep away from sexual immorality, you need to be taught clearly what that looks like.
- vi. So what the Bible's guidelines for our sexuality?
- vii. The Greek word used in this passage for "sexual immorality" (sometimes translated "fornication") is *porneia*. Sometimes it refers to premarital sex; sometimes it refers to adultery; sometimes it refers to other sexual sins. So

porneia refers to any sexual behavior outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage.

- viii. One person defined Biblical sexual morality like this: Never before marriage, never outside of marriage, and never with the same sex.
- ix. In his book, *Set Apart*, Bruce Wilkinson defines five types of sexual sins:
 - 1. Sex before marriage. If you are single, you must save sex for marriage.
 - 2. Intercourse with anyone but your spouse.
 - 3. Any sexual activity with anyone but your spouse.
 - 4. Anything done by yourself for the purpose of sexual arousal.
 - 5. Lustful thoughts. Sexual thoughts or fantasies about someone other than your spouse. This would include pornography.
- x. Pretty clear, right?
- xii. Is it possible to live this way? To be so different from the culture? Yes! Do you remember what I said about sexual morality of the Roman Empire in the first century? It was acceptable for the men to have many different sexual experiences – slaves, prostitutes, adolescent boys. But the early Christians took God’s word very seriously. Some of the early martyrs were Christian slaves who refused to sexually service their masters and were executed for it. Potamiaena was a slave in Alexandria, Egypt, whose master was so angry when she refused his advances that he reported her as a Christian to the prefect. The prefect threatened to turn her in to the gladiators to be gang-raped, but she persuaded him to execute her instead by slowly immersing her in boiling tar. Her faith as she faced death inspired the conversion of several other people, including one of her guards, Basilides, who was also martyred.
- xiii. If the Christians in the first century were willing to break away from the culture and follow God’s instructions, even at the risk of their own lives, then we can too.

4. Our behavior must be driven by holiness, not lustful passion.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:4-5** “4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don’t know God.”
- ii. What is Paul saying here? Notice the word “control.” According to Roman culture, controlling your sexual urges was impossible. This was the purpose of prostitution. Since men had uncontrollable sex drives, prostitution was essential to a healthy society. It was like a safety valve. They believed that if you took away the brothels, men would go mad with lust and society would break down. A single man was still considered a virgin if he visited prostitutes. A married man was not committing adultery if he visited prostitutes. So, according to the Romans, controlling your sexual urges was not possible.
- iii. We see similar philosophies in our society today. If you are attracted to the opposite sex, you’re not supposed to deny yourself; you’re supposed to give

in to homosexual behavior. If you want to have sex before marriage, why wait? If you are married but you fall in love with another woman, follow your heart.

- iv. In other words, the culture in Rome and the culture today says let your lustful passions drive you. Let your sexual urges dictate how you behave.
- v. In fact, there are many secular intellectuals over the past century who have taught that denying your sexual urges is dangerous. Sigmund Freud, for example, taught that sexual restraint is harmful and unhealthy, leading to neurosis.
- vi. The Bible teaches that Christians can and must control their sexual urges. We are to be controlled by God and His will, not by our sexual appetites and attractions.
 - 1. If you are single, your sexual desires are to be delayed until marriage.
 - 2. If you are married, your sexual desires are to be channeled to your spouse.
 - 3. If you battle with same-sex attraction, or any other perverted lusts, your desires are to be denied.
- vii. Our sexual urges/passions/desires/attractions/appetites are not in charge of us; God is. We are not to be slaves to our lustful passions; we are to be servants of God.
- viii. The world teaches that denying your sexual lusts will lead to unhappiness. But the Bible teaches that the only way to be truly happy, the only way to abundant life, is by denying self and living under submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ix. This is where the Christian life takes faith. Just like the Christian who is battling an addiction to food, or drugs or alcohol, you must trust that Christ is enough; that you don't need sexual sin to be happy. That in fact, sexual sin leads to misery, and true happiness are only found in obedience to Christ.

5. Sexual immorality is not just a sin against God, but against others.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:6a** "6 This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner"
- ii. Paul's next point is to say that sexual immorality is a sin against others.
- iii. One of the ways that the devil tempts us to sin is with the lie that "Nobody will get hurt. It's no big deal." Paul is countering that lie.
- iv. When you sin sexually, it's not just between you and God. You are wronging other people.
- v. If you are single and you have pre-marital sex, you are wronging your future spouse of your virginity which ought to be brought into the marriage.
- vi. Consider all the people you sin against when you commit adultery:
 - 1. God.
 - 2. Yourself.
 - 3. Your spouse.
 - 4. Your children.
 - 5. The other person.

6. The other person's spouse.
7. The other person's children.
- vii. Consider David's sin when he committed adultery with Bathsheba.
 1. Bathsheba's husband didn't just lose his wife; he was murdered.
 2. David and Bathsheba's newborn son died.
 3. Also as a result of this sin, David's other son Absalom led a coup to steal the crown from David. He had sex publicly with David's concubines. He caused David and his army to retreat from Jerusalem. The two armies went to war, leading to the slaughter of 20,000 soldiers. And then Absalom was ultimately killed.
 4. What's the moral of the story? The private sins of one person can hurt many others.

6. God will hold you accountable for sexual sin.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:6b** "because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses"
- ii. Here Paul provides another incentive to keep away from sexual sin. God will hold you accountable. Here's another way to put it. God will punish you.
- iii. **Hebrews 13:4** "Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers."
- iv. This is something to keep in mind when you are tempted with sexual sin. God is watching you. And He will punish you for your sexual sin. He takes it very seriously.
- v. Randy Alcorn wrote a book on sexual purity called *The Purity Principle*.
 1. What is the purity principle? "Purity is always smart; impurity is always stupid."
 2. He elaborates. "Purity is safe. Impurity is risky. Purity always helps us. Impurity always hurts us. Purity is always smart; impurity is always stupid."
 3. He goes on, "To choose purity is to put yourself under God's blessing. To choose impurity is to put yourself under God's curse."
- vi. There are natural consequences to sin: Disease; broken relationships; unexpected pregnancy; shame and embarrassment; divorce. But there are also spiritual consequences. God blesses the righteous, but He punishes the unrighteous.
- vii. Taking this truth to heart is called the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the belief that God is always watching me, and He will hold me accountable for my actions.
- viii. Paul is saying that when you sin sexually and hurt others, God will not let you get away with it.

7. You were saved to be holy.

- i. **1 Thessalonians 4:7** "For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness."
- ii. Paul gives us one final reason to keep away from sexual immorality. We were saved to be holy. That's what he means with the word "called." When we were unbelievers, God called us to be saved.

- iii. Paul's point is that when God called us, "He didn't just call us to believe in Jesus. He didn't just call us to keep us from hell. He didn't just call us to make the church bigger. He called us, He saved us, to live a holy life. The whole purpose God saved you was so that you would imitate His character by living a holy life, just as God is holy.
- iv. When you, as a Christian, choose to live in sexual sin, you are rejecting the very purpose that God saves you. You are rejecting your purpose in life.
- v. Finally, Paul drives home this point with one more insight.
- vi. **1 Thessalonians 4:8** "Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit."
- vii. When God saved you, He placed the Holy Spirit to live inside you. Why? Let me give you a hint. His name is the "Holy" Spirit. His job is to make you holy. To grow you in holiness. When you live in sexual sin, you are rejecting the purpose of your life, and you are rejecting all that the Holy Spirit is trying to do in your life.

IV. CONCLUSION

1. Today as we close, my challenge to you is simple, but not easy. Would you make a wholehearted commitment to sexual purity from this day forward.
2. God loves you. He wants what is best for you. Will you trust Him with your sexuality? Will you trust Him with your relationships? Will you trust Him with your body?