

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8: Sanctified Sexuality

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 through 8 on page 960. Would you please rise with me in honor of God's Word? Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learn from us how you ought to live and to please God, as in fact you are doing, you should 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 fornication, that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

For God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever rejects this rejects not human authority, but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Good afternoon.

Thank you, Dr. Eaton, for God's word being read in our hearing on this afternoon. I want to begin by saying thank you so much for your prayers on behalf of Glenn, K. Ryan, and his family.

[1 : 3 5] Over the last two days, there has been a wake and a funeral on yesterday, and Nathan will be laid to rest on tomorrow morning at the Veterans Cemetery near Joliet.

So thank you and continue to pray for them as they walk through this time of great challenge. We continue our series in the book of 1 Corinthians on this afternoon, and the transition from chapter 3 to chapter 4 marks a notable shift to the next major section of the letter before us.

Paul, in chapters 1 through 3, had wisely dealt with first things first. There were some things that needed his attention before he went on to encourage them with his teaching.

In chapter 1, he highlighted that God's work among them was evident. Boy, it really excites me to hear what God is doing in Cameroon. And I look forward to Sammy's stories via email.

God is at work. But not only is God at work where his name is not heard regularly, he is at work in our midst and in our city.

[3 : 0 0] So the work of God among them was evident. Through the ministry of God's word and God's spirit and the labor of God's servants among them, many in Thessalonica had turned to Christ.

Chapter 1. But then in chapter 2, the labor of God's servants among them had been genuine. Paul's pastoral care, that's what's highlighted in chapter 2 among them, had been sincere and pure and parental and honorable.

He wanted them to see that. It was necessary for them to see that, to sort of clear the air before he proceeded, to give them the instructions that their situation demanded.

But then in chapter 3, the report that Timothy brought back from them was comforting. The faith of the believers was healthy.

Their love for Paul was alive. And that was an encouragement and a comfort to Paul. So, with those things in mind, we move to chapter 4.

[4 : 16] Those things were behind them. And so Paul could proceed to supply some of what was lacking in their faith. Look at chapter 3 and verse 10.

Remember, we saw that on last week. He wasn't face to face with them, but he was going to do that via the letter that is before us.

And he does that in chapters 4 and 5. Huh? His apostolic gift of teaching was the means of encouraging and supplying what was lacking in their faith.

Within the last month or so, I've gone through my annual physical examination. Doctor's visit.

Bone scan. Return to the doctor. Instructions and guidance from the doctor as far as how to improve my health. The doctor's report was generally encouraging.

[5 : 26] You know, to hear about some of the things that I was doing well. You know, as often when you go to the doctor these days, my age, you need to lose some weight. But you don't have to get to my age before you need to lose some weight.

Do you? Huh? My vital signs were good. Huh? Those signs that were indicative of life and somewhat of a good state of life.

But among them, on the report, I have some deficiencies. My vitamin D levels are down. Either I need to get out and get more sun, huh?

Or he prescribed a supplement that I need to take once a week. Man, it's powerful to help me with my vitamin D.

Well, Timothy's report included notes regarding areas of Christian life that needed attention from the believers that were there.

[6 : 28] Things in which they were deficient. And the reminder of Paul's letter includes Christian teaching as a prescription, so to speak, to address their deficiencies.

And when you listen closely to the text before us, we hear in our own day what the original hearers heard.

Teachings that reinforce their understanding of how they were to please God. Isn't that what the Christian life is all about?

Isn't that what you and I actually live for? In order to please God? Huh? Look at chapter 4, verse 1.

Finally, that's the word of transition. The word in the text. Yes. And here begins Paul's instruction for them. And notice what he does.

[7 : 30] He appeals to them as a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I love this. We see it in verse 1 as well as in verse 2. Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus Christ, that as you receive from us how you ought to live and please God just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

And look at verse 2. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. And he goes on down and we'll get to that a little bit later.

But again, as Christ's representatives, he instructs them. He delivered Christian instructions. What's in view here are Christian ethics.

These are not just great moral ideas. These are morals, ethics that are rooted in the Christian doctrine, in our understanding of Scripture.

They flow from Christ's person. They flow from his work. They flow from his authority. They flow from his teaching. Paul had instructed them in Timothy's report and revealed that they had responded to his teaching, just as you are doing, Paul says.

- [8 : 50] And so like a doctor looking at a report and seeing what the patient is doing right, Paul acknowledged you are in fact on the right track.
- You are doing right things. But he also urges them in the process to do more and more. Isn't that just like when some of you parents get the report card of that child?
- They're doing well in some areas and not so well in others. You don't start, at least I hope you don't, on, Hey, son or daughter, you've got this C minus.
- I mean, when there are A's and B's that are jumping out at you. Wisdom dictates another kind of response. Paul says, well, you're doing certain things well.
- You're doing, and I encourage you, do those things more and more. But there are some things that need your attention. Paul specifically makes reference in verse 2 to the instructions and orders that he had already given them.
- [9 : 53] And in reality, Paul was just the messenger, wasn't he? Really, the sender was nothing less than the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And you recall in chapter 2 in verse 13 that the Thessalonians have received God's word as it was, not the word of man, but what it was in truth, God's word.
- In verse 3, in verse 2, Paul speaks about the previous instructions that had been given to them, the Thessalonian believers. And he reminded them of what had previously been said, but he instructs them concerning, as you get into chapter 3, particularly sexual conduct.
- The practice of that day would rival anything that we see in our culture today. It rivals the gross sensuality that is all around us, and not only in our nation and in our city, but in our world.
- I think it would be helpful just to hear what William Barclay had to say about certain areas or certain of the cultures of that day, the Jews, the Romans, and the Greeks.
- Listen, among the Jews, marriage was theoretically held in highest esteem. It was said that a Jew must die rather than commit murder, idolatry, or adultery.
- [11 : 28] But in fact, divorce was tragically easy. We understand that there were certain schools of thought and practice in the New Testament day. And Jesus, of course, he gave the real spiritual and actual meaning in certain passages like Matthew 5 and in Matthew chapter 19.
- So, but again, even in this Jewish culture that held marriage and somewhat esteem, it really didn't hold to the full sanctity of marriage as it concerned the practices, understanding and practice of divorce of that day.
- What about the Romans? In Rome, and listen to this, for the first 520 years of the Republic, there had not been a single divorce. Can you imagine that? But now under the empire, as it had been put, divorce was a matter of caprice.
- Caprice. As Seneca said, women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. In Rome, the years were identified by the names of the councils, but it was said that fashionable ladies identified years by the names of their husbands.
- Juvenile quotes an instance of a woman who had eight husbands in five years. In essence, morality was dead. What about the Greeks? In Greece, immorality had always been quite blatant.
- [12 : 54] Long ago, Demosthenes had written, we keep prostitutes for pleasure, we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body, we keep wives for the beginning of children and for faithful guardianship of our homes.
- So long as a man has supported his wife and family, there's no shame whatsoever in extramarital relationships. So? The state of the day in the various cultures of the day.

These Thessalonian believers had turned to God in that kind of world. That was the atmosphere.

Those were the standards. Those were the mores of that day. And here was the deal. Their growth and progress in the faith needed the instructions that Paul provides that are before us because of what was happening as it related to sexual conduct.

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica, Acts chapter 16, it had followed the great council in Acts chapter 15 where the Jerusalem council met. And one of the things that was debated there was whether Christians needed to become Jews first.

[14 : 17] Whether they had to be circumcised in order to be saved. There were those who espoused that kind of teaching in that context. Well, they decided that they really didn't need to be bound by the ceremonial kinds of things of Moses in order to be saved, but they rendered another judgment, a judgment that sort of helps us to see what was going on in the pagan world where Gentiles were flocking to Christ.

James writes in Acts chapter, Luke writes, James speaks in Acts chapter 15 verses 19 and 20 says, and he says this, Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain and notice what they are to abstain from, from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled and from blood.

They didn't have to become a Jew in order to be saved, but these were some good instructions given their exit from the pagan world to the body of Christ.

Paul likewise in other letters to other cities encourages those who have been saved out of the kind of culture that we find here to forsake such sexual sin.

1 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 13, Ephesians chapter 3, 5 verse 3, Colossians chapter 3 verse 5, all encourage Christians who would come out of that kind of culture to forsake and not to be engaged in the things that formerly characterized their lives.

[15 : 52] And thus today, friends, it is right and proper and good for us to hear this word from this text on this day so that our understanding of God's standards for us in the midst of our sex-saturated society might be understood.

The God-pleasing life, the life that is agreeable to God is a life that is set apart for God, a life of holiness, a sanctified life, a life reserved for God and His purposes.

God has called us for that and to that, a life that pleases God. So what does the life that is reserved for God, dedicated to God, look like?

Paul proceeded to unpack what holiness looks like in this critical dimension of one's life in the area of their sexuality. And obviously, we know that this particular dimension of our being is one of the most, I would say, delicate and vulnerable dimension and it demands care and protection and vigilance as well as Christian teaching to help us and every now and then, I praise God that we get to preach through books of the Bible and when we come to passages like this, we just can't skip this.

It must be said and we say it boldly and with confidence that God will use it in your life and in mine. You and I must subscribe to what could be called sanctified sexuality.

[17 : 45] Huh? Just what does it look like? I think the text before us helps us. According to the verses before us, it includes what we see in verse 3.

Sexual abstinence outside of marriage. You see that in verse 3? For this is the will of God, your holiness, your sanctification that you abstain from sexual immorality.

Huh? The standards, biblical standards of holiness call us to refrain from sexual immorality. All kinds of sexual activity outside of marriage, outside of male-female marriage, covenant-keeping marriage, those are the kinds of things that are in view.

That's the sense of the word that's translated sexual morality. Christian sexual ethics are based on the teachings of Christ.

and that being the case, not only are our actions in view, but also our attitudes as well as our physical acts.

[18 : 53] Didn't Jesus say, but I say to you, Matthew chapter 5 verse 28, that everyone who looks on a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart?

So not only does it include the physical acts, but it includes the internal, the attitudes of the heart. And Christian sexual ethics are based on the teachings of Jesus.

When you and I listen to this text today, we hear God's call to sanctified sexuality, abstinence from any form of sexual activity apart from biblical marriage.

One man for one woman for one lifetime living faithfully within the covenant relationship. That's what, that's the biblical picture of marriage.

Some years ago, I heard on a local radio station, not Christian, but in the name of entertainment, there were people who were calling in, they had them call in, and to highlight, when was it that you lost your virginity.

[20 : 06] In the name of entertainment, and there were different ones that were calling in and talking about the age, but then there was this phone call from a young lady by the name of Stephanie.

Here was a grown woman who, though grown, an adult, was maintaining her sexual purity. She was maybe 30 or 40, but she says, I'm still waiting.

And did you know that it's okay to be a teenager today and wait? Or 20-something or 30-something or 40 or over, you fill in the blank, and waiting?

You don't have to be dragged down by the standards of this world or those who you may know. Pleasing God demands that you and I are sanctified in our sexuality.

But notice, not only does it include abstinence, let's look at verses 4 and 5. It includes self-control, not self-indulgence. See that in verses 4 and 5?

[21 : 17] Let me read it for you. That each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and in honor, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

It's a contrast there. Verses 4 and 5 are in contrast. Self-control, not self-indulgence, is in view.

The contrast is between self-restrained, holy, and honorable living. That's encouraged for Christians in verse 4. And the unrestrained self-indulgence of those who do not know God.

That's the big idea of what we see in these verses. But there are alternatives to the translation that we see here in the ESV.

Alternately, the verse can be rendered in this way. That each of you know how to take a wife for himself, and some would use this in defense of heterosexual marriage.

[22 : 20] This word, this view, would render the word translated body in the ESV as vessel. And so, the noun translated in verse 4 can also be rendered that vessel.

The word in pre-Christian Jewish texts appears as a reference to a wife. If that were the understanding of the verse would read that each of you would know how to take a wife for himself.

restrain, self-restraint versus being self-indulgent. Notice this, there is another alternative. It's that each of you know how to possess his own vessel, or in other words, to learn how to live with his own life.

Emphasis on his own versus someone else's. And again, included in that is the idea of being self-restraint versus being self-indulgent.

And then, of course, we have what the SV, which is an acceptable rendering that each of you know how to control his own body. Commentators are divided on the various sides, but I've opted for the SV in this particular exposition, which calls Christians the standards that are holy and honorable, consistent with being dedicated to God, and respectful of others.

[23 : 44] And again, regardless of the option, the principle of self-control is in view. And the contrast in the conduct is seen. Those who don't have a relationship with God often are unrestrained in this area.

Paul speaks otherwise about this same matter in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, where he tells believers who knew something about sex in their city. Corinthians were notoriously sexual indulgent.

And Paul told them in chapter 6, verse 18, to flee sexual immorality. Holiness demands that the believer exercises self-control rather than sexual indulgence.

Set apart for God to be men and women who are honorable in the sight of God and of man. That's the third thing.

Sexual, sanctified sexuality also includes honoring boundaries. We see that in verse 6. The interpersonal dimension of sanctified sexuality comes into view in this particular verse.

[24 : 51] Listen to it again with me. That no one transgressed and wronged his brother in this matter because the Lord is avenger all these things as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

He had gotten the message. This was not new. He's reminding them. Again, perhaps Timothy's report said, Paul, you might want to address this with them. Some are walking in it and there are those who need just a greater understanding the world from which they come and the demands of God.

So why don't you just provide a little supplemental kind of teaching and give that to them? And he does that here. The verse calls us to recognize the boundaries of propriety, to honor established relationships, not to run interference on them, not to cross center lines relationally.

To do so is transgressing, getting on someone else's territory. Even if it's prior to marriage, it's not a person doesn't belong to you.

Or even within the context of an adulterous kind, that person doesn't belong to you. Those who don't honor such boundaries are subject to God's judgment.

[26 : 08] Discipline as established by the Lord. Paul felt it necessary to reinforce what he had said before in this regard.

He had said it before, he reiterated here, and we must be guarded internally and otherwise in these regards.

Abstinence, friends, is not a bad word. No one may think that a message like this is intended for in places where marriages appear to be healthy intact.

And while we may like to think that on this afternoon, that these warnings are not needed, you know, we can't be naive about that, can we? Ah, the great King David could have used a reminder, couldn't he?

The great leader and psalmist and musician and administrator needed this kind of word from God, and friends so do we. How many of us know families and individuals who have been fractured by these kinds of things?

[27 : 15] Guidelines and standards not heated cross lines, interfered with relationships. And the text before us helps us to see from God's perspective how you and I are to conduct ourselves in a world that plays by its own rules.

And if we're not careful, friends, you and I will be drawn into their games. Why do these things need to be enforced? Because God has not called us to impurity, verse 7.

He has called us from impurity and from uncleanness. And if there's one thing is clear, it is that God's will is our holiness, verse 3, and that God's call, verse 7, is to holiness.

But notice also in verse 8, God's provision for our holiness. But before that, to ignore, disregard, what we see here is not a rejection of man.

Look at verse 8 again. Therefore, for whoever disregards this, disregards not man, but God who gives us his Holy Spirit. How does one please God?

[28 : 23] In the area of sanctified sexuality? What does one need to live accordingly? The Holy Spirit. is present and resident in the believer to help one, you and me, male and female, in the quest for holiness.

Victory and sanctity in this crucial area comes from the presence as well as the ministry of God's Spirit.

God's God's God's God's God's God's standards. God's standards for our sexuality.

The fact that you and I are wonderfully, marvelously made as sexual beings must be appreciated and celebrated but also protected. This area of lives is one of great vulnerability that must be guarded and respected and protected.

So let me in a bullet point kind of fashion give you the essence of what I've said. The Lord has called us to please him by being sanctified, set apart, holy in our sexuality.

[29 : 34] Pleasing God is the goal of our living, verse 1. Holiness is the standard of our conduct, verses 3 and 7. Abstinence apart from marriage is our practice, verses 3 and 4.

Self-control in all relations is the underlying principle, verses 6 and 7. The Holy Spirit, he empowers us for holiness, verse 8.

Let me just say that again. Because I want you to see it, I want you to grasp it, I don't want you to get lost. The Lord has called us to please him by being sanctified in our sexuality.

Pleasing God, verse 1, is the goal of our living. Holiness is the standard for our conduct. Abstinence apart from marriage is our practice.

Self-control in all relationships is our underlying principle. The Holy Spirit is our helper. He empowers us for holiness.

[30 : 37] The Lord has called you and me. He's called us to please him him of being sanctified in our sexuality. May we hear that. May we live it out.

And if correction is needed, may God give you the strength and the power to do so. Let's pray. dear Lord, we praise you for this word that is so apropos for us in our day.

And we praise you for Christian sexual ethics that have really impacted the world. And you know, Lord, how some of those over the years have been relaxed and targeted and challenged.

But may we not yield, may we not vary from what we see here. May we subscribe to them, embrace them, and rely on your spirit who came on Pentecost to empower us for life that pleases you in general, but particularly the area of our sexuality.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Let's stand and sing our final song.