

Spiritual Purity

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[0:00] So the best way to start a hard message is to begin with hope and encouragement.

! So instead of turning to 1 Thessalonians, which is where we're going to end up spending the bulk of our time there, I want to encourage you to turn to 1 Corinthians, chapter 6. 1 Corinthians, chapter 6, beginning in verse 9. If you're a guest with us this morning, it's on page 955 in the Pew Bible ahead of you.

1 Corinthians, chapter 6, beginning at verse 9. It says, Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Did you get that? The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, which is the word that we're going to be looking at this morning, it's the word porneia, nor idolaters or adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

[1:36] Now those are some strong words. Is there hope? And that's where we turn to next. And such were some of you.

But you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

There is no hope for us apart from Jesus Christ. So praise the Lord for hope.

But if there is in your life this morning a pattern of sexual sin, of sexual immorality, of giving yourself over to the indulgences of sexual sin, there are strong words this morning for you.

But there is also hope. The strong words that would confront you where you are to force you to ask the question, are you truly part of the kingdom?

[2:56] But by God's grace, there is the hope of sanctification, the hope of justification, and the hope of cleansing that comes through Jesus Christ.

One prominent example, back in the 4th century, is a man by the name of Aurelius Augustine. Now, maybe you do, or maybe you don't actually know who this individual is, but he happens to be one of the premier fathers of the church. He wrote voluminously.

Over 5 million words are accredited to him. And every subsequent generation that followed after him were impacted in some way by his focus and his premier theology that he helped to establish and helped just to clarify in terms of committing himself to the study of God's word and communicating it faithfully to the subsequent generations.

But you would never know that was to be true from the earlier parts of Augustine's life. He led a life of immorality as a youngster.

[4:17] And although a son of a Christian mother, he abandoned his mother's faith in favor of the Persian religion, which was a form of Gnosticism, which would say that salvation could come through knowledge and mysticism.

He had taken a mistress with whom he lived for 13 years. And that immoral relationship continued to be an anchor in his life to weigh him down and to keep him from moving to other things that would be helpful for him.

He became disillusioned with the leaders of that movement and discovered the Platonists. But all this time, his mother had been faithfully pleading with God for her son.

She knew the life decisions that he was making, but also knew that God could change his heart.

And by God's grace, he came upon the preaching of a church father, the Father Ambrose.

He became intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity, but he confesses that he was prevented from accepting the faith because of weakness in dealing with his sexual temptations. [5:25] But again, through God's grace, he arranged the circumstances. God arranged the circumstances in his life, and he was sitting and contemplating Christianity, and he heard in the background a child singing, singing the words, take and read.

Immediately he knew that he needed to pick up the word of God and to see what it had to say. So, in his confessions, he describes how he turned back to the place where he was sitting, and he opened the word, and his eyes fell on the verses in Romans chapter 13, verses 13 to 14, which says, He says, There is hope this morning.

for those of you who are caught up and plagued by this issue of sexual impurity.

As we come to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, we come front and center with the commendation of the Apostle Paul, who up until this point really hasn't been communicating any kind, any form of exhortation.

It's been peppered with encouragement and commending this church and recognizing the things that God has accomplished for them and calling attention to them and encouraging them to grow in those areas.

[7:41] He wants to encourage them to remember the ministry that he and the others had had in Thessalonica, how he treated them like his own children, whether he had a mom-like ministry or a dad-like ministry, a ministry of grace or a ministry of truth.

He talks about his desire to see them, and his affection for this church just continues to explode out of the pages, the joy that he has for each one of them.

And now, finally coming to a place in this letter where he is going to encourage, where he's going to exhort, where he's going to issue warning for them.

We turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 1 through 8. Again, if you're a guest with us, it's on page 987. Let me read just the first three verses which form our point, this first point this morning. It is found in verses 1 through 3. Here's what it says. Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

[9:07] For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus, for this is the will of God, your sanctification.

So this morning, I want to point our attention to three areas where God's will is clear for us today. If any of you are wondering, what does God want for me?

This is where it begins. It begins with God's clear, definitive will of God for you in terms of your sanctification. And he comes at this will of sanctification and tries to explain it in two different ways. He begins in verses 1 and 2 by describing the feature of God's will and sanctification as being fundamental to his gospel message. You should know this because this was foundational to my original teaching to you.

We see that there in verse 1, just as you receive from us. And then in verse 2, you know what instructions we gave to you. So fundamental was this truth in Paul's message and ministry that even though he had only been there for three Sabbaths, it was an essential aspect of his teaching.

[10:32] It had been built in from day one in his encouragement to them. Every conversation that Paul has leading up to this point, if you look at the messages that he preaches throughout the various cities that he goes to, contains this element.

One example will be found in Acts chapter 13 verses 38 and 39. he tells the church or the people in Antioch in Pisidia. He says, Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that though this man, excuse me, that through this man, speaking of Jesus, is forgiveness of sins and is proclaimed to you. And by him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. There is not only spiritual and future deliverance, but there is immediate and present deliverance over sin.

That is the message we preach. That is the gospel. It is the gospel that saves you for a future date and preserves you for heaven, but is also the gospel that talks about deliverance today, freedom from sin, the power of God to overcome in the Christian life.

in Paul's mind, this was an essential to the gospel. You don't have the good news if you don't have this.

[12:05] And by God's grace, the church got it. We've seen that over the past several chapters. We see how their receptiveness to the gospel has come front and center in Paul's commendation to them.

we find in chapter 1, verse 5, he says, our gospel came to you not only in word, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

You saw it, you heard it, you believed it, and the power of God worked in your life to change you.

That's what we see in chapter 1, verse 6. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

And then in verse 7, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Chapter 1, verse 9, they themselves report how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

And then in chapter 2, verse 14, you became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. You heard the message of the gospel, you understood it for what it was, not just faith for the future, but faith for every moment of the day that helps you to overcome the struggles of life, the bondage of sin, and to live in newness that God has given to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

[13:34] The gospel had truly saved them, not for just some future day, but the in, the here and now. He says, you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God just as you are doing here in chapter 4, verse 1.

You got it. You understand it. You're doing it. I commend you. And this is the same word that Pastor David pointed to last week when he says, do this more and more.

This is the super abounding obedience now that Paul is commending to this church in

Thessalonica. So it was fundamental to the gospel, but it's also fundamental to God's character.

We see that in verse 3. Fundamental to God's character. Notice the language in verse 3. For this is the will of God.

In verse 1, he says, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus. Verse 2, for you know what instructions we gave to you through the Lord Jesus.

[14:49] Sanctification, which is a word that describes holiness or separation unto God, refers not only to the activity of the Holy Spirit in setting a man apart unto salvation, but also the process that enables him to be holy.

There is a sanctifying work that the Spirit does initially in our hearts to make us clean, to make us acceptable, but also there is the sanctifying work of progress that moves us in the direction to help us to grow in our likeness, to help that reality that has been accomplished for us to actually show up in how we live.

That's what the Holy Spirit is given to us to accomplish in us. It's truth is fundamental to the gospel because it's fundamental to the character of God.

God is holy. I appreciate what some great men have said about the holiness of God. Listen to a couple of these quotes.

First, from Sam Storms who says this, the holiness of God only secondarily refers to his moral purity. It primarily points to his infinite otherness.

[16:15] To say that God is holy is to say that he is transcendently separate. Holiness is not only one attribute among many, it is not like grace or power or knowledge or wrath.

Everything about God is holy so that each attribute partakes of divine holiness. Or this quote from Jerry Bridges, holiness is the perfection of all of God's other attributes.

His power is holy power. His mercy is holy mercy. His wisdom is holy wisdom. It is his holiness more than any other attribute that makes him worthy of our praise.

And Dr. MacArthur puts it this way, of all the attributes of God, holiness is the one that most uniquely describes him and in reality is a summation of all of his other attributes.

The word holiness refers to his separateness, his otherness, the fact that he is unlike any other being. It indicates his complete and infinite perfection.

[17:27] And finally from R.C. Sproul, only one sin sacred scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a

characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession.

The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Note that he is merely holy, not that he is merely holy, or even holy, holy.

He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice.

It does say that he is holy, holy, holy. That the whole earth is full of his glory. The holiness of God is essential to his character.

And as David described so well last week, the thrust of all that God does for us is to lead us into deeper commitment to holiness.

[18:38] In chapter three, we saw in verses 12 and 13, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before God, before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

In this entire section running from chapter three, verse six, and particularly verse 11, down through the end of chapter four, we find this combination, these paragraphs that are used that emphasize the significance of love and holiness of God, and the resultant love and holiness of God's people. So which one is it? Which one are we supposed to emulate? Which is the seed and which is the fruit? Where should we focus our energy?

Or are both just as important as the other? And I would suggest this morning that as the Bible begins to describe holiness in love, that love is actually a way to describe the holiness of God. When we often think about holiness, we think about rule keeping. We think about the Pharisees. We think about externals. We think about checking the boxes and doing the things that God has prescribed for us to do, conforming our lives to the law.

[20:14] But Jesus himself in describing the moral perfection of God that was expressed to his people through the Ten Commandments summarized the holiness of God and summarized the standard of the law with two commands that both come to us in the form of love, don't they?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. God is just for my own education.

I looked through the entire New Testament to see how many other times does God describe himself as God is? Where you find in the New Testament God is.

There are only four. It is God is light, God is love, God is faithful, and God is a consuming fire. Interesting though that the only two qualities that are commended to us are the qualities of love and light.

[21:29] Ephesians chapter 4 helps us with this. Paul says in this place, Ephesians chapter 4, he says, therefore be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

A fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, but sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you as is proper among the saints.

For at one time you were darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light.

You see how these are synonymous terms?

Walking in love and walking in light? The apostle John does the same thing in 1 John. The only two times where he says that God is light or God is love, he harmonizes that to help us understand our responsibility to emulate the character of God by being like him in these essential ways.

God has called us to sanctification and holiness. It's woven into the gospel message, it's foundational truth for us as believers but it is also woven into the character of God so that those who call themselves believers, those who call themselves children of God must also emulate the character that God has infused within us through his Holy Spirit and by the way, it's his Holy Spirit to work within us.

[23:08] Holiness is manifested in our lives not just through rule keeping but especially through love, our loving of others.

Now, have you ever had somebody in a conversation, they didn't like what you were saying and they shushed you? Ever had that?

Or had anyone, this is probably an old one, but ever have anyone say, talk to the hand? You ever had that happen? Whew. Or, let's see, what's the other one?

Maybe somebody has plugged their ears and said, na-na-na-na-na-na-na, they don't want to hear what you're saying. do you realize that God's instruction for us is so crystal clear, so definitive, this is God's will for you, your sanctification.

And yet, how often do we find ourselves giving God the na-na-na-na, or the talk to the hand? There is no wonder, then, why we are mystified about the will of God in other areas of our life, when it should be crystal clear in so many, in so many, for so many reasons.

[24:38] My recommendation, or my encouragement for us, as a people of God, when we come to decisions that need to be made, to ask yourself these questions.

First, will this lead me to deeper holiness? And will this lead me to greater love? Greater love for God, and greater love for God's people.

Then I think we'll find that the will of God will become much clearer for us. It is God's will that you be sanctified. And then as we turn to verses three to six, we find it is God's will for you to be sexually pure, to have sexual purity.

Let me read these verses for us, and then we'll walk through them together. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that each one of you, excuse me, your sanctification, that you should abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passions of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgresses or wrongs his brother in this matter because the Lord is an avenger of all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

We find in this section three ways that Paul is commending sexual purity to us. first he begins with the putting off of immorality.

[26:19] He leads with this word, the word to avoid or the word to abstain. Let's not get the idea that when he uses the word avoid it means to tiptoe around or to keep it at a distance but maybe kind of dabble in it once in a while or to flirt with our curiosity.

No, when Paul is using this word to abstain he is not talking simply about keeping something at a distance or dabbling in it or indulging their curiosity to some degree but he is talking about complete abstinence, staying completely away from any thought or behavior that violates the principle of God in this area.

sexual immorality which is the word the Greek word porneia is a word that is meant to describe any sexual relationship outside of the heterosexual marriage bond.

Whether it's fornication or adultery or homosexuality or incest or prostitution it is a word that is intentionally chosen by Paul to include every element of sexual impurity outside the bonds of marriage.

Paul had to confront the cultural blindness of the church of Thessalonica. It was a church that had not only been immersed in this kind of culture because of their idolatry in the past their baggage that they brought into the Christian life but their culture was commending this kind of lifestyle.

[28:05] it was not only accepted it was commended it was condoned. Gentile members of the church would have found it difficult to understand how their conversion to the living God necessitated abandoning those pleasures especially in a culture where the norms permitted those practices.

one such individual who stood out as an authority spent some time in Thessalonica and commented this way let not pleasures always be forbidden let desire and pleasure triumph sometimes over reason.

In Greek society a man who owned female slaves could use them as his own human property to satisfy his sexual appetites not only was a single person commended to this kind of lifestyle but married people as well.

Demosthenes expressed the social opinions regarding sexuality that continued to prevail when he says quote mistresses we keep for our sake of pleasure concubines for the daily care of our persons but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households end quote.

In many cases the culture of Thessalonica is no different from the culture of the 21st century America. I thought about giving some statistics this morning and opening the door to help you appreciate the magnitude of this issue but for the sake of not leading you into sin by thinking about those things just it's very clear it confronts you on a day by day basis it is virtually inescapable not only the accessibility on the internet in our music in our videos in movies on TV but in the grocery store in the places of business that you're in it is virtually inescapable and because of that it is also commended by our culture to indulge yourself in any form of pleasure you wish as long as it doesn't hurt somebody around you so we have given way to cultural philosophies we have allowed our hearts and lives to be filled with compromise and we have allowed these things to enter into our lives unchecked

[31:01] Paul says abstain from sexual immorality in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 22 he says it this way he says put off your old self and in Colossians chapter 3 verse 5 he says put to death what is earthly in you have nothing to do with it chop it off throw it away have nothing to do with it again Paul emphasizes the same point in every passage let your life be consistent with your calling you've been called by a gospel that commends holiness you've been called by a God who is holy and you're called to emulate his character but it's not enough to put off we must also fill the void with something else and that's when we're encouraged to put on holiness we see that in this next section not only to abstain from sexual immorality but to know how to control your body in holiness in honor and

I would describe it this way put on holiness in a passage that is strikingly similar we find in 2nd Timothy chapter 2 almost a carbon copy of the same language and the same words the Greek words that are used in Paul's exhortation to Timothy this young man he says therefore if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable he will be a vessel same word that we find body in 1st Thessalonians he will be a vessel for honorable use again timme honorable use set apart as holy this is the word *hagia* so we find again in 1st Thessalonians chapter 4 useful to the master of the house ready for every good work so flee youthful passions that's the the lusts that we find in the next verse in 1st

Thessalonians chapter 4 and pursue here we are pursue righteousness put on faith and love and peace along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart Paul never argues that sexual desires are wrong they are appropriate in the marriage relationship they are good and healthy in a marriage relationship but they must be exercised and they must be affirmed within the appropriate context that God has given them to us notice the qualifying word that he uses here coming back to 1st Thessalonians chapter 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor not in the passions of lust like the

Gentiles who do not know God Paul wants this church to understand the significance of reigning in their appetites and exercising those appetites in a way that is exemplary and holy and commendable but notice how this is done that each of you know how to control his own body and holiness and honor not in the passions of lust like the Gentiles and what's the next phrase who do not know God it begins with your thinking the battle against lust begins in your mind notice in verse 4 4 that each of you know and then in verse 5 who do not know

God and then in verse 8 whoever disregards this disregards God the root cause of lust is unbelief in God and how you act with regard to sexual passion points to what you truly know and points to what you truly believe the only way to overcome is to grow in knowledge in love for God Ephesians chapter 4 verses 22 and 24 puts it this way put off your old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupted through deceitful desires and be renewed notice that word be renewed in the spirit of your mind learn to think differently learn to love God more and to put on the new self created after the likeness of

[36:27] God in true righteousness and holiness in Colossians chapter 3 10 he says much the same thing and have put on the new self which is being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator true faith leads to true knowledge and then true affection of God the battle for purity is a battle that begins in your mind it's a battle that begins with an understanding of who God is a battle that begins with an affection for

God and a desire to know him more but then it moves to this final thing a pursuing love God's will will bear out in our sexual purity if we are people who are pursuing love says in verse six that no one transgress or wrong his brother in this matter now

Paul gets really practical your actions impact the family of God he wants you to understand that there is no such thing as secret sin that doesn't affect the people around you in one way or the other they will be affected!

and secondly he wants them to understand that this is not an issue that God doesn't care about interest in your sexual purity and notice to what degree it says at the end of verse 6 the Lord is an avenger in all of these things God takes personal issue with those who choose to live outside of his calling of sanctification so pursue holiness by pursuing love we're called to do this more and more we see this connection of doing this more and more in connection with love in chapter 3 and then in this small section in chapter 4 verses 9 to 12 it says love more and more let your love abound and here in chapter 4 verses 1 to 8 he says!

Be holy more and more holiness and love as I've been trying to articulate this morning go hand in hand pursuing love is a way for us to pursue holiness learning to love in the way that God has commended in other words it's not just about reading your Bible not just about memorizing the scripture or not just about knowing more information but knowledge that is bolstered and reinforced by love and action and life change does your knowledge of God lead you to more service does your knowledge of God lead you to want to give more of yourself to others around you does knowledge of God help to temper your responses to wife or children is it helping you to grow in gentleness and affection for the lost this holiness of

God leads you to a deeper love for the unbelievers! in your community there is a agonizing in your heart for those who do not know God that's the kind of holiness that we're talking about the holiness that leads you to deeper and fuller commitments of love for those that God has placed in your path but also to a deeper delight in God himself a deeper hunger for the scriptures and that's what we've been talking about all year this abiding relationship with God this affection for him that takes you deeper into knowledge of him through his word this abiding relationship that yields fruitfulness and finally in verses 7 to 8 it is God's will for you that you be saved your salvation here's what's at stake we find in verse 7 and 8 for

[40:56] 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 a really unexpected phrase we find in verse 7 God has not called us for impurity but in holiness wouldn't you expect he would call us to holiness why in holiness it's because the holy one who calls you is God himself a character of purity and righteousness and in holiness he is calling you to be unified with him which would mean that you are working to allow the spirit to accomplish sanctification in your life and to lead you as well to holiness is if his calling is in holiness then he also demands a commitment to holiness the

Bible makes this crystal clear there are verses upon verses that describe what we're talking about this morning the first is Galatians 5 19 now the works of the flesh are evident sexual immorality which is this word pornea that we've been talking about impurity and sensuality I warn you as I warned you before that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God

Ephesians chapter 5 verse 3 but sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you as is proper among the saints for you can be sure of this that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or who is covetous that is in idolatry has no inheritance!

inheritance in the kingdom of God in Christ and in the words of Jesus himself in Matthew chapter 5 Jesus says have you heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart if your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and throw it away for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell and if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell is the message clear this morning from the word of God it is penetratingly clear that God will have nothing to do with those who allow a pattern of sexual impurity to continue to work itself out in their life so what do we do

I'll close with this 1 Timothy chapter 6 verses 11 to 12 1 Timothy 6 11 and 12 this is the key but as for you oh man flee these things and pursue righteousness godliness faith love and steadfastness and gentleness fight the good fight of faith take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses the answer for our daily lives is to fight the fight of faith it is not a one time fight it is not a one time decision it is an ongoing decision to continue to live and abide in the faith in God faith doesn't just save you for the moment but faith is what God uses to continue to work in our life to call our attention to the fact that God will satisfy our inmost desires and help to clear away our anxieties if we trust him day by day the fight of faith is a fight that continues day by day it is the battle against unbelief that God is calling us to wage there is not a separate objective there is just one there are not two battles the one that gets you saved through faith and the other that gets you rewards in heaven through works faith is what carries us into salvation and faith is what carries us to the destination it's what gets us started and it's what gets us there as we continue to grow in faith in God and knowledge of him the way to fight lust is by feeding faith with a knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God so if knowing God is the way to push out all of this other stuff then I want God in deeper and fuller ways I want to know him more in my life so that I can please him in the way I live let's pray as I can