

Faith that Works

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada. You are free to use this mp3 audio file and to redistribute it to others without alteration and without charge. After the sermon, listen for more information about St. John's Shaughnessy Church and the St. John's website. The following message is from the February 18, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of 1 Thessalonians, the fourth chapter, verses 1 to 12. The title of the message is Faith

That Works. Can I encourage you to open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, please, on page 192. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 1 to 12. This is one of the key passages in the New Testament on sexual purity. And we're looking at it not because this week we celebrated Valentine's Day, nor because they landed some module on the asteroid Eros, nor because this day in the church here is called Sexagesima. But it has to do with the fact that the Christian faith is about more than what we believe but how we behave. And the sermon has a parental guidance warning of about 12 years of age. Are there any children here? When we finished chapter 3, you remember it finished in this way. Just look at verse 12, please, and 13.

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. And it sounds very elevated and religious.

And when we come to chapter 4, we discover that holiness is intensely practical. Holiness is not about monastic withdrawal. It's not about freeing ourselves for the tranquility of pursuing my own inner journey. Holiness is about how we live day by day and how we engage with one another. It's not about removing myself from the cares and worries of others. Holiness is worked out in relationships and particularly our sexuality. And it may be this is one of the key areas of weakness for us as evangelicals. We are known as people who preach the gospel, but I wonder if we are known as those who live the gospel. And what is so striking about this chapter is how basic the teaching on sexual holiness is to the gospel itself. The church in Thessalonica could not be any more than a couple of months old and yet throughout the passage the apostle says, we have already taught you this.

We have already instructed you in this. Verse 1, you learned this from us. Verse 2, we gave you these instructions etc. In other words, what Paul teaches us here is part of the very primary and rudimentary instructions he used to give believers.

[3 : 40] The Thessalonians had received the great good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. They had turned from serving idols to serve the living and true God. And they had begun to live the new life in Christ. And that new life in Christ has a discernible shape and pattern which comes directly from God himself.

And one of the marks of being a Christian is that holiness becomes strangely attractive and we begin to hunger for it. Holiness, not morality, it's very different. Holiness is seeking to live our lives open in the presence of God.

And that's why Paul locates this passage within the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verses 1 and 2. Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that as you learned from us how you must live, literally, and to please God, just as you are doing, do so more and more.

For you know what instructions or commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus. In other words, the Christian life is life lived under the control of the Lord Jesus.

What basically drives the Christian person is not so much what's happening in the culture roundabout, that's terribly important. It comes from Jesus himself. And one of the key and perhaps first areas where Christians show how different they are from those roundabout them is in the sexual area.

[5 : 06] And I think the key to the entire passage is in verse 1 where Paul urges us very simply to live to please God.

Because you can't reduce the Christian life to a list of do's and don'ts or rules or right and wrongs. The Christian life is far more than that. It's seeking to live our lives in the presence of God.

I wish I could tell you the freedom there is in this. I lived for years relating to God on rules and the basis of rules. My life was bounded by what I thought I should do, shouldn't do, could do, couldn't do.

And rules give you the mistaken impression that you are in control. You see the lines are very clear, although I was never very good at keeping within the lines. But it was a wonderful day when I discovered this idea of pleasing God.

Because it's a shift in focus away from my performance and what I'm doing onto the person of God himself. If you live to please God, this is how Jesus described his life. He always lives to please God and it ought to be true.

[6 : 09] It ought to be the direction that all of us are heading. There's no circumstance in which we find ourselves where this is not to be true. We live to please God. And in verses 3 to 8 the apostle applies this to sexual purity.

And in verse 3 we read another key word. Let me read it to you. This is the will of God, your sanctification, literally your holiness, that you abstain from unchastity.

He begins with the positive. This is God's will, your holiness, your ongoing holiness. And then the negative, that you abstain from unchastity or immorality.

Good preachers never quote Greek in their sermons. So I want to tell you the Greek word for unchastity or immorality. And it is the Greek word *porneia* from which we get pornography.

And *porneia* is a broad term that was used in New Testament times to refer, we have references referring to these things, prostitution, sexual relations between those who have not been married to each other, adultery, incest, homosexuality and pedophilia.

[7 : 26] Jesus uses the word to describe the lusts that come out and arise from within us. And in the book of Acts, in chapter 15, the Council of Jerusalem writing to new Gentile Christians says to them that we ought to avoid idolatry, murder and *porneia*.

And I know that we live in a culture that's saturated with sex. I was watching television last week and IKEA is using sex to sell their furniture.

But I want to tell you that the new Christians in Thessalonica were immersed in a culture which was far more sexually confused and corrupt. I quote Demosthenes who writes for Greek men when he says, The prostitutes we have for our pleasure, the slave women the word means for the daily care of our bodies and our wives so that we have legitimate children and true guardian for the house.

Herodotus tells us, the Greek scholar, that once in her life every woman had to sacrifice herself to the goddess by giving her body to a stranger in a temple precinct.

And Paul is likely writing this letter from Corinth and if you read through the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, you'll know that the church struggled with just about every sexual deviation going.

[8 : 49] And yet he writes to these new Christians and he says, This is the will of God for you, your holiness, that you abstain from porneia. Several years ago we had Bishop John Reed visit with us.

Bishop Reed is a missionary in Nepal and he told the story of the great privilege that he had of being the second Christian to visit with a tribal group high in the mountains. A young woman had come out from the tribe and gone back in and taken the gospel of Jesus Christ and the elders had wanted to know more and they invited Bishop Reed and a number of others back.

On the second night the tribe decided to follow Jesus together and as often happens in tribes they made the decision all in one. They celebrated communion for the first time.

Bishop Reed said at the meeting that he stayed for another five days teaching them late into the night and getting up early in the morning and teaching them. As we drove home together from church I asked him what it was that he had been teaching them.

And he said to me that almost every question that he was asked revolved around the issues of marriage, kinship and sexual behaviour. It is as though when the gospel first goes into a new culture this is one of the first areas most affected.

[10 : 09] And we live in a culture that prides itself on sexual freedom. Where sexual expression has been raised to be an essential part of human fulfilment.

And when we hear that God's will is our holiness we begin to wonder if we can ever be human and Christian. But of course Jesus himself was single and sexually pure and no one has ever been more fully human.

So what does holiness look like in action? Well in verses 4 and 5 the apostle draws a very simple contrast. Verse 4, each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like the nations or the heathen who do not know God.

The apostle says we either view our sexuality in terms of my own self satisfaction or in terms of serving God and serving my marriage partner.

It's not enough for us to say that God created the gift of sex to be expressed only within marriage. What this passage is saying to us is that holiness also has to do with the way marriage partners relate to one another in honour and in holiness.

[11 : 23] You see the Christian view is that marriage is not licensed lust. It's not suddenly you get someone in your life who is there to satisfy your every sexual need. Christian marriage is not meant to be mutual manipulation where I'm going to meet your needs so that you meet mine.

It's honouring in holiness. And that means there can be no cruelty or force or violence within the marriage. Nothing dishonouring to the other partner.

Marriage does not legitimate my every selfish desire. Marriage is the arena where I am to honour my partner by serving them. And that includes in the arena of my sexuality.

See what he's saying is how we express our sexuality within marriage is just as much part of pleasing God as how we express our sexuality outside of marriage.

Should I say that again? Lust is essentially self-serving and self-seeking whereas holiness means that what I'm doing is I'm seeking to serve others.

[12 : 35] And we can do that with our sexuality whether we are married or single, whether we are old or whether we are young. And the apostle makes this crystal clear in verse 6 where he says, But no one transgress or wrong his brother or sister in this matter.

The Lord is an avenger in all these things as we solemnly forewarned you. The apostle is speaking about sexual behaviour within marriage. When he uses the word transgress the word literally means crossing a boundary, moving over a line, moving into territory that's not your own.

And the word to wrong is from the word greed. It's the desire to possess more than I should, taking advantage of the other person. You should know the New Testament is very frank about marriage.

It's very open about the fact that we are all broken and we all struggle. And it urges Christians to address their struggles and their problems.

Not to pretend they're not there. But to never do anything incompatible with honouring the other. Either by demanding or by withholding.

[13 : 46] Keep your finger in 1 Thessalonians 4 and turn back to 1 Corinthians for a moment please. Turn left. 1 Corinthians chapter 7, page 159.

Reading from verse 3 of chapter 7. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband.

For the wife does not rule over her own body. The husband does. And here's the shock in the Greek culture. Likewise the husband does not rule over his own body. The wife does.

Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.

He's saying that sexual activity within marriage is to be focused on the other person. The great paradox of course is that satisfaction comes when you're seeking to satisfy someone else. Seeking to please God in your marriage means paying careful attention to nurturing and cherishing it.

[14 : 56] If your partner is Christian I think as Paul says here at least means praying together. Bronwyn and I have never had a regular habit of praying together. We pray on our own.

It's probably my reaction to all the rules that I grew up with. In the first twenty years of our marriage we would only pray together in emergencies. Or when we were trying to teach the boys how to pray.

About a year ago some friends of ours came to stay with us and we were very moved by how they prayed together each day. And we still have not managed to pray together daily but we do now do it a couple of times a week.

It's not that we're having emergencies a couple of times a week. And I tell you that because we'd been married twenty years before we really tried to do it. Pray together and it's never too late to start.

The Bible's view is that every marriage has major cracks in it. The issue is not whether you have difficulties but how you deal with them.

[15 : 58] And I think sometimes it's made more difficult if we're Christian. There's a stigma to this. And so we kind of settle down into unhelpful patterns. And we begin to think there's something wrong with my partner. And the Bible says that's okay because there's something wrong with you too.

It says we need to be attentive to one another romantically and sexually and prayerfully. And it may be helpful to make a comment about the internet. You know the University of Victoria has just conducted a landmark study.

And it's called ominously, Sexuality on the Internet from Sexual Exploration to Pathological Expression. And it describes a new pathology, a new compulsion, a new addiction.

The internet is fast becoming a huge conduit for temptation and a breeding ground for infidelity. From pornography to chat rooms.

They calculate that as many as 10% of people who use the internet are caught in a self-destructive spiral. Men and women, single and married. And what does the Bible say to us? Verse 7.

[17 : 05] For God has not called us for uncleanness but in holiness. Therefore whoever who disregards this disregards not man but God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

It's very difficult speaking on sexuality to such a diverse group. There are some of us here this morning who feel tempted to feel self-righteous.

Others of us are tempted to feel self-despair. And I want to point all of you to that luminous last phrase in verse 8 where God gives his Holy Spirit to you.

You know in the Greek it is in the ongoing present tense. It means literally God is now continuously hour by hour, minute by minute giving you his Holy Spirit.

That's very important you see because sexual disobedience makes us feel unclean, unforgivable, isolated. What the Apostle is saying is that God is extending his forgiveness to us again in the person of his Holy Spirit.

[18 : 10] And if you've begun lying to your partner or if you're in a self-destructive spiral or if you're dishonouring your partner or if you're involved in immorality or unchastity and porneia, the Bible says turn away from the sin and turn back to God for this very good reason that he is giving to you his Holy Spirit, the fresh start, complete forgiveness and the desire to change.

See what binds us together as a church is not our success in this area or any other area but our failure. That's why we come forward together and kneel at the communion table and receive the bread and the wine.

It's proof that none of us deserves forgiveness any more or any less than anyone else. And I think that is exactly why the Apostle writes verses 9 and 10 in this context.

He says concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have anyone to write to you for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. Indeed you love all the brethren throughout Macedonia and we exhort you brethren do so more and more.

You see the Christian community is meant to be a safe place for all of us who are struggling to be Holy. For those who are struggling with porneia, for those who are struggling with self-righteousness, doesn't matter really.

[19 : 33] The point is we're not meant to struggle on our own. We need to love one another and accept one another and that's the way God has arranged the church. Those of you who are older need to help those who are younger.

You can be a great help to us. And our teens are under tremendous pressure in this area. You should know that week by week when the teens go out they study the same passage that we look at here in church.

And over the next month they will be attending a conference dealing with these issues and their struggle. We need to pray for them together. Wouldn't it be great if St John's were the kind of place where we could let our masks down within our groups.

Where we could build healthy friendships. Where we could stop pretending we've got it all together. And stop helping one another struggle with those areas where we feel so weak.

You know I'm very glad that at St John's we have a group called Women at St John's. And there's a women's retreat. I've often wondered why there's no men at St John's. Or there's no men's retreat where we could go away together and do blokey things and share our struggles.

[20 : 41] I leave it up to you. Let me say two things by way of conclusion. And they're both about pleasing God. First is this. Pleasing God is about direction not perfection.

Do you notice that twice in the passage the Apostle encourages his readers to do so more and more. He says please God, live to please God as you're doing but do it more and more. And love one another as you're doing but do it more and more.

In other words holiness is not an exam grade that you suddenly pass. Holiness is a direction. It's living in relation to God. It's seeking to serve God. It's honouring his word. It's abstaining from porneia.

And although we struggle and fail God continually, pleasing God means seeking to obey him despite the failures in the most intimate circumstances of our lives.

And finally and secondly, pleasing God begins with receiving his Holy Spirit. Do you remember the story that Jesus told about a young man who took his father's money and squandered it in a far country and ended up working in a pigsty eating what the pigs ate and stinking of pig.

[21 : 56] And when he came to his senses he returned to his father and when his father met him, the father did the father say, you stink of pig, would you get yourself cleaned up before I welcome you?

No, no, he didn't. He ran and embraced him and kissed him and only then did he clean him up and give him a fresh robe and feast with him.

And I say that because God is offering his Holy Spirit to us now. And if you will allow God to embrace you by his Holy Spirit and make you his, he will clean you.

So that as we come forward and receive these physical gifts of bread and wine, let us feed on Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving and so receive his Holy Spirit afresh.

Let's bow our heads for a moment. Our Father and our God, make our love increase and overflow for each other. Establish us and make our hearts blameless and holy in your presence.

[23 : 04] So that when our Lord Jesus comes with his Holy Ones, we may be with him. In his name we pray. Amen. This MP3 sermon, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

That address is www.stjohns.org On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this Sermon on the Web has helped you, and that you will share it with others. Thank you.