

A Life that Pleases God
1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Today, as we continue our journey through 1 Thessalonians, we come to an uncomfortable passage. In some senses it is uncomfortable to preach and I'm sure in some ways it will be uncomfortable to hear.

As we head into this passage, I want to say a word about what I believe God's heart is when He communicates these things to us through the Apostle Paul. I don't think he is the stern parent standing in front of a child wagging an angry finger issuing decrees as He gives these instructions. I think God is like the loving parent who sits down on the side of a child's bed at bedtime and gently shares His concerns. He shares what he shares out of love. Keep that image in mind as we look at this passage today.

I also wanted to say a word about my heart as well. I'm not standing here wagging a finger either. Jesus said that the one who is without sin can cast the first stone. Well, I can cast no stones here today. None of us can. We all come to this topic with a level of brokenness and failure. But we do not have to be forever marked by that brokenness and failure. Because of Christ, we can actually live lives that please God. And so let's look at this passage together.

Transition:

Steve mentioned last week that up to this point in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he has been primarily encouraging and giving thanks for them. But as we come to chapter 4, Paul begins to instruct and the first thing we see here is that he exhorts them to:

I. Keep Pursuing a Life that Pleases God (4:1-2)

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more.² For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

On one hand Paul makes a gentle *request*, but on the other he exhorts with apostolic authority. What he exhorts them to is found at the end of verse one – to *excel still more*.

Paul had taught them when they were in Thessalonica how to live so as to please God. Part of his teaching ministry dealt with the ethical demands of the Gospel. And he affirms their progress in these things. He says, we taught you how to walk and *you actually do walk* in this way. But he says there is room for growth so *excel still more*.

In verse 2, he appeals to what they already know – *You know what commandments we gave you*. This is not new information; it is what we have already taught *by the authority of the Lord Jesus*.

As we see Paul exhorting people who are really doing quite well in the Christian walk to excel still more, I think there is a principle for us and that is that no matter how much we obey God and no matter how much we have grown, there is always room for more growth. We never come to the end of this journey of growth. We can keep pursuing a life that is more and more pleasing to God.

And so, verses 1–2 serve as a general introduction to several things that Paul is going to remind them of in the rest of the letter. As we come to verse 3, we find the first topic which Paul wants to remind them. He tells them that:

II. **A Life of Growing Holiness Pleases God (4:3-8)**

Paul says:

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;

Ever want to know what the will of God is? Paul couldn't be clearer. It is *your sanctification*. This is what pleases God.

Back in 3:13, Paul talked about a state or condition of holiness before God when Jesus returns. *Sanctification* is very similar in meaning; however, here it refers to a process leading to a state of holiness. The NIV's translation, "you should be sanctified" captures this idea of process. Paul is saying that God's will is that you be in a process of being more and more formed into the character of God himself. Holiness is defined by God and His character and so sanctification is a process of more and more putting on and sharing God's character. When we pursue sanctification, this pleases God. It is what He wants for us.

Now, Paul goes on and says a couple of things about how we can pursue this kind of life and he also says a couple of things that result when we do. First he says that you:

A. Pursue a life of holiness by avoiding sexual immorality (4:3)

Paul is specifically calling them to holiness in terms of how they handle their sexuality. They are to *abstain from sexual immorality*. Sanctification is broader than just avoiding sexual sin, but that is the area of sanctification that Paul focuses on here.

It is understandable that Paul needed to address this because the believers in the church at Thessalonica came out of a culture that was very permissive regarding sex. There were many forms of extra-marital sex that were tolerated and even encouraged. A man might have a mistress; slavery made it easy to have a concubine; casual gratification was easy to come by through prostitutes. There were even some cultic religious rituals that sanctioned intercourse with temple prostitutes (Word Biblical Commentary, 82).

Paul says, however, that it doesn't matter what the culture believes; what matters is God's will and God's will is your sanctification; that is that you abstain from *sexual immorality*. The term that is translated, *sexual immorality*, is a general term that includes all types of sexual sin – prostitution, adultery, fornication; which is intercourse between unmarried people. All of these things are to be completely avoided because they are sexually immoral.

If Paul were writing this letter today, I think addressing sexual immorality would be at the top of the list just it is here, because like Thessalonian culture, our culture has become very permissive about sex. Culturally, we no longer have a biblical view of sex. The biblical view of sex is that it is a good gift of God to be enjoyed, but only in the context of a marriage commitment. Any other use of sex is what Paul calls *sexual immorality*.

We need to understand that God doesn't limit sex to marriage because He wants to rob us of pleasure. No, He wants to overwhelm us with deep and lasting pleasure that only comes when we use sex as He intends – in the commitment of marriage.

In a culture that believes that if it feels good “do it” were really need understand God's heart about this. He loves us and He wants what is best for us. Just like a loving parents who build a fence around a backyard with busy streets around it to protect their children and to keep them off the streets where they could get hurt and to provide a great place to play; God too has built a fence. The “fence” of sex only in marriage comes from God's heart of love to provide and protect for us. He wants to provide for us intimate, honest, safe, fulfilling marriages. And, He wants to protect us from things like STDs, unplanned pregnancies and guilt.

Young people, if you could hear and see some of the people I've counseled over my 20-some years of ministry who are full of guilt and feel such regret because they have stepped outside this fence of sex only in marriage you would know the wisdom of staying inside the fence. The fence is given because God loves you.

And so Paul reminds the Thessalonians about the fence. If they want to pursue a life of holiness they need to abstain from sexual immorality. That's the negative command on how we pursue holiness, but Paul goes on to give the positive side of pursuing holiness. In verse 4, He says you:

B. Pursue a life of holiness by controlling your body (4:4-5)

⁴ that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵ not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

Vessel is a word that can literally mean either “body” or “wife.” You probably have a note to that effect in the margin of your Bible. If it means “wife” then Paul is saying that a wholesome marriage is the antidote to sexual immorality. Paul would then be saying

that unmarried men should acquire a wife for this purpose. But it seems unlikely that Paul would give a prescription that would apply to just this group – unmarried men.

I think Paul is using *vessel* in the same way he uses it in 2 Timothy 2:20-21 where he writes:

²⁰ Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. ²¹ Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Here he clearly uses it to refer to a person's body. I believe that Paul is saying that each person is to know, or to learn, how to control his body. He is talking about having self-control; a self-control that is with *sanctification and honor*, which is in contrast to the *Gentiles* who lived with *lustful passion*. *Lustful passion* is a desire, a craving, for things of a sexual nature that are forbidden. This is not the way a follower of Christ is to use his body; rather he is to control his body in *sanctification and honor*.

I think possessing one's body in *sanctification* means that we recognize that our body is not our own; it belongs to God and it to be used for purposes. Possessing one's body in *honor*, on the other hand, seems to relate to living in a way that is right in terms of how we deal with other people. It is living in a way that gives rather than takes. *Lustful passion* is all about taking; but one who controls himself in honor gives instead of takes.

If we don't have this kind of control over our bodies, Paul says we will be *like the Gentiles who do not know God*. But in their case their *lustful passion* at least makes some sense because they don't know God. We do. We are not ignorant of God and what He desires for us.

And so if we want to be the kind of person who pleases God we will pursue being a person who handles our body with sanctification and honor. We will seek to live in a way that is right before God and that is right before others. This pleases God.

Now, as we come to verse 6, Paul is not moving on to another area of obedience. He is still talking about sexual morality. He talks about the results of a life that pleases God. He says that:

C. If you pursue a life of holiness you avoid hurting people (4:6)

Paul writes:

⁶ and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

The *matter* that Paul is speaking of here is the matter that is currently under discussion – sexual immorality. To *transgress* is to cross a boundary that one should not. It's like walking onto someone else's private property. To *defraud* is to take advantage of someone else; to cheat them. When a person is involved in sexual immorality, he transgresses and defrauds his brother.

Let me mention one example of this. If a married person is in an adulterous relationship then the adulterous spouse is transgressing. If it is a man, he is crossing a boundary that he should not in being with another woman. And he is defrauding his wife of the trust and security and intimacy that God intends them to have in their marriage. Those are things that rightfully should be hers in the marriage, but he wrongly takes them from her. And in terms of the woman he is with, he is defrauding her husband if she is married, or if she is not married, he is defrauding and cheating her future husband of what is rightfully his. The same kind of thing happens if unmarried people are involved in sexual immorality.

Anytime a person is involved in sex outside of marriage someone is trespassed against and defrauded and people are hurt. They are deeply hurt. I've seen this in my counseling ministry. You can't imagine the pain. *No man* should do this Paul says. And he gives a very sober warning why - *because the Lord is the avenger in all these things*. Someone might think, "I can hide this behavior. No one will ever know." But God knows and Jesus is the avenger in all these things.

But, if we pursue a life of holiness and use sex as God intended then we won't hurt people. So, pursue a life of holiness.

As we move on to verse 7, Paul gives another reason why we should pursue holiness. He says:

D. If you pursue a life of holiness you live consistent with your calling (4:7-8)

⁷ For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.

God called us that we might pursue sanctification. To be involved in sexual immorality goes against our calling. He didn't call us for the *purpose of impurity*. No, we have been called to become more and more holy – to share God's nature. We have been called *in sanctification*.

Paul then says in verse 8:

⁸ Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

When he says *rejects this* he is talking about God's call on us to pursue a life of holiness. If we reject the purpose of our calling and don't pursue holiness, then we are not

rejecting man, we are rejecting God. These instructions are not ultimately from Paul; they have their source in God. And so to disobey is not just disobeying Paul; it is disobeying God Himself the One who gives us His Holy Spirit.

The point here is that God not only calls us to live holy lives; He has made it possible by giving us his Holy Spirit to live within us. He has not left us alone in this battle; He has given us His Spirit to give us power to pursue sanctification. And so, if we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, pursue holiness then we are living in a way that is consistent with our calling. And that pleases God.

And so, I ask you today, do you want to please God? I truly believe that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ that God has put this desire deep within your heart. You live to please God. It is what you truly want.

Some of you here today, out of this desire are pursuing sanctification; you are abstaining from sexual immorality. Not always because it is easy, but because you know it is God's will for you and that it pleases Him. I think God's word to you would be to excel still more. Keep at it. Keep growing. The journey never stops.

Others of you would say that in terms of sexual immorality, you are not acting out with other people, but there are things going on in terms of your thought life that are not right. You know that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that God is not just concerned with our outward actions, He is concerned even with the life of our minds (Matt. 5:27-28). We are to pursue holiness even to that level. All of our thoughts are to be free of sexual immorality.

I know that this is not easy. We live in a culture in which we are inundated with words and images and thoughts that make holiness in the life of our mind very difficult. Paul would tell us, "Abstain!" Don't allow your minds to be filled with impure things. Be careful about the movies you watch or the books you read. Don't go places on the internet that are impure.

Honestly, I think the internet is one of the most destructive things when it comes to pursuing holiness and so let me mention a helpful resource. If you don't know, there are internet monitoring programs that allow you to be accountable to someone for what you are viewing on the internet. Every site you visit is recorded and then an accountability record is sent to an accountability partner. As a matter of policy here at the church, all of us men have a program called Covenant Eyes installed on our computers (For more information you can go to www.covenanteyes.com). I use it at home too. We want to be accountable because we want to be pleasing to God and we want to pursue holiness.

Now, I know there is another group of people who are here today for whom, unfortunately, sexual immorality is not just something in the life of your mind – you are involved. It might be an adulterous relationship; or it might be that neither of you are married, but you are involved in a sexual relationship. If you want to please God, in fact the ONLY

way you CAN please God, is to stop. Get out of that relationship. You are trespassing. You are defrauding. You are not walking consist with your calling to holiness.

Getting out of that relationship might not be easy. It will probably not be something you can do on your own. I would encourage you to go to a trusted friend and tell them. Ask for their help. Or come to Steve or to me and tell us and let us help you. But get out of that now. Abstain from sexual immorality. Stop hurting people.

There is one last group that I want to speak to. There are those who have been involved in sexual immorality, but you have stopped. You've turned away from it. You've confessed it to God and maybe a friend. But even though you've done that the burden of guilt weighs heavy. You wonder if God can ever truly love you again. I would say to you, God never stopped. He loves you. He LOVES YOU. He forgives you.

He is the father in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Do you remember how the son who had lived in such rebellion came back to the Father? He came back hoping that he might be able to be treated as a servant in his father house. But what did the father do? He embraced him. He kissed him. He put a beautiful robe on him and he called him his son. When you came back to God that is how He received you. You are his beloved child. You do not have to be forever marked by your sin. It is forgiven. Because of the blood of Christ, you are washed clean and you can continue to pursue a life that pleases God as you pursue holiness.

Amen