

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

Many of you know, I grew up in a Christian home. My parents loved me and sought to nurture my life in Christ. They tried to protect me from things that would harm me in anyway and yet, one day as a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grader, I was hanging out with some friends after school and we went to one of my friend's houses and in his backyard they had a little clubhouse and in that clubhouse his older brothers had a stash of pornographic magazines. I wished that that day had never happened and yet it did. And so when I really started to pursue my relationship with Jesus as a freshman in college, this whole area of purity was an issue that had to be addressed in my life.

The reality is that for most of us, this is an area that needs to be addressed at some level. No longer do we have to stumble into these things over at a friend's house. It is everywhere through the Internet and computers and smart phones. We live in a day where so many around us don't have biblical values about sex and how our sexuality is to be expressed. Ideas contrary to God's will are celebrate and promoted. We live in a culture that is awash in this.

And so when we come to this area of sexual integrity, most of us have experienced some level of brokenness and failure. Some of us live with a great sense of guilt and shame because of choices we've made. Some live with a sense of hopelessness of ever really obeying God in this area and we are tempted to give up. Is it even possible to obey God in this area given the world in which we live? And some of you wonder if it really matters that much if you fully obey in this area.

It does matter. All sin matters. All sin is a serious. All sin is destructive. But having said that there is something about sexual sin that seems to have greater capacity than all others to destroy lives and relationships. It matters.

Today we are looking at 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. Up to this point in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he has been primarily encouraging and giving thanks for them, because of the health that he saw in them. As we come to chapter 4, Paul begins to give instructions that will help them to continue to grow as a healthy church. In the first two verses of chapter 4, Paul talks about a core motivation that will apply to all of the instructions that he will give them in the remainder of the letter. We are going to look at this core motivation and then at the first area of instruction that Paul gives to the church at Thessalonica.

**A Core Motivation: Pleasing God (vv. 1-2)**

*<sup>1</sup> Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*

When Paul first brought the gospel to the Thessalonians he taught them how to live so as to please God. In his letter now, he affirms their progress in these things. They were walking in a way that pleased God. They were living out the *instructions* that Paul had given them *through the Lord Jesus*. But there is room for growth and so he urges them to *do so more and more*. No matter how much we are obeying, we never come to the end of our journey of spiritual growth in this life. And so we are to keep pursuing a life that is more and more pleasing to God.

Now, in the next verses Paul is going to give some specific areas in which we are to seek to please God, but before we look at the first area, I want to sit with this idea of pleasing God for just a little bit, because it is really important. At the heart of the Christian life is a relationship. The heart of the Christian life is not a set of rules to obey. It is a relationship with a God who created you and who loves you dearly.

If your core motivation in the Christian life is just to keep rules that will not be sufficient. We need a higher and grander motivation than just keeping rules. Power for obedience lies in a genuine desire to please 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 that Paul wants to address. He tells us that we should:

### **Seek to Please God in Your Sexuality (vv. 3-8)**

*<sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;*

Ever want to know what the will of God is? It is *your sanctification*. Sanctification a process that begins the moment we trust Christ and it will continue until the day we die. It is a cooperative process with the Holy Spirit of being formed more and more into the character of Christ. That is God's will for you. And when you pursue that, that pleases God.

Now, sanctification applies to all areas of life, but Paul specifically focuses first on our sexuality. He calls us to holiness in terms of how we handle our sexuality. We are to *abstain from sexual immorality* and we are to *control* [our bodies] *in holiness and honor*.

The term that is translated, *sexual immorality*, is a general term that includes all types of sexual sin – prostitution, adultery and intercourse between unmarried people. All of these things are to be avoided because they are sexually immoral.

Now, the believers in the church at Thessalonica lived in a culture that tolerated and even encouraged many forms of sex outside of marriage. Their culture did not have a biblical view of sexuality and so this issue was vital to address. And if Paul were writing today, I think address-

ing how we handle our sexuality would continue to be at the top of the list, because our culture does not have a biblical view of sexual morality.

The biblical view of sex is that it is a good gift of God to be enjoyed, between a man and a woman in the context of a marriage commitment. Any other use of sex is what Paul calls *sexual immorality*. God doesn't limit sex to marriage because He wants to rob us or because He is down on sex. He is not down on sex. It was His idea! He created it! And He wants us to use our sexuality in ways that will give us the deepest joy. He wants to overwhelm us with intimacy and pleasure that only comes when we use sex as He intends, which is in the committed relationship of marriage. In brief, that's the biblical view of sex.

Our culture tells us that the biblical view of sex is archaic and restrictive and repressive. Our culture tells us that we will find the most happiness when we throw off the biblical restraints. Our culture tells us that if it feels right it must be right.

As we consider the biblical view, we need understand God's heart. He wants what's best for us. Just like a loving parent who builds a fence around a backyard to keep her kids safe from busy streets and to provide a great place to play; God has built a "fence." The "fence" of sex-only-in-marriage comes from God's heart to provide and protect for us. He wants to provide for us intimate, honest, safe, fulfilling marriages. He wants to protect us from guilt and shame and heartbreak.

Young people, you've got choices to make about whether you are going to trust God and stay inside the fence or if you are going listen to the culture and step outside the fence. If you could hear some of the pain I've seen in my office as I've counseled people either one-on-one or in pre-marital counseling who 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 please God they needed to abstain from sexual immorality and instead learn how to *control* [their bodies] *in holiness and honor*. This pleases God.

Now, as we come to verse 6, Paul is still talking about sexual morality and He says . . .

*<sup>6</sup> that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.*

Anytime our sexuality is used in ways that God did not intend, someone is transgressed; someone is wronged. People are hurt. This is true in adultery. This is true in pre-marital sex. This is true in pornography. Some will say, "When I look at porn, I'm not hurting anyone. It is just a private act." But when anyone views pornography this is transgressing and wronging another.

By viewing porn a person is supporting an industry that hurts those enslaved by it. By viewing porn a person is supporting an industry that objectivizes and brutalizes women.

Paul says that no one should transgress and wrong another, *because the Lord is an avenger in all these things*. We must not think that we can disobey God and there not be consequences. Nothing is hidden from God. God sees. God knows. God will discipline us. But, if we pursue a life of holiness and use our sexuality as God intends we won't hurt people. So, pursue a life of holiness. This pleases God.

In verse 7, Paul says that this pursuit of holiness is our calling.

*<sup>7</sup> For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup> Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.*

To be involved in any kind of sexual immorality goes against our calling. We are called to be holy. And if we reject the purpose of our calling, then we are not disregarding man; we are disregarding God, who *gives his Holy Spirit* to us.

In giving us His Spirit, God has not left us alone in this battle. He has given us His Spirit to empower us 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. We will be living in a way that pleases God in our sexuality.

Now, I want to offer some thoughts of application. First, for those of you who ARE pursuing the kind of life that Paul describes here, way to go! It is not easy in this world. But in doing so, you are pleasing God. And you are modeling a kind of life before other believers that is need. And before those living far from God you are modeling a life that is winsome and good and that points them to God. Keep at it. And as Paul says, do so more and more. Keep seeking to please God in this area. Keep growing because the journey never stops.

Now, for those who are walking in a way that is not pleasing God in this area, I want to talk to you for a few minutes. Your struggle may be at the level of an impure thought life; it may be pornography; it may be that you are involved in a sexual relationship with someone to whom you are not married. I would suggest that first thing you need to do is to . . .

**Decide whom you want to please.** And another way to say this is, who is going to be the authority in this area of your life? The culture? Your flesh and its desires? Or God? It is not possible to walk in sin and please God. And so, you have to decide it is really is your desire to please God. Now your gut reaction might be to say, "Sure I want to please God," but do you REALLY?

I would suggest that you take some time to wrestle with this question. Think about it. Maybe you need to go for a long walk and pray about this. You may not settle this question in a day. It may take a lot of days. But work at this until you have a firm decision that you want to please

God and not your flesh. I believe that if you are a believer in Jesus, that deep within you God has placed this desire to please Him. And so the work here is getting connected to this desire.

If you sense that it isn't your honest desire, but you want to get there, then my encouragement would be to focus on getting to know God. Get to know His heart for you. He loves you. He wants what is best for you. Let a growing knowledge of God lead your heart to a place where you really do want to please Him and to walk under His authority.

Second, **confess and repent of your sexual sin.** When we are aware of sin in our lives, we are called to confess it. Don't excuse it. Don't explain it away. Go to God and confess it. This morning we are celebrating the Lord's Table. My encouragement to each one of us during this time is to confess any sexual sin of thought or deed today. Let's come clean before our Heavenly Father. Let's get real and honest with Him today.

And so we confess our sin; but we also need to repent. To repent means that you turn away from the sin. You stop doing the thing that is sinful. And this can be so hard especially with sexual sin. If you are in an immoral relationship, repentance means that you break it off. Young people, our culture says that if you are not going all the way it isn't really sex, but there are all sorts of things come short of having sex that are impure. Those things need to stop as well.

If pornography is the issue, repentance might involve getting rid of whatever you are using to access the porn. It would be a drastic thing to get rid of your smart phone, but if you really want to please God that might be exactly what needs to happen.

It may be that some of you have strayed so far from God in this area that 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.

Third, you need to **come out of hiding.** You need to tell someone about your struggle; your sin. We confess our sin to God, but it is also a powerful and freeing to confess it to a trusted friend. Shame and guilt are going to tell you that you cannot tell anyone; that it is enough to just tell God. The enemy will tell you that you are alone in your struggle; that no one else struggles like you do. Part of his strategy is to keep you isolated in your shame. But you need to know that you are not alone. Guys, other guys are struggling with porn. You are not alone. Woman, other women are struggling with porn. You are not alone. Come out of hiding. Very few people who are struggling with sin in this area can begin to walk in obedience and freedom without help

and so come out of hiding. If you don't feel that you have someone to talk to about this come talk to one of the pastors or elders. Reach out to some reach out to one of the pastors here at Faith. Talk to one of the elders.

Fourth, **get connected to a helpful community.** We all need to be connected to community. This is why we offer Life Groups. But this is going to be especially important in this struggle because recovery and healing and working out our repentance in this area happens over time. So much of our sexual brokenness is connected to our relational brokenness. And so get connected to a community of people who will love you, encourage you, pray for you and hold you accountable.

One of the groups that we have here at Faith for men is called Pure Desire. It is a yearlong group that seeks to be a community of men who are helping each other walk in sexual integrity. A new group is going to be starting very soon (this Friday I believe) and so, men, I'd encourage you to consider that. If you want more information, you can contact me. The write up for this group is in the catalog.

**Transition to Communion:** A couple of weeks ago I attended Willow Creek's Leadership Summit. During the summit, like he does every year, Bill Hybels made the statement that the church is the hope of the world. The world needs some hope right now, right? But how can we be the hope of the world if we are not healthy? How can we be the hope of the world if we are mired in sexual sin? The mission that God has given us in this world to help people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life is so important for us to be wasting our days in sexual sin.

As we go to communion today let's get serious about this. Let do business with God about this that we might be a healthy church engaged in the mission and actually being the hope that the world needs. Jesus died for us that we might be forgiven and he rose from the dead that we might walk in newness of life including our sexuality. Invite God in this time to renew you and to strengthen you in this battle.