

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 (ESV)

1 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. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3** For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4** that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, **5** not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6** 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. **7** For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8** Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Living sexually pure in a sex crazy world

70 years ago we may have been able to read this text and have some difficulties thinking of **actual real life examples** of the sins described here. But we've come a long way baby. We all need Paul's words to us this morning. We are living in a world **too much** like the one in Thessalonica. The Greek cultural influence in the Roman territories was notoriously **erotic** and **perverse**. The Christians in Thessalonica were surrounded by the same sexual craziness we are surrounded with, with a few allowed perversions that have not yet legalized in America. It was bad. It was **very** bad. Their culture, like ours, held assumptions about sex that were accepted as norms. They saw physical intimacy as just a bodily function. They thought that people should be free to experience it however they wanted to. It was highly unusual for anyone not to exercise that right. Those who did not would be viewed as if there is probably something wrong with them. It is very similar to our world.

The ancient writer Demosthenes expressed the generally amoral view of sex in the ancient Roman Empire: “We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”

David Guzik, 1 Thessalonians, David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2013), 1 Th 4:3–6a.

This gives us insight into the temptations that the Thessalonians faced. The Thessalonians' **environment** was **sexually charged** and their natural assumptions and upbringing were **spiritually immoral**. That makes

everything on this front a major battle for them. They are fighting everything that is in them, everything they have been taught, and everything their friends and neighbors say. That is the context of our text. It would not at all surprise me if the **urgency** with which Paul **approaches** this issue is because he suspected that the Thessalonians did not have **enough** urgency. This is not the kind of desire that will cure itself. This is not a godliness that will **just happen** to them. If they were not extremely intentional about not sinning, they were going to naturally fall into it. That prompted the Pastoral heart of Paul into action.

1 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.

The word for finally doesn't always mean a conclusion. It was often used as a word to indicate a change from what was being said earlier. It is a transition word.

Then Paul uses the family word- brothers. He is emphasizing their commonness with each other. This was likely a group that had little in common socially other than their belief in Christ. So Paul appeals to who they are in Christ.

we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus

The words "ask" and "urge" are caring words. They are "**come next to you to help you**" words. They are an emotional appeal. The words appeal to the relationship. These are not words like "**command**" that he will soon use. Paul starts by aligning his **concern and desire** for the Thessalonians with the truth of their relationship with the Lord Jesus. We ask you and urge you because we are under Lord Jesus's rule and so are you. We are talking to you in that realm. We are speaking to you as family members.

that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God

Here we see how Paul viewed the discipleship he was doing. This is what he was hoping to teach.

You received from us- This is what Paul was teaching. Those people who believe you can have Jesus as Savior and not as Lord aren't ministering the way Paul taught. Paul was teaching believers right off the bat how you ought to walk and please God. What this means is Paul was teaching them that following Christ is not a "decision you make" as much as it is "a life that you live". Certainly, you must **decide** to follow Christ. But the decision is not just

a decision of **which eternal destination** you would like to get to. It is not something you decide upon once and it is done. Paul never presented it like that. No. You are deciding on **a path** when you come to faith in Christ. And Christ immediately intrudes into stuff that you may **really not want intruded into** at first. He gets **really really** personal. There is no- **“that’s none of your business”** with Christ. When He **draws us** to Himself, that is part of a **larger** will. His will. And His will is very **expansive**. It covers everything in our lives, in one form or another.

Now we might think that surely God will wait awhile before He expects us to give up these **core desires** in our lives. I mean, c’mon. This is really hard stuff. This is ingrained stuff. This stuff is heavily embedded in our personhood. It is stuff we learned from childhood. We grew up thinking this stuff and everyone around us was thinking this stuff. Surely He isn’t asking for submission in **that** area.

Yep. That is exactly the kind of territory someone disciplining someone for Christ will enter into.

It is such a sad state when we separate evangelism and discipleship, as if **one** is our **primary** goal and the **other** is **secondary**. Our zeal gets spent on getting someone to make the **first step** and we move on to the next one. In the Great commission there is no separation. We are to preach **in order to** make disciples. Getting people saved wasn’t the goal. **Making disciples** was the goal. There are very many churches and parachurch organizations that have forgotten this. We need to make sure we also are not one of them. I regret my own lack of follow through on new Christians. I know I need to improve.

We need to see something here. Paul wasn’t with these people more than a month probably and he has already told them to **abstain from extra marital sex**. He seems to assume that if they **understand the language** and they **have the Holy Spirit**, that they have what they need to obey what God says. They do not need to be brought up in a church to understand and do this. It isn’t that complicated.

how you ought to walk and to please God

The word “walk” really means live. Paul isn’t teaching us just **what to believe**, like Christianity is **all in our heads**. He is teaching us **how to live**, how to get up tomorrow morning and live the day in a way that honors God. He is teaching us how to exist in the proper state.

To please God-

G. K. Beale comments, “Whether in the ancient world or today, the chief end of humanity has often been to **take pleasure in this life**. In contrast, our passage begins by affirming the **opposite**: humanity’s chief goal ought to be to **take pleasure in pleasing God**.”

Have you heard of the fear of missing out? It is the fear that we will choose a path that will not give us as much pleasure as a path we **missed out** on. So we find ourselves anxious and conflicted that maybe we are missing some pleasure.

Christians can be free of that. Because when we live to please God, we can read God’s word and know **if we are doing that or not**.

We have the capacity and opportunity to live our lives deciding to do those things that **we know** get God’s approval. We don’t need to worry about missing out on that. We can **know** we are doing it.

And the beauty of this is that it pays even more dividends than just giving **God** pleasure. In the long run, and even often in the short run, it grants **us** pleasure. And not the fleeting kind.

If we will live to please God, we will find that **our own** happiness follows.

There is **joy** in the **journey** and there is even **greater joy** in the **destination**. In eternity there is no one who will look back and say, I wish I had disobeyed God more. I wish I had sinned more of those pleasurable sins. No, every effort in pleasing God will be the most pleasant of memories. Every effort at pleasing God will be seen as time best spent.

Then Paul says-

just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

I have learned in marriage that I am **best heard** when I acknowledge current effort and progress while suggesting things could still be better. I am not saying I always **do** that. But I have **learned it**.

That is what Paul is doing. We can tell from how much he makes this **a topic** that Paul is **VERY** concerned about this. But at the same time, the Thessalonians are not at a **nothing**. They are **making progress**. They are taking efforts. They are already **DOING**. So he recognizes that fact and encourages them to **do it more and more**.

Isn’t that the Christian life? Sometimes we get absorbed in our **failures** to the point that we cannot see our **progress**. Sometimes we need a Paul to step in and say, yes there is much to be done. But look how much **you have already done**. Look at the **growth**. Look at the **successes**. Hang in there. Keep on doing what you were doing. Keep making those efforts. Keep making those

small changes. What you are doing right, do that more and more. That is Christian growth.

2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Again we see the emphasis of where the teachings came **from** and **through**. Paul was teaching the Thessalonians what **Christ** taught Paul and the Apostles. The teaching is authoritative. It is through Christ. After the Sabbath study, I have been taking a renewed interest in what Paul teaches to New Testament believers. It is amazing how many times He refers to teaching **directly from Christ**.

It is interesting what word is used for **instructions**. Other versions translate it Commandments. This word for instructions was most frequently used for issuing **military commands**. Where Jesus said **“keep my commandments”**, here is one of them. And it is expanded by Paul. There are some commandments that are debatable, but if you want to know a commandment we for sure must keep, here is one.

Now remember, Paul was only there for a few weeks. As few as 3. And He already had made it very clear what Christ expects regarding their sexuality. Paul is now reminding them what he already taught to them.

He gave them Christ’s marching commands. Submit your sexuality to Christ’s rule. Paul knew that it wasn’t enough to just tell them **once** what to do. Simply knowing what is **right and wrong** regarding our sexuality is rarely the piece that is missing in getting us **to obey what God says** regarding our sexuality. Knowledge is necessary. But knowledge is rarely sufficient. Normally, victory over sexual sins and those strong temptations requires a battle. And Paul is calling them to that battle. Wouldn’t it be nice if being told **once** would be all it takes to overcome some of these core issues, like the only thing that was missing was information. In eternity things like this will no longer be an issue. But as long as we have a sin nature, we want what we want. And it is hard to say **“no”** to what we want. Isn’t it?

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

Actually the next 5 verses are about sanctification. Sanctification is the process of being made holy, being set apart **by God** and **for God**.

Paul says – **this is the will of God**.

I was listening to an audio file of RC Sproul talking about the will of God recently. He made a distinction I thought was very interesting.

First he divides **God’s will** into these sections.

God's **decretive, sovereign, or hidden will**. This is God's ordering of the universe. Everything that happens, happens because He is Sovereign. Even if He simply allows it to happen as a natural consequence, it happens because He wills it. If it went against God's sovereign will, it would not happen. So when something happens, it happens according to God's decretive, sovereign or hidden will.

God's **preceptive will**. These are the things that God tells humans to do because they are right and not to do because they are wrong. Jesus tells us not to steal. That is His preceptive will.

God's **dispositional will**. This is what God likes. God tells us what kind of God He is. For instance he tells us that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. God is willing that anyone should come to Him. That is what God is like. Let me give an example to help us understand this.

If you have children, do you **like** spanking them? I know all of us well enough to know that **we do not**. But there are **higher priorities** that we **do** like. We like our children to behave well. We like peace in our household. We want them to grow up with self control. So we may spank our children, but we take no **pleasure** in it. Other things require it.

That is how God's dispositional will is. It tells us what He is **like**. But it does not always tell us what He will do in any given situation. He sees to it that a lot of Godless humans die, but it is not something He likes.

RC read this verse-

[Deu 29:29 ESV] 29 "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

RC made the point that much of what Christians are trying to determine God's will on are things like this. What car to buy, or what person to marry, or what job to take. He makes the point that these are efforts at knowing the secret things of God. We **do not know** the secret things and we are never told to **make efforts** to know them. They are secret.

But what **are** we told? The revealed things belong to us. They are for us. And these revealed things are things we are TO DO.

RC makes the point that we do well to prioritize exhausting ourselves in the pursuit of **obeying what is revealed** and not allow ourselves to get obsessed on **discovering** that which God has **not revealed**.

A lot of Christians think they must know God's will on a day to day matter before they can make a decision. I think they have it backwards. We must know God's **declared will** first and then make decisions freely within those boundaries. That is why Mike always said, you don't **pray** to know God's will. You **read** to know God's will. God has declared His will that He wanted us to know. Doing that will keep us plenty busy.

And what is God's **declared will**? **Our sanctification**. Our becoming Holy. We never need to doubt what God wants us to do in a day. He wants us to live our lives **in His presence** doing what we do **heartily** as to the Lord and not to man. He wants us to live, **not with eyeservice as men pleasers** but in sincerity of heart, fearing God.

That is God's will for our lives. God does not promise to give us all the answers, nor does He **demand** that we need to **get** all the answers from Him about the unknowns in life. We just need to be sure that we know His word about how our lives are to be lived, and that we **stay within His boundaries**. We need to make all of our life decisions under submission to God's known will.

Wisdom is also very helpful. And often we can only get that from others. Especially if we are young. Foolish decisions are often costly decisions, even when we believe them to be faithful decisions.

But anyway, I can tell you with certainty that **right now** God's will for your life is that you **grow in becoming more holy**. It is God's will for your life for you to grow spiritually and to overcome sin in your life. It is God's will for you to **know and obey** what He says.

Now, in our text the issue that needs sanctification is sexual sin.

that you abstain from sexual immorality;

The next 5 verses are going to tell us how to be sanctified sexually.

The word for sexual immorality is the Greek word Pornea. As I study for sermons I am often surprised. This is where I was most surprised this morning.

Pornea is used for **actively taking part** in an immoral sexual act with another being. It can mean sex outside of marriage, adultery, homosexuality, and the like. I expected that. But it does **not** include mental sexual sins.

I had always thought that the word pornography came from the word Pornea. It does not. Pornea in the Greek first began by meaning a male or female prostitute. Over time it came to mean any immoral sexual act. But the word

that Pornography came from was Pornographia, which literally meant **drawing or painting** a prostitute.

Pornea involves **doing**.

Pornographia involves **looking**.

The original audience would have understood this.

I don't say this to make **any allowance** for looking at pornography. Jesus clearly told us in the Sermon on the Mount that **lust** is on the **adultery** train. It is forbidden to lust after someone who is not your wife. But pornography is not primarily what Paul is talking about in this passage. He is talking about actively bodily participating in these forbidden activities.

I don't think we do any harm to **include** pornography as we make our applications. But this word for sexual immorality is not specifically talking about that.

So the sanctification for the Thessalonians, and our sanctification as well, involves abstaining from sexually immoral actions.

I want to point something out here. God created the drive to mate. Had he not, we would have no trouble finding parking spots. There would be very few children born. And because of that, there would be very few people **saved** to a future **eternity with Christ**. And that is really God's **end goal** in the drive for sex. He wants His kingdom full of His people. Sex gets them born. God's spirit gets them reborn. But they must be born first. Our physical drive is used by God to cause that to happen.

Now God, in His grace, did not create that powerful urge in us in order for us to be continually frustrated. He gave us **marriage**. And Paul helped us in 1 Cor by making one of the primary expectations in marriage very clear.

[1Co 7:2-5 ESV] 2 But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Since marriage is the only place that people are allowed to go to for this satisfaction, marriage has to be a place where both parties understand that they need to be **consistently available** to fulfill this purpose in marriage. A

marriage that does not **readily** and **willingly** provide this outlet is not a biblical marriage.

So as we look this morning at what God **prohibits**, the back side of that is what God **provides**. We are to thankfully use what He **provides** and diligently abstain from that which He **prohibits**. This is not an unreasonable or harsh demand by God. He has provided us what we need and desire. We do well to **relish** in the wonder of what He has **provided to us** so we are not **intrigued** by that which He **forbids**.

I had intended to cover this whole passage in one sermon but it became too long. So we will stop here and take up the rest next week.

A good application for us this week might be, just how submitted is our sexuality to God? Outside of marriage, do we **avoid** all the things that God tells us are clearly sins. Inside of marriage, do we **avail ourselves** to all that marriage provides and demands?

Also, do we allow our pursuit of discovering God's secret will to distract us from the bigger focus of obeying His known will?