

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.

We are continuing our study of 1 Thess 4:1-7. I had intended to cover the text in one sermon, but it turned into 2.

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;

I remember when Mike preached on this passage many years ago. It stood out because Mike used this text to point out the dangers of what happens when a translator of the Bible inadvertently interprets the Bible. The New King James Version actually does a better job here.

1 Thessalonians 4:4 (NKJV)

4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

That is the most accurate translation to the Greek. The Greek word translated **possess** could mean possess or control or **acquire**. The word for vessel is just that. It means vessel. The New King James lets the reader decide what Paul was talking about.

Other translations, like the ESV try to do that **for us**. The ESV translates the Greek word for vessel, **“body”**. Other translations translate the word vessel, **“wife”**. And scholars have probably argued for 2000 years which is correct. Paul knew for sure which he meant. His readers probably did too. But we don't.

ESV says 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,

RSV says

that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor,

I have read some good scholars who are sure it means body. I have read others who are sure it means wife. And both of them have really good reasons for what they believe.

Now, this passage **cannot mean both**. So one is correct and the other is incorrect. But the beauty, in this case, is that even the application that is incorrect **here** is a correct one in another text. We know that we must exhibit self control over our bodies and we also know that we must **love our wives** and **treat them honorably**. So even if we get this interpretation technically **wrong**, there is no **harm done**. My focus will be on a **man controlling himself** because that will have the desired result, no matter which is intended.

4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,

Again, remember that this was written to new Christians in a very pagan culture. And Paul isn't pulling any punches here. He is not showing sympathy for how hard this is going to be. He just lays it out.

Where Paul says "**know**" here, it is the Greek word that means **having the knowledge or skill to accomplish the task**. This links back to what Paul said in verse 2 about knowing the **instructions** or **commands** that Christ gave in this regard. You must **know how** to do this thing, and we are **telling you how**. But this is what you must do. You must **control**. The word used for control here normally means "**to acquire, get or procure a thing for one's self**". Translating the word that way usually leads to the conclusion that this verse is about acquiring a wife. But the word can also be used for **gaining mastery over**.

So here a man is told to control his own body or acquire his own wife in holiness and honor. Well, how do people **normally** use their bodies or how do men **often** decide who they want to mate with? Well, the default method in our culture is they do **what** they want, **how** they want, **when** they want, with **who** they want. They do what they feel like doing without regard for what God **says** or **wants**. What God might **want** or **say about it** tends to be an afterthought, if they are considered at all.

So whether this passage means controlling one's body or acquiring one's wife, both are going to require a supreme submission to God. In light of our Sabbath study, keeping the Sabbath is a **piece of cake** compared to this kind of self control required to submit our sexuality in holiness and honor.

Yet Paul does not relent. Our whole sexuality is to be mastered. It is to be brought under the submission of Christ's Lordship. It is to be bridled and only allowed to do those things that the Master says yes to, just like an animal being trained.

Again, holiness is **set apartness**. Holiness is singled out for a sacred use. It is designated as different. Holy sexuality is sexuality used only as God allows and requires. That is what holiness looks like in regard to sexuality. Honor is the result of holiness.

We really need to understand here that what might **feel** like an honor often is really a disguised **pleasant disgrace**. And what we **feel** is a disgrace is often an **unappealing honor**. And sometimes the only way we can tell the difference between the two is by God's word. We can not trust our seemers here.

Let me show you what I mean.

Suppose a woman at work is attracted to a married man or vice versa. The interested person is very attractive. The initiator singles the other person out to give them their attention and flirting and flattery. They make it clear they are open to it going further.

The initiator is showing no regard for God's gift of marriage. This person has no regard for all the human suffering that this betrayal would cause. While we might feel honored to receive all of that flattering attention, we **should** feel repulsed at the evil, at the huge **dishonor** behind their whole approach. So we may **feel honored** to be singled out to receive such attention from an attractive person. That is how our flesh would most normally receive it. But it is not an **honor**. It is really a **dishonor**. So we, by our nature, might feel **honored** at a **dishonor**. Anyone approaching us for intimacy outside the bonds of marriage is **dishonoring** us **and** God, whether we feel it or not. It does not matter how attractive they are, or how smooth they are, or what status they hold. Their approach is not an honor. It is disgrace wrapped in a very pleasant package to our egos.

This is even true of men approaching single women with no intention or plan for marriage. If the man has great status or popularity, it may **feel like an honor** to the woman singled out for his attention. But it is a **dishonor**.

The same is true in reverse.

When a Christian man commits himself to a woman, he has normally promised to give up every other option. And his life is then committed to her welfare. He has committed the rest of his life to providing her food, clothing and shelter. And he, at least in our culture, has limited his intimacy to only her. He has honored her with the gift of provision for a lifetime.

When he makes advances for intimacy toward her as his wife, he may do it in such a way that would **not win him a role in a Hallmark romance movie**. It may lack the **finesse** or the **eloquence** or the **mood creating elements** a woman might desire. Others might have smoother approaches or be better talkers. She may feel dishonored by his approach. But the truth is he has chosen an **honorable path** in regard to his wife.

Scripture says this.

[Heb 13:4 RSV] 4 Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous.

Marriage is **honored** by God and **should be honored** by us. When a Christian man marries, he has granted the greatest honor he has to give. His whole relationship is couched in **honoring** God and **honoring this woman** through marriage. The dishonor she might feel by the demands of this relationship may very well be **displaced** and **inaccurate**. Feelings should not be trusted as adequate indicators of truth. Marriage is an honor. And the duties toward each other included in that relationship are **honorable**.

We need to define **honor** only by God's word. We cannot trust our feelings to reveal it.

It is also good to point out here what a gift marriage is. It is so easy in our selfishness to forget this. I like how Suz refers to Jarrod. She says he is "my person". God has gifted us with that relationship. It is so easy to focus on the wrong things and forget that God has granted us this committed relationship with another human being. Yeah, sometimes it is really hard. But consider that God, in His grace and mercy, would dedicate another person for your welfare. Consider that he would give you another human being to be contracted together for life. That truly is an honor. That truly is honorable. That truly does honor God when we **keep that commitment**.

5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;

So our dealings with sexuality are to be submitted to God as a person set apart only for His use. And they should be carried out in an honorable state that only God can tell us about.

Then they are **not** to be carried out like the natural person. If you look around our world, we see the **passion of lust**. Essentially, the world's advertising says do what your body wants to do. Do what your feelings tell you to do. Live to maximize your positive experiences. Let this life be your highest aspiration, your greatest high. Enjoy anything this life can give you to the fullest. If there might be consequences, think about them later. And if you can, eliminate them. If there are costs, you can avoid them. Live for the pleasure of now. "As long as everything is consensual, there is no harm done", our world says. That may be how the world lives, in whatever million versions of that that they may choose.

We cannot allow ourselves to live like that. We cannot dishonor our Lord by allowing our bodies and feelings to master us.

[Rom 6:16 ESV] 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

We are slaves to that which we obey. The world lives for the world. That is all they have. They cannot help it. But we **can** help it. We **can** live for Christ. We are **empowered** to say no to the things that flesh compels us to do.

Scripture tells us this.

Galatians 5:24 (NASB)

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Colossians 3:5 (NASB)

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry."

This is very hard. This is the world we live in. How do we do this that Paul is telling us we must do?

John MacArthur says this:

In several of his other letters, the apostle Paul made it crystal clear that in order to control their bodies believers must rely on the Holy Spirit. "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). The key to walking in the Spirit is being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:17-18), and the key to being filled with the Spirit is for believers to let God's Word dwell within them (Col. 3:16; cf. Pss. 19:7-11; 119:11, 105). They must

sincerely read, study, and apply Scripture so that it saturates their lives and allows them to yield complete control to the Holy Spirit (Deut. 6:7; Pss. 1:2; 119:97; John 5:39; Acts 17:11; 20:32; Rom. 15:4; 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 1:19; cf. Isa. 30:20–21; Ezek. 36:27; John 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:12–13; 2 Tim. 3:15).

John F. MacArthur Jr., 1 & 2 Thessalonians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 108.

It is so good that we have so many helpful resources you and I can depend upon to help us in our Christian lives.

Let's move on to verse 6.

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.

The words for wrong and transgress in our text both carry an element of fraud in them. Fraud is **wronging someone by giving an unfair exchange.**

This passage is saying don't **fraudulently defraud** a fellow believer. The word for "brother" in this verse is not limited to only males. It could also be a sister in Christ.

So how would a brother or sister not give a fair exchange in regard to sexual activity. How can they take something and not pay a fair price for it. Or how can they give away something that is not theirs to give and defraud the person to whom it belongs.

Let's start with understanding how God intended marriage to be conducted in most cases. We see this in the law in Deut 22, 24.

A man was to raise his daughter and protect her from harm. Part of this was to protect his daughter from men who would want to take advantage of her. Then when an honorable willing man was selected, the father would receive a bride price for his daughter. In exchange for that, he would give his virgin daughter to that man.

At that point the father would trust that this man will provide food, clothing and shelter for a lifetime to his daughter and their children. This is a picture of everything working as it should. No one is ripped off. No one is wronged. No one is defrauded. This is the biblical model of a fair exchange.

Obviously in our culture there is no bride price. But a father should still receive the assurance that if a man is intimate with his daughter, that man will remain married to her and carry out all his responsibilities to her for a lifetime. That is a fair exchange.

So what is NOT a fair exchange? Anything else.

How does unmarried sex defraud? How does it offer **one thing** but deliver **another**?

Well, unmarried physical intimacy does the following:

It defrauds by encouraging another person to commit a sin that God clearly hates and consistently warns against. There may be some things in the New Testament that **are not** clear. But sexual sin is not one of them. So it defrauds by encouraging sin.

It defrauds by robbing any future spouse of either party of something that **should be theirs alone**.

It defrauds by the instigator suggesting something that is represented as **only pleasurable** but actually partaking in this activity has **great risks** of unexpected pregnancies and very life affecting diseases. And these diseases can remain unseen until they produce cancer years later. So it defrauds by promising only pleasure but posing a tremendous risk.

It defrauds by robbing a father of what he should be able to rightfully expect, future provision and protection for his daughter.

If anyone is **already married**, it defrauds the married partner of something that was promised **only to them**.

It defrauds by a man, it is normally the man, taking advantage of a woman's inherent vulnerabilities. Instead of **protecting** the woman from **himself**, which is what he owes to God and to her, he takes something from her for which he is not willing to pay his whole life for.

Scripture generally (there are some exceptions) paints a picture that women, on their own, are most vulnerable to being taken advantage of. And it is not just a matter of physical strength. They are generally not aware how much **value** physical intimacy has in the world of men. How they view intimacy is so **very much different** than how men do that they often interpret a man's advances in a **better light** than they really are. So in a culture where we send women alone into the world to fend for themselves, what we find is that women will be exploited. There is no mystery here. That is what we ought to know will happen.

God is so good to protect us from sexual sin by **forbidding it** and **rebuking it** and **warning us** in nearly every book in the New Testament. How much He desires that we do not suffer the unseen consequences. I already spoke of the defrauding. But there are weights that go along with sexual sins. Our

media downplays them continually. But all one needs to do to see the truth is to talk to believers who have experienced them.

We know people who have experienced the betrayal of infidelity.

We know people who were raised in families where the father did not honor his responsibility to provide for his wife and children.

And there is a consequence that few think of. They are what I think of as “**the skeleton talks**”. It is the influence of memories, the skeletons in the closet that remain invisible but they **keep talking**.

If the memories are **pleasurable**, those memories become a temptation to **recall them** and to **hold them** as more favorable than our current situation.

Our current spouse will be demoted in our minds as not living up to that memory. A spouse may never live up in our minds to that which we remember. Our past pleasurable experiences may plague us with temptation. They may rob us of the satisfaction we **should have** and the **gratefulness** to God that is appropriate in our current situation.

If the memories are **negative**, those experiences have taught us lessons that our current spouse will pay a price tag for. And those lessons are often so deep that we are unaware of the effect they have on relationships long term. The skeletons in our closets **keep talking**, but they **get no blame** for what they say. The current spouse is regarded as the problem. That is the irony. It is those who are absent that do the talking but those who are present take the blame. I think of a quote of Mike’s here. “It had done no wrong but it was punished none the less.”

Sexual experiences outside of marriage fill our closets with skeletons that the devil intends for our harm. There is no removing of the skeletons. We can only expose them in an effort to minimize their negative effect and to emphasize our Saviors amazing Grace. Again we need truth in our inmost places.

Basically, sexual sin is not a sin we get away with. We can get forgiven of it. And that is absolutely wonderful. But it normally comes with an unannounced price tag. There are unadvertised and unavoidable consequences.

If we steal, we can pay back what we stole. If we lie, we can go back and tell the truth. We can just confess the myriad of internal thought sins to God. But

physical sexual sins leaves emotional and relational residue that needs dealt with.

The only **restitution available** for sexual sin is to marry the defrauded party, which is exactly what the law required. A man was required to pay the bride price, at least, and to marry, at best, the party that was defrauded. In the law, a man that was physically intimate with a woman was required to marry her if the woman wasn't in the profession of using her body as financial enterprise. Where this marriage is **not done**, or **cannot be done**, wrong is the result. This text tells us that Christ doesn't overlook the wrongs done to his children. He takes it seriously. God looks out for those who are wronged, who are sinned against, who are robbed, who are exploited. This is serious stuff. So we must make sure that **we are not people** who are sinning these kinds of sins against others.

Paul is really driving this home. He is saying, Hey I told you this earlier. But you really need to get this.

Parents, as your kids get to the age where they can understand this, teach it to them. Talk to them about it. They need to understand, not only that it is a big deal, but **why** it is such a big deal. The Thessalonians were doing well. But Paul still put on a big push on this issue. Because in their culture, it would swallow them whole if they were not extremely intentional about how they handled their bodies. And our culture is just like theirs.

Solomon warned his son over and over. You can't put fire in your lap and not get burned. No amount of begging will reduce a man's wrath against you if you sin against him in this way. He told his son not to be honored when a woman is trying to seduce him. She is just trying to use him. Sometimes it is for bread. Sometimes it is for sport. But either way, there is no honor to be found there.

The only good that comes out of sexual sin is that it shows us our need for a Savior. It shows us our own fallenness. Each dose of sexual sin comes with an installment of destruction. If the Holy Spirit is active in our lives it will be effective in driving us to true repentance.

Praise God we can be forgiven of these sins. Praise God that they will not be held against us on judgment day if we are in Christ. But as believers we should not be surprised when there are **consequences to pay** for sins in which God warns us that He takes action on. The devil will want us to think that those sins are **our identity**. But they are only our **history**, they are not our

identity. Our identity is found in Christ. What good **He does for us** is much greater than any harm we have ever done **against Him**. So we must continually see ourselves through **His lens**, through the words of scripture about who a child of God really is. And in eternity those sins will no longer play a factor in our identity. We will be the people of the white robes. Praise God for that.

In the mean time we might need to do business with the consequences of those sins from time to time.

Paul is giving them, and us, fair warning.

So there is marital sex, and everything else defrauds.

All other kinds of sexual sins, perversities and the like, do the same kinds of things. People are harmed. People are damaged. People are wronged.

[1Co 6:18 ESV] 18 Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

We see there is even an unusual mystical element to sexuality. We even harm ourselves in sexual immorality. We don't just sin against others. We sin against ourselves.

Let's move on.

7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.

The opposite of impurity is holiness. I mentioned earlier that pornea did not refer to pornography. Well impurity does. Impurity expands the net to include any kind of evil sensuality.

The Greek word for "**Impurity**" means, "uncleanness, filthiness, impurity." It literally meant "**refuse**" and was used of the contents of graves. From this it came to be used of sexual sins. This gives us some idea of God's attitude toward this kind of sin. Refuse.

When God wanted to emphasize how his people had **wronged Him**, He regularly used **infidelity** and **blatant promiscuity** as pictures of the wrong done by God's people to God in order to capture the **seriousness** of how **seriously** God was wronged. I assume He chose those sins because nothing captures the **evil of being wronged** and the **strong feelings that accompany that betrayal** as sexual sin does. In scripture, **idolatry** is regarded as **spiritual adultery**.

Paul is telling the Thessalonians that it is insignificant what your culture expects from you. It does not matter what your fellow Thessalonians expect

from you. It does not matter what you excuse in yourself and for what reasons you excuse it. The only thing that matters is what God expects from you.

God saved us for **holiness**. God saved us for a life that lives in a way that the world cannot understand. We are separated. We are to live submitted to what **He wants** for our lives and no **other expectations** matter. Remember, Paul is not talking to people who were raised in the church. These were brand new Christians.

8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Paul means business. And he is not backing down in the least. Paul is laying down the gauntlet. If you ignore this, you ignore it at your peril. He is essentially telling them, **and us**, I don't care what your excuses are. They are not legitimate. You might be a brand new Christian. That doesn't matter. You have heard what I said. You can read what I wrote. You know how to understand human language. And I am telling you that God says **don't do this**. If you continue in your old ways, **God will respond**. He will respond in a way to protect those you are defrauding, whether you are male or female. **Expect consequences.**

I hope we find application in this to be careful to carry out our sexuality in holiness, that we set this portion of our lives to only be used as God says. That may deserve some consideration this week. What needs changed?

Another application might be that we ask God to help us see what is truly honorable and what is truly disgraceful, so we are not tricked into by **feeling honored** by what God rejects and **feeling disgraced** by what God accepts.

And another application we can make is that we can rejoice that we serve such a forgiving God. Our deep and accurate confessions of sins, of any kind, will always be **met with** by a God who is **very pleased to forgive them** and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.