

## **1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 – A life that pleases God.**

### **Introduction**

I don't know about you, but the past week have been a sad reminder to me of how destructive sexual sin is to our world. For the past week the media has been dominated by discussion of alleged sexual assault and misconduct at the highest levels of our politics.

And in the commentary surrounding these reports, many have been asking the question, what can be done to improve the culture within government so that people are not left vulnerable to sexual predation and harassment. This week has shown us the importance of taking sexual wrongdoing seriously.

Well, in our text today, we see that *God* has something to say on this topic too. We see that *He* takes very seriously sexual wrongdoing – or to use the language of the passage “sexual immorality.” And we also see that He too cares about creating a healthy culture within the community of His people. But it's not just “safe” He's after, but Holy. God wants a Holy community in which his people are marked by sexual purity. And in light of the week that has just been, I think that is a good thing to be thinking about.

So, what we'll do is think about God's call for holiness in sexual purity, why this is a good thing, and what it means for our lives.

But for a little bit of context.

*Context*

Last week, we heard how Timothy had been sent by Paul to the Church in Thessalonica to make sure they were going okay amidst the persecution they were facing. And what was the answer? They were doing well! In both faith and love (3:6). But as we think about the rest of this letter, it would seem that Timothy's report may have also included a few areas that perhaps needed a little more attention and even correction. And one of those areas appears to be the topic of sexual purity. Look at how Paul starts this new section in verse 1:

*4 As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. [You're going well, but there's one or two things I want to remind you about] <sup>3</sup> It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality*

Now, I'll unpack the language of verse 3 in a moment, but let's not miss the big thing here: Part of God's will for the Thessalonian church (for our 5pm community) is that they/we pursue holiness and avoid sexual immorality (or put it positively strive for sexual purity).

### **1. God's call for Sexual Purity (vv.3-8)**

Sometimes living God's way makes a Christian feel like a complete weirdo in the wider world we live. And I think this is certainly true when it comes to idea of living God's way in sexual purity. When was the last time you turned on the radio (not light FM) and heard a song glorifying sexual Chasity? Much like the Thessalonians (in the RE), we live in a sex-

saturated world. And so to live according to God's way makes feel so different – as though wearing a minion suit in a shopping centre [*Show pic*]. We feel like we stand out in this department.

This is why I think the apostle Peter uses the words he does in 1 Pet 2:11:

*<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as **foreigners** and **exiles**, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.*

Living God's way in sexual purity – brings home, in a powerful way that we are like *foreigners* and *exiles* in this sex-saturated world. And that is how we can feel – we don't really fit, like we're wearing the minion suit. Because it is God's kingdom we belong to now, not the world.

But notice it is through living like foreigner with respect to sexual purity that *pleases* God.

Read again with me verse 3:

*<sup>3</sup> It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality*

God wants followers of Jesus to be sanctified – that is a biblical term that means “set apart for God to be holy – that is to live for God and reflect His good character.”

People are set apart for God and made His own when they first put their faith in Jesus – like we heard from Eunice tonight. And when the *NT* writers speak of being sanctified, the idea is of us becoming more and more like Jesus, the Son of God, who is the supreme example of a life pleasing to God. 2 Cor 3:18 puts it like this:

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. [ESV]*

Sanctification is our transformation into the image of Christ [bit by bit) by the Spirit of Christ now at work within us.

And God tells us that one way we become more like Christ (sanctified), is as we avoid sexual immorality (v.3). This is God's will for us. This is what pleases Him.

Now, I want to note from the outset that God is not anti-sex, contrary to popular opinion. He is our creator, He invented sex and gave it to humankind as a wonderful gift that a husband and wife can enjoy together in the relationally secure covenant of marriage.

In fact one book in the Bible, Song of Songs, is dedicated to declaring the glory and power of sexual love in marriage. SoS 7:1-2

*How beautiful your sandaled feet,*

*O prince's daughter!*

*Your graceful legs are like jewels,*

*the work of an artist's hands.*

<sup>2</sup>*Your navel is a rounded goblet*

*that never lacks blended wine.*

*Your waist is a mound of wheat*

*encircled by lilies. [I better pause there].*

You get the idea, though, in the right context, God's word is prepared to *sing* about the glory of sexual intimacy. God is not against sex. But He is against the distortion of his good gift of sex and sexual desire.

And that is what God is talking about here when it sexual immorality.

The term 'sexual immorality' comes from the Greek word '*porneia*' (where we get the word 'pornography' from). *Porneia* was a catch-all term the NT writers used to group in *all* forms of sexual sin that distort and misuse God's good gift of sex. It includes pre-marital sex, lust of the mind, prostitution, adultery, incest and homosexual sexual activity. Now some of the things on that list you might think: "fair enough" but others you might think, "I'm not so sure." But they are actually all things that, throughout the Bible, God calls His people to avoid.

And here again is where many of us as followers of Jesus feel like we are wearing the minion suit in the world around us. Think about how radical it would be in the eyes of some of your colleagues or uni friends to say the following statements over the water cooler:

- What did I do over the weekend? "Well, I uploaded some software on my computer that makes it harder for me look lust after pornography."
- "My girlfriend and I will not be having sex until we are married."
- "No, I actually haven't watched GOT, because I find the sex scenes unhelpful in my walk with Jesus."

To live a sexually pure life is to live in counter-cultural trust and obedience to God and that pleases Him. But that kind of life is hard. It is hard, when an entire world is telling you that it is right and normal to express your sexual desires in areas that God says is wrong. Think for example of every sitcom you've ever watched in which premarital sex is portrayed as a normal thing under the right consensual circumstances.

But it isn't just sitcoms. That was the message I was getting highschool from teachers 20 years ago. I remember all the boys in year 9 had to participate in a sexual health, week long program called "building blokes." The program basically assumed we were all sexually active to some degree and this was a healthy thing so long as others didn't get hurt. We had to watch horribly awkward videos produced in the 70s and have horribly awkward group discussion time. I remember sitting through that program as a young Christian, trying to work out my faith, terrified at the thought of how different I would need to be if I was going to keep taking Jesus seriously. Was I really prepared to avoid sexual immorality – even the supposed "safe kind" promoted by "building blokes." Can I trust Jesus enough to live His way when it seems so counter-cultural?

Maybe some of you are feeling that too tonight? Kind of terrified by the radical obedience that sexual purity might mean for you as a Christian. Or perhaps you're not a Christian, and somewhat confused or annoyed by the idea that God would be so nosy into such personal matters like your sex life.

Well, if that's you, I want to highlight three good reasons why Jesus calls His followers to live sexually pure lives. The first is that it is that He says it is holy and honourable in God's

eyes, the second is that He says it values and protects others, and the third is that He loves us and does not want us to face His judgment.

### ***Holy and Honourable***

The first reason is Jesus calls His followers to sexual purity is because it is holy and honourable in **God's eyes**.

You see it there in verses 4-5:

*<sup>4</sup> that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, <sup>5</sup> not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;*

And again, down in verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup> For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.*

Striving for sexual purity through self-control is a *holy* thing to do. It is reflect the pure character of the saviour we belong to. We should not be embarrassed but it. We should not allow Hollywood, and movies like 40 year old virgin to negatively impact our thinking about sexual purity. It's an act of faithfulness to Him that reflects his faithfulness to us. And you notice the negative contrast is given. We should not act "in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God." The ancient Roman world was saturated with unrestrained sexual activity and much of their worship involved temple prostitution. In God's eyes, this was and is shameful and wrong.

“But you know God” says Paul. You belong to Him now through faith in Jesus. He has forgiven your sin and made you Holy, so be who you are!

God calls us to be different from the world around us. God is not saying we “deny” our sexual desires but “control.” Our God-given sexual desire must not rule us, we must learn to rule it by avoiding that which God says is wrong.

Jesus says sexual purity is a good thing because it is Holy and Honourable in God’s eyes. And it’s His opinion which truly matters - more than Hollywood, more than our school friends, more than anyone.

***It protects and values others.***

The second reason that God calls us to sexual purity is because it protects and values others.

I don’t know if you’ve been following the story of Chanel Contos. She is former private school girl from Sydney who started an online petition on Instagram to raise awareness about the prevalence of teenage sexual assault, particularly in the private school sector. Chanel shared her own story and now thousands of other girls have now added their tragic testimonies also.

God calls His people to sexual purity so that others are not wronged. Look at what is said in verse 6:

*<sup>6</sup> and that in this matter [the matter of sexual immorality] no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.*



People are more than objects to be used for our personal gratification. We are not to take advantage of them. They are human beings, made in God's image and valuable to Him.

Sexual sin degrades and damages people.

- Think of the adultery that leaves a family devastated and broken, robbed of a stable and happy home.
- Think of the grief and broken trust that comes in Christian dating couples when one or both parties start putting sexual pleasure before love of Jesus.
- Never think that pornography is simply a *you* issue. That too affects others. For starters it sustains an industry in which countless people (mainly vulnerable women) have been manipulated, exploited, objectified and sexually and physically abused. You may not know them or their names, but you need to care about them as God does. So before you click on the porn link, ask yourself, do I really want to be a part of the loveless porn industry that devalues women and men made in God's image? Or will I act in love by saying no. And like adultery, porn damages the person you're dating or married to. People are left devastated by the secrecy, unfaithfulness and broken trust.

Sexual immorality damages people. Sexual purity builds people up. In marriage it allows a spouse to feel safe and secure in his or her marriage. It prevents teenagers from having their lives messed with. Sexual purity means people are treated with respect, protected from unstrained lust and valued for who they are, not what sexual pleasure they can provide.

And isn't that a good thing?

Isn't it a wonderful thing that you can love your neighbour simply by your choice to remain self-controlled in your sexual desire towards them and others? God sees it and God loves it.

*... no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.*

***He loves us and does not want us to face his judgment.***

The third reason that Jesus calls us to sexual purity is because He loves us and does not want us to face his judgment.

It's like with my kids right. I tell them at the beginning of a walk. Do not run on or near the road. Stick by my side. Now, I don't tell them this because I am a kill-joy who just wants to take away their fun. I tell them this because the road is seriously dangerous. And I love them and don't want them to be run over.

In the same way, God loves us, and does not want us to face his judgment through a resolute desire to run on the road of sexual immorality. To reject God's word in this matter is to reject God Himself. Look at the middle of verse 6ff:

*The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. <sup>7</sup> For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. <sup>8</sup> Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

Because God loves us He warns us.

Over the past few weeks the Christian world has look on with great sadness and anger as one of the most renowned evangelists and apologists of our time – Ravi Zacharias – was exposed as a repeat sexual offender of vulnerable women working for him in a day spa he apparently owned. This brought home to me that it's not enough to know God's word, to be able to explain and defend it. We must live by it. I don't know how it all happened, but somehow Ravi became comfortable with this sin. Somehow, he was able to justify it and live with it. That, I think shows the deceptive power of the human heart.

This is a warning to us that we cannot become so content with our sexual sin that we are willing to reject God's word about it. Paul, is speaking of a wilful, habitual and unrepentant rejection of God here. The attitude that wrongly says: "Jesus I trust you to rule this much of my life, but not this area – not my sex life. That's out of bounds and you have no claim over it." God is saying, that way of thinking is rebellion against Him. It's not only deluded but will send you to his judgment.

*anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

Because God loves us, He warns us.

Jesus, in this passage, gives us three good reasons as to why He calls His followers to live sexually pure lives. Because it is holy and honourable in God's eyes. Because it values and protects others. Because He loves us and does not want us to face His judgment.

## **Application**

Now perhaps you're here tonight and you're not yet a Christian? What do you do with all of this? Well, the answer is not simply, "be more pure." The first thing I'd encourage you to do is investigate the Jesus who gives these instructions and find out why it *would* be worth turning your life upside down to follow Him. You need to know Jesus. It is not by avoiding sexually immorality that we are saved, but by trusting Jesus who died for your sins, not just sexual sins, but every kind of heart rebellion against God. And I think that as you get to know Him, and what He has done for you in his death and resurrection, that you will be much better placed to trust Him when he speaks on matters of sexual immorality.

But what about if you're a Christian? Maybe you've been listening tonight and are thinking, I know I'm not perfect, but I do think I doing okay avoiding sexual immorality. It's tough, but I'm seeing God help me make progress. If that's you then praise God! "Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (v.1)."

But I suspect there are a number of you here tonight for whom this topic just brings up a level of grief.

So I just want to conclude this talk by speaking to a few groups of people listening tonight and showing you how Jesus is God's mercy to us in a world messed up by sexual sin.

*To those of you feeling wronged, you need to know that Jesus judges.* That's what this passage tells us. The Lord will punish, bring to account, all those who commit such sins (v.8). So, if you have been sexually wronged – used, abused, cheated on, assaulted or harassed, you can be sure Jesus will punish the sin of your offender – either at the cross, through his or her repentance or on the final day of judgment when that person has to stand

before the all seeing and all knowing Holy God. As good as our justice system might be, it can never guarantee you that level of justice.

*To those of you feeling guilty, you need to know that Jesus saves.*

That is the good news of Christianity – we have the real hope of forgiveness through faith in Jesus. He died for our sins, rose again to life and will rescue us from the wrath of God on the great day of judgment as we trust Him. Paul has already said that back in 1Thess 1:10 – “Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” So, if the guilt of past or perhaps present sexual sin is plaguing you, you need to remember you have a rescuer. Jesus came into the world to save sinners! So cry out to Him. Confess your sin to him, turn from it and rest in the forgiveness He has won for you at the cross.

*To those of you feeling helpless in sexual sin, you need to remember that Jesus helps.*

In verse 8 Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God has given His HS to them. Most of us know how overpowering our sexual temptation can be. You might think: “It’s just so hard to avoid looking at those images on the screen. It’s just so hard to be godly with my girlfriend or boyfriend. We know we need *supernatural* help when it comes to our sexual desires – because left to ourselves we are powerless.. But praise be that Jesus doesn’t leave us to ourselves but gives us His Spirit to help us. So keep asking the HS to help you make and keep good boundaries in dating, to stay off the computer late at night. Keep asking him to help you remain faithful in your marriage.

But Jesus also helps us by getting us to look forward to our future hope of life in the new creation (which we will look at over the next two weeks). You see that hope tells us it is worth living Jesus way. Maybe you worry that the sexual satisfaction you long for in a healthy marriage will never actually be fulfilled. Trusting in Jesus guarantees you *will* find

satisfaction. And it will be much better than even the best marriage could provide. In fact Revelation reminds us that in Heaven there is no need for marriage – for we are in perfect relationship and happiness with our Saviour. All us single, all of us perfectly satisfied in Jesus.

So, do not grow weary of trusting Jesus in sexual purity. Keep remembering that it is holy and honourable. Keep remembering that it values and protects others. Keep remembering that God loves you, and does not want you to face Him in judgement but in the glory of His eternal kingdom. Let's pray.