

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. From the immediately preceding context, we have seen the apostle Paul focused on the spiritual well-being of the new believers who are his spiritual children in the church at Thessalonica. In the closing verses of Chapter 3, Paul prays for them. Paul’s end game is reflected in the last line of his prayer in □ 1 Thessalonians 3:13.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:13 so that he [the Lord] may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul wants the hearts of the Thessalonians to be “blameless in holiness” before the Lord when Jesus comes. At the judgment seat of Christ, Paul wants them to be confident, unashamed, and worthy of reward.

In this case, being “blameless” is the functional equivalent of being approved for reward. The term, “holiness” describes a quality of life expressed in careful obedience to God.<sup>1</sup> The general idea, then, is to be worthy of reward based on obedience. That’s what Paul wants for his spiritual children.

To Paul, holiness is a pathway to reward and living life abundantly, both in this life and the life to come. Holiness is vital to a believer’s spiritual well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> Friberg.

I want to be careful to say that we are not talking about the difference between going to heaven or hell. For the Thessalonian believers, that issue was resolved once and for all when they first believed in Jesus for eternal life. They have already received new life in Jesus, so heaven is guaranteed.

The issue for them now is one of living abundantly in Christ. And for that, holiness is key.

The holiness we're talking about is not an ongoing state of sinless perfection; otherwise, none of us could be holy, because we all sin. It is a devotion to God that is generally-but-not-flawlessly reflected in obedience, including ongoing confession when we fall short.

In our text for today, Paul continues the theme of holiness, focusing on an important aspect of being holy, and that is, our sexual purity. Before getting to the issue of sexual purity, Paul sets it up by making some general comments about increasingly living a life that is pleasing to God and consistent with his word. In ☐ verses 1 and 2, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:1 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.

☐ ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Then Paul makes a similarly general statement in the first part of ☐ verse 3, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: . . .

The original Greek word translated □ “sanctification” is ἁγιασμός. It describes a personal dedication to the interests of God as evidenced by obedience.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis here is on the sanctifying process of becoming holy.<sup>3</sup> It has in view obedience that leads to purification—becoming more and more like Christ.

The word could also be translated □ “holiness,” and many English translations render it that way. In fact, this Greek word shares the same root as the word translated “holiness” back in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, where Paul prayerfully presents holiness as the goal when standing before the Lord at his return.

Now, Paul explains three interrelated facets of holiness, marked off by the word, “that.”

First, in the last part of □ verse 3, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:3 . . . that you abstain from sexual immorality;

The term, □ “sexual morality” is a translation of the original Greek word, πορνεία. It’s the word from which we get our English word, pornography. The biblical term, however, is much broader. Essentially, it describes any sexual gratification outside of marriage. According to his word, God designed sex to be enjoyed exclusively in the context of a

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<sup>2</sup> BDAG, Friberg.

<sup>3</sup> Friberg, TDNT, BKC.

marriage between a man and a woman; therefore, all other sexual activity, whether real or fantasized, is morally out of bounds.

Yes, even fantasizing about that which is immoral is out of bounds. Not my idea. Jesus said it in Matthew 5:28.

ESV Matthew 5:28 “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

This puts us all in the same boat. We may not all be criminals, but from a spiritual standpoint, in one way or another, at one time or another, we’re all sex offenders.

Nevertheless, Paul says we should abstain from sexual immorality. To abstain means to keep your distance, to stay away, to avoid contact, don’t get close.

Paul mentions the second facet of holiness in □ verses 4 and 5, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:4 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;

The terms □ “holiness” and “honor” describe the manner in which we are to control our bodies.

“Holiness” is from the same word, ἁγιασμός, translated “sanctification” back in verse 3. The direction of this term is toward God. Remember, it reflects personal dedication to the interests of God as evidenced by obedience. We control our bodies in holiness when we obey God’s word concerning sexual activity. This honors God.

The term, “honor” describes recognition of another person’s worth or value. In this context, the direction of this term is toward other people. We are to control our bodies in a way that honors other people and does not degrade them. The suggestion is that, when we control our bodies according to God’s word, we honor others, including ourselves. In contrast, when we do not control our bodies, we degrade others, including ourselves.

This idea is reflected elsewhere in Paul’s writings. For example, in □ 1 Corinthians 6:16, Paul says,

ESV 1 Corinthians 6:16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”

Paul is using an example of the most casual sex you can imagine: with a prostitute. No love. No commitment. No feelings. If there was ever a sexual encounter that was just physical and temporary, this would be it.

But even in this situation, Paul says the two bodies become one body. Paul uses two important words here that are easy to miss and misunderstand. But they point to a union that is much more than just physical and temporary.

The first important word is □ “body.” We most commonly use the word, “body” to describe the sum of our physical parts. That’s not what Paul means. He uses a Greek word that refers to the whole person, not just the physical part, but also the spiritual part.

The second important word is □ “joined.” It means to bond, to glue, to weld, to cement, to bind indissolubly. The suggestion is that the joining is permanent, irreversible, and that the two people joined are forever

changed. When you have sex, even casual sex, you become one with your partner in a way that changes you and your partner permanently.

It's obvious that, in sex, you are joined temporarily in a physical way. What's not so obvious is that you are also joined spiritually in such a deep way that it can't be undone without damage. You're giving away a part of yourself that you can't get back. And you're taking a part of your partner that he or she will never get back.

That's how God designed it to be. When Paul says, "For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh,'" he's quoting Genesis 2:24, describing God's creation of marriage. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (NASB).

God made humans differently than all the other animals. We bear God's image. That means we are spiritual beings. As spiritual beings, God designed sex to be different for us than for all the other animals. For animals, it's just physical. For us, it's also spiritual.

God designed sex to spiritually bond you to your marriage partner. Sex is like spiritual super glue. It's intended to be permanent. And it's not an all-purpose glue; it's intended for marriage only.

When we misuse sex, we do damage. When we treat super glue like Velcro, we do damage. When we bond ourselves to a sexual partner and then break it off, we do damage. Paul says that every time we misuse sex, we degrade ourselves and the other person.

So, back in □ verse 4 of our text, controlling ourselves in holiness and honor describes a sexual purity that aligns with the will of God and the best interests of others. Holy sex honors God, ourselves, and others. That is a part of the holiness we are to pursue.

In □ verse 5, Paul describes the unholiness we are to avoid, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;

Here, the term “Gentiles” is not used to describe ethnicity, but faith. The Gentiles are those who do not believe in the God of the Bible. Collectively, they are the unbelieving culture in which the Thessalonians live. Which raises the question, what was the unbelieving Thessalonian culture like? What ancient cultural norms reflected being led by “the passion of lust?”

Turns out that their ancient Greek culture was similar to ours, and in some ways, more promiscuous. For example, it was socially acceptable for men to have sexual relationships before marriage. Prostitution was okay. A man who owned female slaves could use them to satisfy his sexual appetites. Married men could keep mistresses and concubines. Having sex with the wife of another man was condemned, but violations of this norm were well known.<sup>4</sup>

As you may have sensed from this description, there was a double standard. Women were far more limited than men. A married woman was never to have sexual relations with anyone but her husband.<sup>5</sup> But men had more freedom to satisfy themselves in multiple ways.

In addition, in ancient Greece, sex between males was not uncommon, including pederasty, the relationship between an older man and an adolescent male. Nevertheless, the one assuming the passive role in

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<sup>4</sup> Green, Gene L., *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 187-188.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 188.

male same-sex relationships was considered to be of lesser status. Adolescent males in passive roles were expected to grow out of it and become dominant in adulthood. Adult males remaining in passive roles were stigmatized as effeminate.<sup>6</sup>

These definitely weren't the good old days.

Greek sexual ethics were organized around a set of socially derived ideas rather than the revealed will of the one true God.<sup>7</sup>

Given these ancient cultural norms, scriptural boundaries for sex would have seemed just as restrictive to the Thessalonians as they seem to us. Greek culture would have neither affirmed nor applauded the biblical sexual ethic Paul is encouraging.

Sexual holiness was then and is now countercultural.

Paul mentions a third facet of holiness in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:6 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.

When Paul mentions wronging a 1 Thessalonians 4:6 “brother” he has in view believers engaged in sexual immorality within the body of Christ. So, this facet of holiness is connected to the well-being of the church.

Also, the combination of the words, 1 Thessalonians 4:6 “transgress” and “wrong” suggest more than a mere crossing of moral boundaries. Paul seems to view it as an exploitation of healthy community, an abuse of fellowship.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality\\_in\\_ancient\\_Greece](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_ancient_Greece).

<sup>7</sup> Green, 189.



Sexual sin within the church not only compromises the purity of the church, but also destroys the community God intends us to enjoy.

We need look no further than the sexual scandals in the world-wide church today to see the devastating effects that concern Paul. It is out of this concern that Paul issues the sobering warning in □ verse 6: “the Lord is an avenger of all these things.” An “avenger” is one who carries out a judicial sentence. The Lord is the punisher.

This flies in the face of the popular notion that some forms of sexual immorality are victimless or harmless or without consequences.

Paul is not dangling believers over the pit of hell; he is warning of the painful discipline of a loving Father.

Having covered the various facets of holiness, Paul puts a point on all this in □ verse 7, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.

Holiness is our heavenly Father’s plan and purpose for his children. He calls us to holiness, not impurity.

Verse 7 seems to be Paul’s big idea in this text, so I am just going to make it the big idea of my sermon: □ God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.

I can anticipate some pushback on this big idea and all that has led up to it. I can almost hear someone say, “Bob, all this holiness hocus is a senseless imposition of your moral values on my sexual freedoms. It’s pathetically out of touch with reality because people are going to cross

your boundaries anyway. It's repressive, puritanical, and prudish because sex is no big deal. It's just physical."

In [1](#) verse 8, Paul seems to anticipate such pushback when he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

To disregard the call to holiness does not disregard Paul. Neither does it disregard me or any other teacher. It disregards God himself, the one who gave us his word, and the one to whom we must give an account at the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul is not being a killjoy. In fact, he wants us to live abundantly, which is precisely why he calls us to holiness. Holiness is the pathway to reward and living life abundantly, both in this life and the life to come. Holiness is vital to a believer's spiritual well-being.

Right about now some of you may be feeling ashamed. Perhaps you have been involved in some impurity. We all have in one way or another, at one time or another. Let me remind you of some things that are true.

First, forgiveness is available. First [1](#) John 1:9 says,

ESV 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

You can confess your sins to God and start fresh right now. The Old Testament patriarch, David, was a voyeur and an adulterer who confessed and found his way back to closeness with God.

You may be thinking, “I’ve confessed over and over again, but keep falling back, and I feel powerless to change.”

You are not alone. And you are not hopeless.

Look with me again at the last part of □ verse 8 in our text. Paul says God is the one “who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” The moment we believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life, the Holy Spirit comes to permanently indwell us. The question is: Why would Paul tack on this seemingly random bit of theology at the end of our text?

Because it is not random. The role of the Holy Spirit is vital to holiness.

You may be thinking, “Well, if the Spirit is so vital to holiness, why didn’t Paul explain it more instead of just tacking it on the end?”

Maybe he didn’t have to. Maybe he had already explained it to the Thessalonians previously. Remember, back in verse 2, Paul alludes to some unspecified instructions he had already given the Thessalonians. We don’t know for sure what those instructions were. But it’s not hard to imagine that the role of the Spirit in holiness was included, and that Paul is simply reminding them of it now.

Advancing this notion, we know that Paul had written a letter to the Galatians a year or two earlier, in which he addresses the role of the Spirit in holiness. For example, in □ Galatians 5:16, Paul says,

ESV Galatians 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

To □ “gratify the desires of the flesh” is the same thing as surrendering your body to “the passion of lust” and the “impurity” Paul warns

against in our text. To overcome this and to pursue holiness instead, we are to □ “walk by the Spirit” —the Holy Spirit God has given to us.

Notice the promise here: □ “will not.” In the original Greek, Paul uses a double negative, which makes the promise emphatic: “will absolutely, positively not.”<sup>8</sup> If we walk by the Spirit, we will absolutely not indulge in impurity but will instead walk in holiness. Guaranteed.

But how do we walk by the Spirit?

It is simple, but not always easy.

Let me cite an excellent explanation from □ Dr. Roger Fankhauser, author of the book, *Stormproof Men: Sexual Purity for Christian Men in a Sex-Saturated World*. Roger also happens to be a friend and member of Moon Valley who usually sits up front in the splash zone. Come to think of it, you probably would have been better served if Roger had preached this sermon, but it’s too late now. Here's what he says about walking in the Spirit on page 111 of his book. It applies to both men and women. He says,

□ Sanctification (growth in general and sexual purity in particular) comes through a faith process. It starts with hearing the Word of God, and by faith believing it as true and sufficient for life. □ The Holy Spirit will *always* lead in accord with the Word. He might use a direct quote, a truth principle, a promise, an application of the Word, or even a “nudge,” but His leading will always be in accord with the Word. □ That he does this reinforces the importance of spending time in His Word; it gives the Spirit something with which to work in our lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Fankhauser, *Stormproof Men*, 109-110.

□ We can summarize the process of walking in the Spirit in one easy statement: *Hearing the Word with faith, then in faith responding to Him.* □ He will always lead us in a direction leading to our Christlikeness. □ We take in the Word of God and learn the truth it contains. We learn the truth that sin is no longer our legal master. We learn the truth about the indwelling Holy Spirit and the power He provides us. □ We believe what the Scriptures say, and we obey them as we respond in faith, trusting that the Holy Spirit leads us in the right direction through the application of the Scriptures. □ We believe the Holy Spirit provides us the power we need to obey as we obey.

That is an important concluding statement: “We believe the Holy Spirit provides us the power we need to obey as we obey.” God has called us in holiness. And by his Spirit, he has given us the power to fulfill our calling. Believe it.

That brings us right back to the big idea: □ God has not called us to impurity but in holiness.

Let me mention several pertinent things in closing.

First, if you need some help with holiness, please contact me. Business cards with my email and cell number are available at the Connect Counter in the lobby. I would be happy to talk with you and will do my best to sort out the help you need.

Second, we are starting today a brand-new segment of our Fifteen class titled, “Faith, Sexuality & Gender.” I will be leading this class, along with Phil and Joyce Schaffer. It will be right after the service in Room 200—the youth room. And it will last for 11 Sundays.

The class will be a fairly deep dive into the contemporary issues of sexuality and gender. The goal is to help you navigate these issues in a biblically informed, Christlike way. There is no need to pre-register. Just join us when you can.

Third and finally, we are observing communion today, which may be a perfect time for you to do some business with God after hearing his word today.

Communion reminds us of some things that are true.

For example, you are not beyond the reach of God's grace. God already knew all the sins you would commit before he lovingly decided to pay for them on the cross in your place and on your behalf.

On the basis of his work on the cross, the Lord gives judicial forgiveness to all who simply believe in him. If you have believed, the penalty for all your sins has already been paid. You are adopted into God's forever family. And you cannot be unadopted for bad behavior.

The love for you that drove Jesus to the cross still drives him today in pursuit of a close relationship with you. The pathway to closeness and abundance is holiness. To the extent that we stumble and fail in our pursuit of holiness, the Lord offers relational forgiveness, whereby we confess our sins, and he cleanses us, restoring us to fellowship. We repent, and he embraces us and empowers us to change by his Spirit.

Communion reminds us of this dynamic and presents us with an opportunity for self-examination. This is an opportunity to confess to him our wrongdoing, and to repent, believing that the Spirit gives us the power to change.

In a moment, I am going to pray. Afterward, some music will play, at which time I encourage you to do some business with God, as needed. Whenever you are ready, you may come to either one of the tables up front, where you can eat the bread and drink the cup. The bread represents Christ's body given for you on the cross. The juice represents Christ's blood shed for the forgiveness of sin. You may partake of the elements at the table or back at your seat; it doesn't matter.

If you would like me to serve you the elements right where you are seated, that would be my privilege. When the time comes, just raise your hand and I will find my way to you.

Let this be a fresh start in holiness.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you for your love and grace and forgiveness reflected on the cross. In this moment, where faith is needed, may it happen. Where confession is needed, may it happen. Where repentance is needed, may it happen. May this be a fresh start in holiness, empowered by your Spirit. Amen.

Whenever you are ready, you may now partake of the elements. There is no rush.