

This morning, I am in the fifth week of a sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. In the first section of this letter, Paul reminds them of the gospel and of his love for them, and he defends himself against his critics' accusations and slander. In the section that begins in chapter 4 this morning, Paul transitions to instructions about how to live as a Christian. In this chapter, he'll focus mainly on three areas of life: sex, work, and death. The next two weeks we'll look at works and death, but this morning, we will look at verses 1-8 and what Paul has to say about God's vision for our sexuality.

NIV 1 Thessalonians 4:1 - Finally, brothers, 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. ² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

Paul was writing this letter to a church in the Roman Empire, and these words about sexuality are addressed to people living in a culture that in no way reflected the values which he was espousing. In Paul's day, most men not only had a wife whose role it was to manage the household and bear his children, but they also had a mistress who provided them with intellectual companionship, and sometimes a concubine for sexual purposes, and access to prostitutes whenever they wanted, and often boys who they used for their sexual pleasure as well. All while the women, of course, were expected to be faithfully married and to take care of the household and the children. And into this culture, Paul comes with a message of sexual fidelity to your spouse and a challenge to not give into every sexual impulse but to control your body in a way that is holy and honorable, so that you might not

take advantage of others. And he warns them that God will punish people for their sins, and reminds them that God calls them not to impurity but to holy lives.

Now, there are certainly many in our culture who feel that God's vision for sexuality as outlined in the Bible is woefully out of step with our culture's vision of sexuality, but the truth is that it was just as countercultural in Paul's day, as it often is in cultures around the world. Paul did not expect that his message of God's vision for sexuality would be met with a 100% approval rate, nor do I. But, as Paul, said, *For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus*. Before we dive deep into God's vision for our sexuality and relational life, let me make two preliminary statements.

First of all, let me say that I recognize that for many of you, the topic of sexuality carries with it many strong feelings. It may bring up memories of past experiences, or present pain or longings, and possibly some real confusion or questions. I will be doing my best this morning to share my understanding of what the Bible lays out as God's vision for our sexuality. If you find points of disagreement, or aspects that make you angry or confused, or points that you hadn't thought about before, **I want you to consider this sermon an invitation to a conversation**. I fully recognize that each individual story is unique. There are no "single people" or "married people" or "gay people" or "divorced people" or even "Christians." There are individual people with unique names and stories. My preference would be to have one-to-one conversations with each of you instead of just preaching a one-way sermon, but that's not possible. The bottom line is that you are welcome to reach out to me and discuss further anything that troubles you or requires more conversation. And I want you to know that it is possible to see things differently and still have respectful conversations as we seek understanding together.

Secondly, let me say that often sexuality is a topic that is avoided in church and in Christian families, and when it is brought up, the focus is mainly on rules, on the do's and the don'ts, which I believe puts the emphasis in the wrong place and sets people up for failure. The approach I will take this morning is to begin with God's vision and purpose for sexuality, which is about much more than a list of do's and don'ts, and much more beautiful. Our culture is not shy about giving its vision for sexuality. We should not be shy to share God's vision either, for it is a better vision for the world.

Let me share four aspects of God's vision for our sexuality. Two books that really helped were *Rethinking Sexuality* by Juli Slattery, and *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* by Christopher Yuan:

1) God created our sexuality to be a sign pointing to Him

Genesis 2:21-25 - So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. ²⁵ The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

From the very beginning, God created a man and a woman, and says that the man will leave his family, join to his wife, and they will become one flesh. This is the first word on marriage and sexuality – one man and one woman coming together in unity, in a relationship where they could be vulnerable and without shame.

God created our sexuality to be a sign pointing to Him. Everything God has created is meant to reflect in some way His character. Consider some of the Bible language: Look at the sparrows. The Lord is like a shepherd. We are to be like trees planted besides streams of water, bearing fruit in season. I am the bread of life. When it comes to our sexuality, God could have given us the ability to reproduce in many different ways. It could have come from high fiving another person, or from getting wet like Gremlins. But instead he created a man and a woman to be attracted to each other and to reproduce sexually.

So how is this meant to point to God? Consider that God created sex to be an expression of intimacy, exclusivity, complementarity, and passionate love expressed in the context of a covenant relationship, a whole life commitment known as marriage. A covenant is like a contract, but with relational intimacy. As Paul writes in Ephesians 5:22-33:

Ephesians 5:22-33 - Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but **holy and blameless**. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their

own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

When we read this passage, we often get hung up on the whole submission thing. **But Paul's main point in this passage is that marriage is meant to be a sign pointing to God, revealing something to us about God's character.** Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, to present her to himself as a radiant church, holy and blameless. And as the church submits to Christ, wives should submit to their husbands. He ends by saying that marriage is a profound mystery, but it is really meant to point to Christ and His church, God and His people. This earthly marriage is meant to be a sign pointing to the relationship we were created to have with God. We are meant to enjoy a covenant relationship with God, a whole life commitment that is marked by intimacy, exclusivity, complementarity, and passionate love. Romantic love, marriage, and sex are meant to point to the love above all loves, the covenant relationship we are to enjoy with God. In fact, not only does the Bible begin with a marriage, but it will also end with a marriage scene:

Revelation 21:1-5 - *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

The Bible begins with a marriage between a man and a woman, and ends with a wedding scene between God and His people. The author of Revelation uses wedding language to describe heaven because it is the best language we have on earth to communicate the depth of intimacy, exclusivity, complementarity, and passionate love that we will enjoy with God forever. Earthly marriage and sexuality is just the sign, and will pass away and no longer be needed in heaven,

because we will have the real thing forever; we will have God Himself, the love we have been searching for. And remember that throughout the Old Testament, God often uses marriage imagery to illustrate His relationship with His people, and uses the language of spiritual adultery when He talks about our sin. In other words, sin is not just rule-breaking; it is breaking God's heart and our covenant of love.

Marriage and sexuality is meant to be a sign pointing to God and the relationship we were designed to enjoy forever with Him. There is a scene in Matthew 22 where a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death, ask Jesus a question in hopes of exposing how ridiculous views on the afterlife are. Jesus replies with:

²⁹ Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Notice how Jesus responds. In heaven, there will be no marriage. There will be no sex. They will not be necessary. **Jesus responds by saying that if you think there is marriage in heaven, you don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God – you don't realize that there is something greater in store that will make marriage and sexuality an unnecessary afterthought in heaven.** This means that if you are married, you and your wife will no longer be husband and wife in heaven; the long-lost reunion with your departed spouse that is so popular in the cultural imagination may not be exactly as you envision in your head when you arrive in heaven. Not that you won't be reunited, but Jesus is saying that if you experienced the joy of marital oneness on earth, it will be nothing compared to what you will be experiencing in eternity with God.

We were created to enjoy a covenantal relationship with God marked by intimacy, exclusivity, passionate love, and yes, complementarity. The complementarity of male and female is meant to point to the complementarity of God and His people. This is why the Bible consistently presents homosexuality as contrary to God's design and will. It is not hatred or prejudice, but because marriage was designed to be more than just a vehicle for the happiness of people but an impermanent sign pointing people to the relationship we were designed to enjoy with God forever. The Bible's witness on this is consistent, regardless of what our culture has come to believe and teach, and yes, there were homosexual relationships in Jesus' and Paul's time as well, not just between men and boys but between consenting adults as well. And if you want to discuss this further, I am happy to have that conversation.

So the first element of God's vision for sexuality is that our sexuality is meant to point to Him. Not only is marriage meant to point to Him, but our very longing for intimacy, exclusivity, and passionate love, for a perfect love that never ends, is meant to point us to Him.

2) We are all sexually broken

Recently there was a movie that came out called Sound of Freedom that opened many people's eyes to the horrors of sex trafficking around the world and how prevalent it is, that young people are being kidnapped and their bodies used for the gratification of adults. And as many of you know from personal experience, many lives have been forever altered by experiencing unwanted sexual abuse or rape at the hands of others. But the reality of the Bible is that we are all sexually broken. It's not that some of us are broken and some of us are just fine, thank you very much. Although we were all created in God's image, and capable of reflecting Him in the way we love others, we have all sinned, and as a result every part of us is twisted, including our sexuality. This means that our desires are not pure. Our heart is not perfect. Our will is not aligned with God's will by nature. "I was born this way" does not mean that our natural desires are from God or good for us. Because of our fallenness, we will want things that are bad for us and for others. We will not desire what God wants for us, but what we want. We will not have a pure desire for only our spouse. We want to be our own Lord.

Jeremiah 17:9 - The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Romans 7:18 - I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

God created our sexuality as a good gift to be a sign pointing to Him. But we are all sexually broken.

3) We are saved by grace, not by our sexual purity

When Jesus sent out his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, He did not say, "Go into all the world and make virgins of all people," or "Go into all the world and make heterosexuals." He told us to make disciples, followers of Him, to teach people to obey everything He has commanded. Salvation is by Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross, nothing else.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

This is good news for us, since we are all sexually broken and none of us can stand before God on the basis of our purity. Jesus came for sinners.

Matthew 9:10-13 - While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

We are saved by grace, not by our sexual purity. This means as well that our job is not to judge those outside the church but to love them and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them.

1 Corinthians 5:12-13 - What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside.

We are all broken and in need of a Savior, and so we point people to Jesus.

4) If Jesus is your Lord, the call is to be holy

Throughout the Bible, God's clear design is what I called last week "holy sexuality," to borrow a phrase from the author Christopher Yuan: chastity in singleness, faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman. People throughout the Bible and history rebel against that design in different ways, but the design and the vision remains.

Be sanctified. Be set apart. Be like Jesus. Love as He loves. Serve as He serves. Avoid sexual immorality – porneia – which included every kind of sexual intercourse outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

I said at the outset that sometimes the focus of the church when it comes to sexuality is legalism, setting up laws and thinking you are saved by them. But the other extreme is antinomianism, thinking that Jesus' salvation is a license to sin and do as you please. But this is not the case. Faith without works is dead. If Jesus

is your Lord, the call is to submit every area of your life, including your sexuality, to Him.

So, in a nutshell, this is God's vision for sexuality: God created our sexuality to be a sign pointing to Him. We are all sexually broken. We are saved by grace, not by our sexual purity. And if Jesus is your Lord, then you are called to be holy, which at the very least includes chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. So what are the implications of this vision of sexuality? Remember again what Paul wrote:

³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them.

1) Sex is a bodily commitment to another person that is meant to happen in the context of a whole life commitment to that person

If our sexuality is meant to point to God's love for us, then it makes sense that God designed it to be expressed within the context of a whole life commitment, the covenantal relationship of love that we call marriage. It is not just God being a prude or trying to squash people's fun. It is His protection for us, especially for women, who are the most vulnerable to a society where anything goes sexually. **The implication is that we are not to give our bodies to another unless we have also given each other the rest of ourselves** – relationally, emotionally, financially, and so on. Casual sex and the hookup culture and apps are wrong because they violate God's design for our sexuality and for our spiritual and emotional health. To give ourselves to someone physically when we do not have the protection and security of a whole life commitment is to take advantage of others or to open ourselves up others taking advantage of us, using each other and not loving each other.

This means that sex in the context of a whole life commitment is not just for procreation but becomes an act that reaffirms your covenant with each other. As Tim Keller put it:

“When you use sex inside a covenant, it becomes a vehicle for engaging the whole person in an act of self-giving and self-commitment. When I, in marriage, make myself physically naked and vulnerable, it's a sign of what I've done with my whole life...

Sex is supposed to be a sign of what you have done with your whole life, and that's the reason why sex outside of marriage, according to the Bible, lacks integrity. You're asking someone to do with your body **what you're not doing with your life**. You're saying, "Let's be physically vulnerable to each other, let's do physical display, disclosure, but not whole-life vulnerability. If you have sex inside a covenant, then the sex becomes a covenant renewal ceremony. It becomes a commitment apparatus... you're getting married all over again; you're giving yourself all over again. In marriage when you're having sex, you're really saying, "I belong completely and exclusively to you and **I'm acting it out**... I'm giving you my body as a token of how I've given you my life. I'm opening to you physically as a token of the fact that I've opened to you in every other way."

Sex is a bodily commitment to another person that is meant to happen in the context of a whole life commitment to that person. Do not take someone's body if you're not willing to commit your whole life to them. And do not give your body to another if they have not given their whole life to you.

2) We are not to follow our desires but to exercise self-control over them, submitting them to God's will

³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them.

We are all sexually broken by the fall, and often by life circumstances as well. This means that just because something feels right to you does not make it right for you or for others. And this is very countercultural in a world that is teaching people that their feelings are their truth. Just because you were "born this way" is not a justification for behavior. We are all fallen and sexually broken and we must be born again by God's Spirit, new creations whose desires more and more become in line with the way God intended for us to live. As Paul put it:

1 Corinthians 6:12-13 - "Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"-- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Paul quotes a saying that was common in Corinth that essentially compared the sex drive to the hunger drive: when you are hungry, you eat, and when you feel the need for sex, you meet that need. For a man in Corinth, this meant having sex not just with one's wife but with prostitutes, slaves, and even boys. In Corinth, sex was an appetite to be satisfied, and there was no shame in satisfying one's lusts outside of marriage with either men or women or boys. The shame was in suppressing your desire for sex. And Paul speaks against this cultural norm. It is not just an appetite to be fed. It is a desire to be mastered and controlled and used in the proper time and place.

1 Corinthians 6:13-18 - The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality.

Sex joins two people together, creating an enduring bond. There are powerful bonds formed in your head and soul even when you indulge in pornography. We are not to follow every sexual desire but to exercise self-control over them.

John 8:34 - Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

The more you exercise the freedom to drink, the more you become a slave to that. And the more you indulge your sexual desire outside of marriage, the more you become a slave to it. Flee from it. Exercise self-control over it. If you struggle, confess to someone who can fight for you and hold you accountable.

James 5:16 - Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Unlike what the world says, suppressing your desire will not harm you; it will refine you to make you like Christ. And it will make the desire less powerful as you refuse to feed it.

3) We are to honor and serve others, including our spouse

³ *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;* ⁴ *that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,* ⁵ *not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;* ⁶ *and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them.*

Control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God, and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them.

Pornography, prostitution, dating hookup apps, and so many other cultural expressions of sexuality are all about using other people, other image-bearers of God, for your own pleasure. It is not love, it is passionate lust that is taking advantage of other people. This violates God's design for sexuality and harms both us and others, and we need to repent of it.

We are to serve others, treating people in a way that is holy and honorable. If you are married, this includes your spouse. Marriage is not legalized lust. You are to serve them. Lay down your lives for them. Do not take advantage of them, and do not deprive them, but be willing to honor them above yourself in a way that glorifies God.

4) We are to find our ultimate love in God

1 Thessalonians 4:1 - Finally, brothers, 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.

Marriage and sexuality was designed to be an impermanent sign pointing to the love we were designed to enjoy with God forever. For this reason, the Bible elevates singleness, because it recognizes that marriage is not the ultimate love, but that our hearts are truly longing for something that only God can perfectly give us. Paul elevates singleness, calling it a gift from God, just as much as marriage is a gift. **It's hard to appreciate just how radical this was in his day.** In those days, you had to be married and have children or you had no future, significance, or security. In fact, Caesar Augustus had widows fined if they failed to get married within 2 years, to ensure that they would not be a burden to the Roman government. As far as we can tell, Paul was the first to say it is good to be single. Christian widows did not have to get remarried, as they were cared for by their spiritual family, the church. Single men and women could serve God wholeheartedly while being a part

of the Christian community, finding their significance in Christ and not in a relationship.

Things are not that different today. Our culture, and often the church, has elevated marriage, sex, and family as idols, to the point where singles are often viewed as deficient, having something wrong with them. And those who are not having sex are definitely viewed as weird. The more God is removed from our culture, the more people are looking to a romantic relationship to fulfill and complete them, and so singleness can feel like being unloved, unwanted.

Consider what Justice Kennedy wrote in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized gay marriage: *“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family.”* That is the world’s view. But we know that there is a union more profound than marriage, that embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family, and that is our union with the Lord. Even the best marriage is but a shadow of that good reality.

Saying yes to Jesus as an unmarried person means saying no to sexual freedom, but it does not mean missing out on intimacy. Dennis Hollinger – *“Life without sexual intimacy and marriage is not a deficient life. Rather, life without intimacy with God in Christ is deficient.”* Our longings for a spouse or for sexual union are ultimately for the intimacy that is found in the One who created us.

Live to please Him. We have all heard the expression “happy wife, happy life,” but Paul tells us that our ultimate aim is not to please our spouse but to please the Lord. Live for His glory and honor. Make Him the Lord over every area of your life. **It’s not about a list of do’s and don’ts that we are trying to follow. It’s not about avoiding sex outside of marriage.** You can be a virgin and still be completely messed up in your approach to sex and relationships. **It is about living to please and honor Jesus, the one who gave His life for us, and loving Him with all our heart and loving others as He has loved us.**

³ *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;* ⁴ *that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,* ⁵ *not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;* ⁶ *and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or sister or take advantage of them.*

The good news is that although we are all sexually broken, some due to our own actions and some due to the actions of others, there is forgiveness and healing at the cross. There is grace for those who repent, and there is healing for those who make Jesus their first love.