11/15/26
Pursuing Sexual Purity

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8

Cornerstone Introduction…

Introduction
There's an elephant in the room this morning. And what am I referring to? Sexual immorality. Even mentioning those words can bring a sense of discomfort, concern, guilt, shame, and regret. And the truth is, we live in a sexually immoral culture.

Everywhere we turn, we're confronted with immorality. Whether through commercials, social media, entertainment, or even conversations in the workplace.

Sexual immorality is a tragic reality of living in a fallen world. And the problem isn't just out there; the problem is also within us. But as Christians, we have hope. The hope of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sins and to transform our lives.

Remember what Paul tells the Corinthians in **1 Corinthians 6:11**. After describing various expressions of sinful living, including sexual immorality, he wrote **"such were some of you"** but they had been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.

And that's what we're going to see in our passage this morning. God has not saved us so that we can continue living in sexual immorality. He has saved us to be a people who are holy and set apart for Him. And that brings us to our main point this morning.

Main Point: In 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8, Paul gives us three essential truths concerning our sanctification so that we would pursue sexual purity and walk in a manner pleasing to God.

Outline:
I. Embrace God's Will for Sanctification (3a)
II. Pursue Sexual Purity for Sanctification (3b–6a)
III. Remember God's Motivations and Provision for Sanctification (6b–8)

And it is my prayer that God, by His grace and through His Word, would work powerfully in our hearts, that we would grow in our sanctification.

I. Embrace God's Will for Sanctification (3a)

Last week, John Marc walked us through the opening verses of this chapter, where Paul begins to focus on how the gospel should practically applies the lives of believers. And right away, Paul makes it clear that God's will for their lives is that they would be sanctified.

Look at what he writes in verse **3 "For this is the will of God, your sanctification."**

The Will of God[1]

Now, when we talk about the will of God, what exactly do we mean? I think many Christians are confused about what God's will actually is. But Scripture helps us understand that there are two aspects of God's will.

First, there is God's decretive will. This refers to everything God has sovereignly ordained to take place. We don't know what tomorrow holds because God hasn't revealed all His purposes to us.

But second, there is God's preceptive will. This refers to what God has explicitly revealed and commanded in His Word. And unlike His hidden decrees, this is not something we have to guess at. God has made His will known to us.

Paul tells us plainly, **"For this is the will of God, your sanctification."**

Now, this word **"sanctification"** essentially means holiness. It carries the idea of being set apart, consecrated, or devoted to God.

And here, Paul is emphasizing our ongoing growth in holiness. As believers, we are to become more and more conformed to the likeness of Christ, both in our character and in the way we live.

Think about the difference between a good athlete and a great athlete. Often, what distinguishes them isn't simply natural ability, but their willingness to embrace their craft. It's a passion that motivates them to pursue their vocation with discipline and diligence.

And I think there's an important parallel here to our Christian lives. We can all say that we want to grow in Christlikeness. But are we actually embracing God's will for our sanctification?

Because if we're unwilling to take seriously what God has commanded, we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves spiritually stagnant, not progressing in maturity, and struggling with the same sins.

[1] (See also: John 6:40 — God's will for salvation and eternal life; 1 Pet. 3:17; 4:19 — God's will in suffering for righteousness)

And brothers and sisters, think about this. What else is really worth living for? If we're living in light of Christ's return, if we're living for eternity, then why wouldn't we give ourselves wholeheartedly to pursuing the very thing God has called us to, our sanctification?

And I don't say this as a perfect man, but as a fellow brother in Christ who wants to encourage all of us to press on and, by God's grace, pursue holiness.

So let ask ourselves some questions. What is keeping you from wholeheartedly embracing God's will for your sanctification? Is it that the things of this world, the distractions, the enticements, or the busyness keeping you from communion with your Savior through His word?

Or is it that you're not praying and asking God to align your heart with His? Are you asking Him, as we see in Psalm 119, to incline your heart to His Word and His ways?

Or perhaps, if you were to place God's will on one side of a scale and your own desires on the other, would your desires outweigh what God wants for your life?

Brothers and sisters, whatever it is, I want to encourage you to examine your heart and give God's will the priority it deserves. There is nothing this world has to offer that is more valuable or ultimately more satisfying than knowing God and walking in His will.

So let us as God's people embrace God's will for our sanctification.

II. Pursue Sexual Purity for Sanctification (3b–6a)

Having established that God's will for us is our sanctification, Paul now gets very specific by addressing the issue of sexual immorality.

And I find this fascinating. As Paul begins to explain what it looks like to walk in a manner pleasing to God, the very first area he addresses is our sexual purity. And I think that's significant because it reminds us just how destructive sexual immorality to our spiritual life.

And one of the things we need to understand right away is that sexual immorality is fundamentally incompatible with our sanctification. We cannot willingly continue practicing sexual immorality while claiming to be pursuing holiness and growth in Christlikeness.

And so, the first instruction Paul gives is, look with me at the rest of verse **3, "that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality."**

Now, the word **"abstain"** means to avoid, to keep away from, or to distance yourself from something. And the phrase **"sexual immorality"** is actually one word in the Greek, and it's a

broad term referring to any sexual conduct outside of God's design for sexual intimacy within the marriage covenant between one man and one woman.

Paul is calling believers to keep themselves far away from sexual sin. So, if we're going to be growing in sanctification, then we must be abstaining from sexual immorality. Sexual purity is not optional for the believer. This is part of God's revealed will for our growth in holiness.

And as we move into verse 4, Paul gives us further instruction on this pursuit of purity. Abstaining from sexual sin means that we must practice honorable self-control. Look with me at verse **4, "that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor."**

The word **"possess"** carries the idea of gaining or having possession of something. The word **"vessel"** is a reference to the physical body. So, in this context, Paul is speaking of exercising mastery or control over one's own body.

And notice that Paul says we are to do this **"in sanctification and honor."** Again, we see that word **"sanctification,"** which refers to holiness, or being set apart unto God. But Paul also adds the word **"honor,"** which speaks of dignity, respect, and what is honorable.

So, we are to exercise control over our bodies in a way that is consistent with God's design, reflects our devotion to Him, and brings honor to His name.

We must remember what Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 6:19–20 "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."**

And here's what we need to understand. Because of the gospel, every believer has been given the spiritual resources necessary to pursue this kind of self-control. Listen to what Paul says in **Romans 6:6, "knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin."**

We've been given the grace and power to resist sinful desires rather than be ruled by them. That doesn't mean we no longer struggle with temptation. But it does mean that sin no longer has dominion over us.

And that's precisely the contrast Paul gives in verse 5. We must reject the lustful passions of unbelief. Look at verse 5, **"not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God."**

Now, that expression **"lustful passion"** describes strong, sinful desires that seek to be gratified rather than governed by holiness and honor. Paul writes that this is a characteristic of **"the Gentiles who do not know God."**

He's referring to the unbelieving world, those who do not know God and whose lives are not governed by a desire to honor Him. They live they way they live because of their unbelief. But because of the gospel, we've been given the grace to say NO to those desires and pursue holiness instead.

And this is important because, sexual immorality doesn't just dishonor God or involve our own sinful desires. It can also lead us to sin against others.

And that brings us to the next instruction Paul gives in verse 6. Look at the first part with me, **"and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter."**

The word **"transgress"** carries the idea of overstepping a boundary or violating what is right. And the word **"defraud"** speaks of taking advantage of someone or wronging them.

And what Paul is communicating here is that sexual sin also involves wrongdoing against others.

I want us to think about this for a moment. When two unmarried people willingly engage in sexual immorality, they are not simply sinning against God. They are also wronging and defrauding one another.

When someone commits adultery, they're transgressing and defrauding their spouse and the covenant they have made.

And even when someone views explicit material in private, that's not some harmless, victimless activity. They're dishonoring others through supporting something that involves the exploitation and degradation of people made in God's image.

But I want to take this one step further. We need to understand that the consequences of sexual immorality extend even further than this. Sometimes we convince ourselves that because nobody knows about our sin, or because we're committing it in private, it really isn't affecting anyone else.

But that's not true. Scripture tells us that our sin grieves the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). And when we give ourselves over to sexual immorality rather than walking in obedience to God, we compromise our fellowship with Him and hinder our spiritual fruitfulness (John 15:1–11).

And brothers and sisters, that affects others as well. Remember, God has called us to serve one another as stewards of His grace (1 Peter 4:10).

And so, when we're harboring unrepentant sexual sin, we're not only dishonoring God and wronging others, we're also hindering our ability to faithfully serve others and be instruments of God's grace in their lives.

Our sin is never as private as we might like to think. And that should cause us to take Paul's instruction here very seriously. We must refuse to sin against others through sexual immorality.

As I read Paul's warnings here, I'm reminded of Solomon's instruction in Proverbs 5 and 7. Solomon doesn't simply tell his son to avoid sexual immorality.

He exposes its deceptive nature and its devastating consequences. In Proverbs 5, he describes how sexual sin may appear sweet and pleasurable, but in the end, it is bitter and destructive. And in Proverbs 7, he pleads with his son not even to turn toward the path that leads to sexual immorality.

And isn't that exactly what we need to understand? Our flesh and the world tell us that sexual immorality promises pleasure and satisfaction. But God's Word exposes that lie. Whatever fleeting pleasure sin may offer, its consequences are devastating.

And so, brothers and sisters, we need to see sexual immorality the way God sees it.
Don't entertain it. Don't see how close you can get to it. Flee from it, just as Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife.

And by God's grace, don't simply run away from sexual immorality. Pursue sexual purity, honor Christ with your body, and walk in a manner pleasing to Him.

Whether it's in our outward behavior or in the sinful desires we're deliberately entertaining in our hearts, we cannot be pursuing holiness while making provision for sin that God has commanded us to put to death.

And brothers and sisters, I want to encourage those of you who may be looking back with regret over years of sexual sin.

Remember what the Lord says in Joel 2:25, where He promises to restore the years that the locusts had eaten. Now, that was a specific promise God made to Israel. But I think there's a wonderful reminder here of the mercy and compassion of our God. Our God is a God who restores!

And while that doesn't mean He will remove every consequence of our sin, it does mean that no matter how many years you've wasted pursuing sinful pleasures, God's grace is sufficient to forgive you, transform you, and bring genuine spiritual fruitfulness into your life.

He can restore the joy of your salvation, renew your fellowship with Him, and enable you to walk in holiness. So don't allow the failures of your past to keep you from pursuing Christ today. Turn from your sin, look to your Savior, and rejoice in the mercy and transforming grace of God.

And brothers and sisters, we must be diligent in our pursuit of sexual purity. And this begins with our relationship with Jesus Christ. We must be abiding in Him, depending upon His grace, and walking in obedience to His Word.

But there are also practical steps we should be taking in our pursuit of holiness.

For those of you who are married, remember what Solomon tells us in Proverbs 5. God has designed sexual intimacy to be enjoyed within the marriage covenant. These desires are not inherently sinful. And so, we ought to be cultivating a loving, intimate relationship with our spouse, seeking to enjoy God's good gift in a manner that honors Him.

But we also need to be carefully guarding what we're allowing into our hearts and minds. What are we putting before our eyes? What are we watching? What are we looking at on our phones? Are these things helping us pursue holiness, or are they feeding the very desires God has commanded us to put away?

Perhaps that means restricting access to certain things, using accountability software, or pursuing accountability with trusted brothers or sisters in Christ who can encourage us, pray with us, and help us in our fight against sin.

And we must also be diligent in taking our thoughts captive. When our minds begin drifting toward sinful desires, we need to turn those thoughts to the Lord, confess our sin, remind ourselves of the truths of the gospel, and seek His grace to walk in obedience.

And brothers and sisters, these are just a few practical steps. If this is an area of struggle for you, please know that the pastors and elders here would love to come alongside you, pray with you, and help equip you through God's Word.

But I want us to understand something. All of these practical measures have their place, but ultimately, sexual purity is a matter of the heart. We cannot simply manage our outward behavior while allowing our hearts to remain captivated by sin.

We must be growing in our fear of God, learning to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

And so, don't continue hiding or making excuses for your sin. Confess it, turn from it, and remember the wonderful promise of 1 John 1:9: God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, by the grace of God, pursue sexual purity for the glory of Christ.

III. Remember God's Motivations and Provision for Sanctification (6b–8)

So, we've seen that God's will for our lives is our sanctification, and that an essential part of pursuing holiness is abstaining from sexual immorality. But beginning in the second half of verse 6, he gives us several important motivations why we must take our sanctification seriously.

And all of these motivations direct our attention back to God Himself. Look with me at the second part of verse 6, **"because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you"**

Paul wants believers to remember God's judgment. Now, that word **"avenger"** refers to one who brings about just punishment for wrongdoing.

And what Paul is communicating here is that God does not take sexual immorality lightly. He sees it, He knows it, and He will hold those who practice it accountable.

We need to take these warnings seriously. Now, it's important that we understand something here. For those who genuinely belong to Jesus Christ, there is no condemnation. Christ has borne the punishment for our sins.

But that doesn't mean God overlooks our sin. Hebrews 12 reminds us that our heavenly Father disciplines His children for their good, so that they might share in His holiness.

But Scripture also gives us a much more sobering warning concerning those who continue in unrepentant sin.

Listen to what Paul says in **Galatians 5:19–21 "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality… of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."**

And so, we must never presume upon the grace of God or treat sexual immorality as though it were a small thing. For the genuine believer, God lovingly disciplines His children. But for those who persist in rejecting Christ, there remains the certainty of divine judgment.

And that's precisely why Paul says he had already **"solemnly warned"** the Thessalonians about these things. Sexual purity matters to God, and the Lord will not overlook wrongdoing.

But Paul doesn't stop with the warning of God's judgment. He now reminds these believers of the purpose for which God has called them. Look at verse **7, "For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification."**

And here Paul brings us right back to where he began in verse 3. God's will for our lives is our sanctification. The gospel isn't a license to continue living in sexual immorality, giving ourselves over to sinful desires and pursuing whatever pleasures we want. No, God has called us to holiness.

That's not the purpose of our salvation. God has saved us to make us holy, to progressively conform us to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we would glorify Him with our lives, including our bodies.

And this is precisely what Paul tells us in **Titus 2:11–14**. He explains that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation, and that this very grace instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live godly lives.

Christ didn't just die to forgive us of our sins. He died to redeem us from our sins and to purify a people for Himself. A people who would be zealous for good works.

God has not saved us so that we could continue living in impurity. He has saved us to be a people who belong to Him and who pursue holiness.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He concludes this section by emphasizing not only the authority behind these commands, but also the gracious provision God has made for our sanctification.

Look at verse **8, "So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you."**

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that the commands he had given them were by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. And here, at the end of this section, Paul returns to that same reality.

This is important because some would argue that these instructions concerning sexual purity were simply for another time and culture, and that times have changed.
But Paul makes it absolutely clear that these are not merely cultural expectations or the opinions of men. These are the commands of God Himself.

And so, to reject these instructions, to make excuses or attempt to justify continuing in unrepentant sexual immorality, is not simply to reject the teaching of men. It is to reject the very God whom we claim to follow.

God's standard for sexual purity has not changed. His Word remains just as authoritative for us today as it was for the Thessalonians.

But I want you to notice something else in this final verse, because tucked into this warning is an incredible encouragement. Paul describes God as the One **"who gives His Holy Spirit to you."**

I recognize that today's teaching may have struck a chord with many of us. Perhaps you've been convicted about areas of sexual immorality in your own life. But I want you to remember that God has not left us to pursue holiness in our own strength. He has given us His Holy Spirit!

And it is through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God, that we are enabled to put sin to death and progressively grow in holiness. And so, for my brothers and sisters here this morning, I want you to be greatly encouraged.

Jesus Christ is real. His grace is real. The Holy Spirit's power is real. And by the grace of God, you can experience genuine growth and victory over sin in your life. I say that as someone who knows what it means to struggle with sin, but who has also experienced the transforming grace of God in my own life.

Our Savior is sufficient, and His grace is sufficient for us. But perhaps you're here this morning, and while you agree that sexual immorality is wrong, you've never actually repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ.

I want you to understand something. You may be able to restrain certain outward behaviors. You may even maintain an appearance of morality. But you cannot, through your own strength, change your sinful heart or make yourself righteous before a holy God.

Only Jesus Christ can save you and give you a new heart. And the truth is, sexual immorality is only one expression of a much greater problem. Every one of us is a sinner who has fallen short of the glory of God. And that's precisely why we need Jesus Christ.

Christ came into this world and lived the perfectly righteous life that none of us could ever live. He never sinned. He was perfectly holy and obedient to His Father in every respect. And yet, this perfectly righteous Savior went to the cross to bear the punishment for the sins of His people.

He died so that sinners like us could be forgiven, reconciled to God, and given eternal life.

And through faith in Jesus Christ, His righteousness is credited to us, and our sins are forgiven. That's the hope of the gospel!

And so, if you're here this morning and you've never repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ, I urge you to turn to Him today. Trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. He alone can forgive your sins, reconcile you to God, and give you new life through His Spirit.

And for my brothers and sisters here this morning, let me encourage you with this as well. Look to Jesus Christ. Don't place your confidence in your own strength or determination. Look to your Savior. Depend upon His grace. Walk by His Spirit. And continue pursuing the holiness to which He has called you.

Because, as we've seen this morning, God's will for our lives is our sanctification. And if we're going to pursue sexual purity and walk in a manner pleasing to Him, then we must:

First, embrace God's will for our sanctification. Second, pursue sexual purity as an essential part of our sanctification. And third, remember God's motivations and provision our sanctification.

Brothers and sisters, God has called us to sanctification. And by His grace, through the power of His Holy Spirit, may we be a people who take that calling seriously and seek to glorify Him with our lives.

Let's pray.

Benediction: 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.