

Again, our sermon text for this evening is 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, looking at verses 1 through 8. As I've routinely reminded you, mainly for my benefit so I can remember where we are, we've been organizing our thoughts about Thessalonians under four major headings, four sort of headlines that kind of guide the structure of Thessalonians. The first major heading was Thanksgiving. We saw that in chapter 1. as Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians and the progress they have made. And we've been looking at explanation, as Paul explains his conduct amongst them, and it's been very autobiographical, and it ended with that glorious prayer about the Thessalonians' progress, this transitional prayer, which transitions into the next section, which we're beginning tonight, exhortation.

We saw last time that God has promised to sanctify us. For the Christian, for the true believer in Jesus Christ, it is not a question of whether you will be sanctified. God has promised to sanctify you. But that promise, the promise that God will surely sanctify us, does not remove the need for our instruction from God's Word, nor does it remove the need of our effort. The promise of God that he will sanctify us does not remove our efforts, it establishes our efforts. It establishes the need for our exhortation because this is the means by which God makes us holy. And God has promised to make us holy and he has commanded that we pursue holiness.

So what does that look like? What does it mean? What kind of exhortations is Paul going to give us? Well, let's read the text. Before we do, let's ask God's help in prayer. Father in heaven, as we open up your word, as we seek to apply it to our lives and to understand it, we pray that we know not you'd teach us, but we have not give us and what we are not make us for the sake of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Reading from 1 Thessalonians chapter four, verses one through four. 1 through 8, rather.

Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus, for this is the will of God. your sanctification, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness, therefore, Whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. This is the word of the Lord.

May he add his blessing to it. It should come as no surprise that instruction about how to live a holy life touches on our sexuality. This should come as no surprise to us because it is one of the major driving forces behind human existence. If you know anything about history, you know how many historical events have been influenced by this very thing. I would put it in the number two slot as far as the most influencing human passion in history. Number one slot's gotta be envy. But the number two slot is lust. The number two slot is sexuality.

We don't have to go that far back. One example is Henry VIII. Why did the Reformation come to England, ultimately? Well, it came because Henry VIII wanted to commit sexual immorality. That's really what it comes down to. God used it. It was God used even his sin to do good in England. God is able to take, just as he used the brother's sin against Joseph to save Israel, to save the ancestor of Israel, that was good, but the means, not so good. So the fact that this is so influential, and it's influential even today.

And again, I don't think I have to tell you that. Just to give us a bit of a barometric reading on where we are as a culture, I was looking at the Babylon Bee recently. It's a great satirical news website. If you haven't heard of it, their

motto is, fake news you can trust. So they're a good time. So one of their headlines recently that I got a bit of a kick out of, one of those times where you laugh so you don't cry, was, Christian Misses the Days When All the Obscene Smut Out There Was Heterosexual.

That's a pretty good reading as far as where we are. So it makes perfect sense that since this is such a influential factor in our humanity, that sanctification, devoting our lives to God, being holy, touches on this issue. And what is the requirement? If we're gonna distill all this down into one phrase, what would it be? It's that you need to sanctify your bodies. We need to sanctify our bodies. And we'll look at this under three major headings. First, whom is this required for? Second, what does this require? And third, why is this required? Whom is this required for? Whom does this require, or what does this require? And why is this required? So first, whom is this required for?

You'll notice that Paul begins here with brothers. And we shouldn't take this as though Paul is only speaking to the men in his congregation. This word, in this culture, when you address the men in a room, you're addressing the entire room. It's sort of like how you might talk about history, the history of man. When someone says the history of man, they don't mean the history of males. They mean the history of mankind, of all humans.

That's what Paul is doing here. He's addressing them as brothers, but he's addressing the entire church because this is an issue that concerns the entire church. Now, that being said, the culture that Paul is addressing, in this culture, there is a sense in which this directive is primarily being given to men, at least in this passage. And there's a reason for that. In the culture in which the Apostle Paul lived, sexual immorality was more permissible for men than it was for women.

Just to give you a flavor for it, Cato, one of the great Stoics, known as a great moralist. So you think this is going to be the guy who is going to take the hard stance, the hard line. He's a moralist. What does Cato say? Well, Cato, he praises in one of his writings the men who go to prostitutes instead of someone else's wife and says that's really virtuous. Those are the virtuous men.

That gives you an idea of where the sexual ethic was in the Greco-Roman world, especially for men. If that's what people were praised for, imagine what they were blamed for. And because of that, because this was the culture they were in, it makes total sense for why Paul would be focusing his attention on men.

Now in our culture today, this is a problem for both men and women. You don't have to read very many statistics to find out that, for instance, even things that we normally associate with men are also a problem for women. I was talking with a counseling student at our RTS, and she was saying the statistics on pornography are shocking. Just as many women are into it as men now. It's a real thing.

So this is a very relevant message for both men and women. Who is this required for? Well, it's required for male and female Christians. Secondly, it's required for justified Christians. This is a requirement for justified Christians. It may sound like an oxymoron, but it's important to point out.

Notice how Paul addresses the believers. He says, finally then, brothers, we urge you in the Lord Jesus. in the Lord Jesus. Paul is not addressing unbelievers. He's not addressing the city of Thessalonica in general. The message of the Christian faith is not culture, shape up on sexuality. The Bible has something to say on that, and if people follow this ethic, they're going to have a better life, but that's not the message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is repent.

The message of Scripture is you have committed adultery, not primarily against your spouse or against yourself, but you've committed adultery against God. You have worshiped anything and everything except for the God to whom you owe your worship, and you need to repent and you need to trust in Him. You need to devote yourself to Him. You are an unfaithful spouse to God.

That is the message of Scripture. So this message to be holy only applies to those who are holy in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a message to believers. This is a message to those who have been justified that they might, in the words of verse, again in verse one, that you ought to walk and to please God.

The pleasing of God here is not to please a God for your justification, but to please the Father who has already been reconciled to you. If you're a Christian, if you are someone who is justified, then you ought to desire to please your Heavenly Father. There's, I don't know how many people I've talked to who have said, well, I'm trying to figure out God's will for my life. God's will is first and foremost this. It's first and foremost that you keep his law. First and foremost, according to this passage, that you abstain from sexual immorality. That's how you can please God.

So this is something for justified Christians. Again, a bit of an oxymoron, but there's another oxymoron I'm gonna throw at ya. It is a message for sanctified Christians. Again, I feel like I'm repeating myself here, because all Christians are being sanctified, but there's a point to this. Look at how Paul describes the Thessalonians. He says, finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do it more and more.

Paul isn't speaking to scoundrels. He isn't speaking to backslidden Christians. He isn't speaking to, like in 1 Corinthians 7, where he's addressing this gross adulterer. He's addressing faithful Christians whom he has already commended for their love and obedience to God. And the reason for that is this message is not confined to a single class of Christians. It's to all Christians, regardless of your spiritual maturity. I look out in this congregation and I see many who are far more spiritually mature than I am, much farther along in your Christian walk, much more physically mature than I am.

I'm 26 years old. And you might be tempted to think, well, this is a message for the young man. This is a message for the scoundrel. No, this is a message for all Christians. Yes, there are seasons of life in which this temptation is greater, but if you believe you are above it, if you believe that you don't have to worry about it, that you're past that, let he who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. We must be careful. So this is a message for Christians, men and women. It's a message for justified Christians. It's a message for even the seasoned saint. So whom is this required for? All Christians. Now, sanctify your bodies. What does this require? What does this require? Look with me at verse three.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification. that you abstain from sexual immorality. First and foremost, this requirement is that you separate yourself from anything that is sexually immoral. Now, the word here, it's translated abstain from, has the sense of separation here. The sense of consecrating yourself from something unclean. It's the same kind of idea that was present at Sinai, when the people of Israel were going out to meet God. And God says, consecrate yourselves, separate yourself from anything that is unclean. That is what God is calling, through the Apostle Paul, the Thessalonians to do. To consecrate themselves, to separate themselves from anything that is sexually immoral. And this was a very real call for the Thessalonians, as we've already seen.

This was something that was highly present in their culture. It was present, as we saw, in their social hierarchies, in the way they interacted in their culture. Adultery was rampant. It was present even in their worship. The two biggest cults, the two biggest places of worship in Thessalonica at the time of this epistle were the cult of Dionysus and the cult to Kyberos, both of which had sexual immorality as a part of your worship of these gods. That is how much it was tied into their culture.

It was present everywhere. Therefore, the call to the Thessalonians to separate themselves from anything sexually immoral meant separating in their business dealings, in their social interactions, in their worship, in everything. And honestly, the description of the Thessalonians' context sounds a lot like us today. I don't think we're quite as far gone as what Cato describes, though we're getting close.

But is sexual immorality not present everywhere? It's everywhere. It's in advertising. You can just look at some of the latest ad campaigns, especially on sports networks. It's everywhere on the internet. It's on the golf course, the kind of conversations you have. And honestly, our state religion has a whole month dedicated to celebrating sexual immorality. It's everywhere. Therefore, this call is for us.

So what does this mean? How do you separate yourself? How do you abstain from sexual immorality? What does this actually look like? Well, it begins with your thoughts. It begins in the mind. If you have a sexually immoral thought, don't nurture it. Don't let it sit. Don't play with it. Immediately take it to God.

Confess it as sin. That's the first step. It applies to applies to opportunities. If you find there is something in your life that is routinely an opportunity to sin in this way, follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you. You know me, you know that I don't miss an opportunity to make a gardening illustration. And so I'm gonna make one. I'm thinking about pruning tomatoes. And when you're pruning tomatoes, especially in this human culture, if you see, especially on those lower branches, you see there's a branch that has mold on it. What's the first, what do you do? You cut it off. You get rid of the whole branch. Why? Because you can't afford that mold to spread to the rest of the plant and take it over. It'll kill the entire plant.

That should be your attitude when it comes to sexual sin. There's something in your life that's an opportunity, cut it off, throw it from you. So this call to sanctify our bodies, what does this require? It means cutting off anything sexually immoral. And second, it means control over sexual impulses. Control over sexual impulses. Look at verse four. That each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.

Now the word Paul uses here for body is vessel, and there are some who argue that what Paul is talking about here is not so much control over the body, but the acquiring of a wife. There's a lot you can read on that if you're interested in the subject. But the issue with that interpretation is that it does, and some translations reflect that, is that then Paul's instruction here is only to unmarried men in the church. And that's not Paul's meaning here.

Paul is speaking to the entire church. He's speaking to them and saying that every single one of you need to learn to control your bodies. All of us are vessels. All of us are bodies. And we have these, and we have sexual desires. We all have this drive. It's a part of our humanity. It's one of our passions. But the thing about passions is while they can seem all-consuming, while they can seem like they run the ship, they don't. They don't.

You are ultimately in control of what you do with your passions. You need to learn self-control, and self-control is a fruit of the spirit. Even if we were to grant that the unsaved cannot control their passions, they're a slave to their passions sometimes. That is not true of Christians. What is the fruit of the Spirit? It's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Self-control. Think of the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, where he says, no temptation has overcome you than that which is common to man. And God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with every temptation will provide a way of escape.

Sometimes it'll seem as though it is in control and you're not. That's not true. Don't buy the lie. You can always say no. But on that point, if there's a routine in your life in which the passion seems overwhelming, seems all-consuming, think back. Think back to where that passion began. Because passions normally Don't become all-consuming. Don't seem to take over in a moment. Passions don't grow unless they're nurtured. Passions don't begin as these all-consuming forces.

They start as a little thought, a little inclination, and then if you don't let it, if it, then like a relentless weed, if you don't pull it out, it grows, it expands, and it becomes much more difficult to deal with. That's why it's so important to start small. Start small. Control your sexual impulses.

And in what way are we to control them? What is our goal? What is our standard for controlling them? We're to control them, in the words of Paul, in holiness and honor. Holiness and honor. What does Paul mean by that? Well, holiness is love for God. It's to control them in a way that honors God. that God is the one who made your body. God sees all things, and you are to use your body in a way that honors God. You're to control it in holiness. You're also to do so in honor. Is it honorable before men? Not just is it holy before God, though that should be our first question. Is it honorable before men? Marriage is both holy and honorable. Sexual immorality is neither. Holiness and honor.

So what does this require? Well, it requires cutting off, separating ourselves from any sexual immorality. Sanctifying our bodies means controlling our sexual impulses. And third, sanctifying our bodies means consideration of our spiritual family. Consideration of the spiritual family. Look at verse six. that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.

Paul shifts focus here from looking at inside, how it's a sin against yourself, how it's a sin against God, to how adultery, how sexual immorality is a sin against those around you. Sexual sin is never private. It always balloons

out, it always mushrooms out. It always is a sin, not just against yourself, not just against God, it's a sin against the person you're doing it with, whether that be in person or through a screen. You're sinning against them too. Sexual immorality in your thought is a sin against the other person.

And we need to think about, we need to think about that, we need to think about how we can love our neighbors in the way we use our bodies. And what Paul has in mind here in particular, especially as he uses this word, the word translated matter here, he has in mind particularly affairs, of extramarital affairs particularly. We can even see that in this word can sometimes be translated affair, and we use the word affair to speak more broadly, it's a euphemism. Paul is probably doing the same thing.

And anyone who has been involved in counseling or seen that in their family, knows that those things are never private. They're never just between two people. Because in that instance, you're not just sinning against yourself. You're not just sinning against God. You're not just sinning against the other person. You're sinning against the other person's spouse, against your spouse, against your children, against their children, against the entire extended family, against your church, against your community. Marriage is social. The family is social. Everything connects together. An extramarital affair tears so much apart that no one is harmed, that no one transgresses against a brother in this matter.

Incidentally, this concern for those around us and the way we use our bodies is where the Christian ethic towards modesty comes from. Now modesty first and foremost is about, there is a sense in which it's about self-respect. It's about presenting yourself in such a way that honors your own body. But there's also a sense in which it is love for your neighbor, not giving them an occasion for sin. And modesty doesn't just apply to your dress either. It applies to your speech.

I've had several friends I've talked to where they'll point out to me, hey, you realize, I was looking at this, and most of the words we consider swear words, they're not violations of the third commandment at all. I'm like, yeah, you're right, but they're certainly violations of modesty. Is your speech modest? Do you speak in such a way as to keep your brother or sister from sin? What about your actions? There are immodest ways you can act. Do we act in a modest way?

So what is this text, what is this call to sanctify our bodies mean? Well, it means cutting off anything sexually immoral from our lives, it means controlling our sexual impulses, and it means consideration for our spiritual family. But why is this required? What is the reason behind it? Well, Paul gives us straight up the reasons why this command is in place, why he is encouraging, commanding the Thessalonians to sanctify their bodies.

Look again at verse six, 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. Why must we sanctify our bodies? Because the Lord is an avenger, because the Lord cares, because the Lord sees. God sees. We know God. Why do you think adultery made God's top 10? Why is it so high on the list? Our culture would see it as a small thing, as a little thing. as a private matter. Why is it that God cares so much? That's what Christians are frequently asked on the street when they're sharing the gospel and they're asked about God's sexual ethic. So many non-believers will ask, why does God care? What's the point? Well, it's not because God is a prude. The reason that God, what God

hates is always driven by what God loves. What God hates is always driven by what God loves. Why does God prohibit adultery?

Because he loves marriage. Because he loves the family. Because he loves the human body that he made, he designed, that he formed from the dust of the ground. He loves every part of it. And he wants it used well and to see his good creation drag through the mud. Dragged and used and twisted apart. That's an offense to him. And God is an avenger in these matters. He sees it all. And no evil deed will go unpunished.

That's what Paul is getting at in verse five. Looking again at verse 4, that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. This is if Paul were to say, it's one thing for the Gentiles to do this. It's one thing for those who do not know the God of the Bible to commit sexual immorality. It's one thing for someone who is in the cult of Dionysus who believes that his God is honored by that to commit that. It's one thing today for an atheist, for an agnostic, for a Buddhist to go and commit sexual immorality. It's another thing for a Christian. One who knows God's requirements, who knows that they serve a holy God, a God who sees everything, who knows everything, who is present everywhere.

There is no place you can hide. Where can I go from your presence? Where can I flee? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there. If I go to the remotest part of the sea, Even there, your hand will lead me, and your right hand will lay hold of me.

That's a comfort, but it's also a warning. There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed. Why is this required? Because you know God. Though the culture will not condemn, God will. Second, because you are holy. You are holy. Look at verse seven. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Notice how he phrases that there. He doesn't say called us to holiness or into holiness, though God certainly does that. He calls us to pursue holiness, and that is a great reason to not commit sexual immorality because that's not what you're called to. You're called to holiness, but that's not what Paul says. Paul says you're called in holiness.

Again, keep going back to 1 Corinthians. Paul says that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in you, you are holy. As a Christian, you're not just being made holy, you are holy. You are God's dwelling place. You're his temple. Thus, to bring sexual immorality into your heart and into your life is akin to when Manasseh brought the cult prostitutes into the temple of God in Kings. That's what you're doing. You're violating God's sacred space. Why must we reject sexual immorality? Why must we sanctify our bodies? Because we are holy. And why ultimately are we holy? Why was the temple of God holy? Because God lives there, because you are indwelt.

Indwelt, look at verse eight. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. See, you don't stop being indwelt when you commit sexual sin. Praise God. God doesn't toss us away when we commit sin, otherwise none of us could be saved. That's also a terrifying thought. When we commit sin, when we commit sexual sin particularly, we bring God into it. We bring God who dwells in us into that sin. Not that God somehow commits the sin, but God is present with us as we commit the sin.

Paul makes this clear again in 1 Corinthians, where he tells those who are in Christ, he tells those who are in union with Christ, that their union with Christ does not cease when they enter the brothel, but rather, when they enter the brothel, they are carrying Christ with them.

They're saying, come with me, Christ, into the brothel. It's a terrifying thought. If we love the Lord Jesus Christ, if we are truly in union with him, We must remember this. Why must we sanctify our bodies? Because we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. Because we're in union with Christ.

So we've seen whom this is required for. It's required for all Christians, young and old, male and female. What is the requirement? That we separate ourselves from anything sexually immoral. that we control our bodies, and that we consider our spiritual family. Why is this required? Well, because God sees, because you are holy, and because you are indwelt by his Holy Spirit.

One final note before we close out. Notice again Paul's final words in verse eight. Therefore, whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God. If you reject God's sexual ethic, you're not just rejecting his ethic, you're rejecting him. You cannot be a believer in Jesus Christ and continually reject his law.

Also, if you feel convicted in any way, if you feel as though this sin has been present in your life, Know that you can be forgiven. That God stands ready to forgive. In the words of John Stott, give some helpful advice. He says, confess your sins. If it's been a private sin, confess it to God in your heart privately. If it's a public sin, confess publicly. And true repentance is possible. It's always possible. Because we serve a faithful God. With man it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

Beloved, let's pray. Our Father and our God, thank you for this word that pierces the division between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Thank you, Lord, that you have not left us orphans. You have indwelt us by your Holy Spirit. You give us the gift of holiness. Help us, Lord, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, even in this area of our lives. Pray in Jesus' name, amen.