

Walking to Please God

1 Thessalonians 4: 1-12

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 24 AD 2021
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We've been following the Apostle Paul's letter to a young church in the Greek city of Thessalonica. The letter overflows with thanksgiving and encouragement. In some of Paul's other letters, he has to correct sharply some sinful behavior and prideful attitudes in the churches. But with the Thessalonians, Paul happily coaches them to keep on doing what they're doing, only more so. He encourages them, "As you have received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more" (4:1). Paul has shown them by example and taught them by words how Christians live in the world. Their new life in Christ will be markedly different from the Greek culture around them. It will take intentional choices to live distinctively as Christ's people.

So Paul lays it out for them: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." He is about to tell them what God wants from them. To tell them how to grow in holiness and live according to a distinct vision for humanity that arises from our Creator's will. Now we note that in Scripture, knowing the will of God is usually less about knowing which one of several good choices you should make and lots more about knowing *how* to live whatever you are doing. The Lord's instructions go straight to the heart of how we conduct ourselves in our work and relationships, specifically in regard to our sexual expression.

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his body in holiness and honor" (4: 3-4). First up on the list of living out the will of God in our lives is how we conduct ourselves sexually. Paul begins by demanding that the Thessalonians *abstain* from immorality and *control* their bodies in holiness and honor. Sexuality is a mighty force. Within our sexuality is the glorious power to bring forth new life. To establish deep intimacy. To create ties that bind. To knit hearts. To grow families and thus communities. But like any force that is powerful, it must be harnessed. Shaped. Managed. Appetite for food is necessary for life, but I have to control my appetite or I'll eat junk all the time. Sexual desire is very powerful. It's absolutely vital for life in the world, but this great source of life can be a force for death if not managed.

Where sex is cheap, life is cheap. Where there is no sexual restraint, there is no regard for the dignity of life, the guarding of individual rights and the cherishing of each person. Where everything is sexualized, humanity is degraded.

By contrast, Paul teaches the Thessalonians the great, high, dignified, view of human life and sexuality that is unique to the Biblical vision. A man and a woman feel powerful gravitational attraction toward one another. But they restrain immediate total expression of all they feel. For they know that from union comes life. And life must be nurtured in the context of commitment, security and protection. A Biblical community provides boundaries for expression that lead the couple to take sacred vows expressing the mystery that what is going on between them is more than animal appetite. Sexuality is connected to spirituality, and marriages mirror the love of Christ for his people. So we wait in order to give ourselves bodily to each other in the context of having totally bound ourselves to each other financially, spiritually, legally and communally. We will become a family on which not only our children but many others will rely. We all know that children thrive best in intact families. We know that people thrive economically in marriages. We know that we shelter under the branches of these mighty oak marriages of several decades: they hold us all together.

Where sex is cheap, life is cheap. Where sex is guarded, people are guarded. Where sex is expensive, where it costs you a commitment of your whole self, the value of the other is elevated. Life is cherished. People rise in dignity. Fidelity creates security. Security creates confidence and prosperity and emotional health. We know this in our bones.

But we also know it doesn't always work out this way. We live in a fallen world. Some people never find a mate. Some never have children. And in a fallen world things fall apart. Some vows unravel. Marriages end. Pain ensues and lasts for years. It's hard. No marriage is easy, they all take work. We fail. And it's not what anyone planned or intended or wanted. I've been a pastor a long time; I've been a husband and friend and person a long time. I know the pain. I see the damage. I know it hurts.

So as I take up a little more strongly Paul's warning to the Thessalonians, let me stress: I am not judging you. I do not desire to increase your pain or your shame for failure in matters of sexual morality. You've paid a high price and you know it. I do not want to make you more miserable. But, at the same time, I'd be making a terrible mistake if to spare some people the pain of memories and guilt, I failed to warn others. If my silence should make it seem like choices don't matter.

So what I'm going to do is not talk about you. I'm going to talk about people and relationships in my circle of life. Outside the church. But close to me. Friends, peers, pals. I will speak about the pain in my heart for choices people I love have made or had made for them.

In my personal circle of relationships through the years a lot of sexual immorality has occurred and the results were neither brave, romantic nor pretty. I have listened to friends weep about pornography addictions. It's like being addicted to crack cocaine. A quick immediate high is followed by emptiness, shame and loneliness, with the overwhelming desire to have it again, only more is needed. This is dangerous stuff. Expensive for one thing. For another, the porn addict sees everyone and everything through sexualized eyes, has unrealistic images placed over any normal relating to a spouse. For the spouse, it's as if adultery is ongoing. Who can compete with manufactured ecstasy? Sex is meant to be relational. Porn, and self-devices, lead people into isolation, away from their mates.

I've seen the devastation of adultery. I've heard friends give the lamest excuses for cheating. I've watched friends deal with the shame and betrayal of having been cheated on. I've sat in a man's office telling him, "You know if you go through with this, and leave your wife for this younger woman, it will affect not only you but your children and your grandchildren." He dismissed me out of hand. Within five years his own son committed adultery, decimated a family and shredded a ministry. I've seen the loneliness of frigidity when one spouse forgets that husband and wife belong to each other. It absolutely un-mans a man when his wife goes cold. I have friends haunted by abortions.

And I have friends haunted by shame and loneliness of earlier relationships. There's a young woman who's like a niece to me. She's experienced the scooping out of her heart in living with a man and not being married. She says, "My parents' divorce was so painful to me that I would never do that to my child. So I'm just not going to get married, or have kids, until I'm really sure." The pain of her childhood sent her to further pain.

And I'm not talking about any of you. I'm talking about what I've seen in my life and circle of relationships. Sexual immorality leads to damage. We don't get away with it. We just don't. We need to be warned of this reality.

Now Paul knew that his young Christians in Thessalonica would not get much help from the loose Roman culture around them. In fact, historian Rodney

Stark has found letters in which a Roman man advises against marriage. Women and children are just too much trouble, so use prostitutes or other men and it will be a lot easier. They figured, you've got to express your sexual urges, but marriage is just too much trouble. The Christian vision of a man of God is very different! "Let each one of you learn to control his own body in holiness and honor." More literally, Paul tells each man to "possess his own vessel" in holiness and honor. If the vessel is a ship, it means steer your rudder against the tide of sea. Direct your rudder to safe harbor in spite of the waves. If vessel means container, Paul is saying "Don't pour sludge into your marble vase. Or don't pour out fine wine into the dirt." This is a much different view than we get in the endless stream of degrading sex in thousands of movies. Christian sexuality means possessing yourself in dignity and honor. *Raise the value of sex and you raise the value of life*, both your life and the lives of others. Men, think of women not as something to take but something to guard as your possess yourself in dignity. Being a man means controlling one's passions for a higher good.

To take this just a bit farther, we note that Paul urges the Thessalonians not to defraud or transgress one another in these matters. Sexual immorality not only degrades us, but it infringes on the dignity of others. It means regarding others as not worthy of protection and restraint, but rather as objects for my use. Outside of marriage, sexuality does not give but takes. And so Paul concludes this section by reminding the Christians that God has poured his Holy Spirit into us. We are vessels containing Christ's own Spirit. We are temples of the living God. We are not to disgrace the temple of God that is our body, nor bring Christ into disgrace by where we go sexually. Paul warns them that this is serious business. Sexuality is a powerful force to be well channeled, and a precious gift to be treasured. A high view of sex gives a high view of other people. Being sexually moral confers dignity and worth on yourself and others. It leads to what we all want most: intimacy, new life, stability and a future.

Now, let's conclude by turning to Paul's brief but potent teaching on work. He writes, "We urge you...to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands...so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." Live quietly. Tend to your affairs. Work with your hands. In this way, you can support yourself and not be a drain on others.

The Bible gives us not only a high view of sex but also of work. We were placed in the Garden to tend it and shape it. Work is harder now than it was intended to be. We have to fight the thorn and sweat. But all honest work has great dignity in the eyes of God. The Lord blesses hard work. Work means taking

responsibility to use your life for the good. Work creates the ability to get a living, and then to be able to give to others. Hard work keeps us from having time to pry into other's affairs or gossip about their activities. Work with integrity, honesty and industry creates a powerful witness to the world that our faith is real.

I love this passage because it dignifies those Christians who are rooted in one place, working for years to create homes and careers, to participate in community life and contribute to the common good. We celebrate missionaries in our church, and rightly so. It's an extraordinary calling to pack up and leave a home on Lake Rosemount and go live in Malaysia like the Magruder's. Or to opt out of suburban life for Lebanon as the Understall's did for years and the Smith's desire to do. It was extraordinary that Paul travelled the known world bringing the gospel to others. But wherever Paul went, he left behind communities of Christ's people who were called to stay where they were. Paul moved on with his team to establish churches in new places. But the churches he founded stayed in their communities. People worked. People raised families. People met to worship. People witnessed to the world while staying in place. They lived out a different sexual ethic, as we saw. They lived out higher business practices. They told a different story about who we are, who God is, why we are here and what God has done in the world. But they could be distinctive while being rooted at home. This is Peter Kiwanuka that we talked with today, getting a degree from LSU, then returning to Uganda and choosing to create a school for children who would otherwise have no education.

The wonder of our gospel is that we have a God who redeems us out of darkness. He forgives sin. He brings healing. He turns what was done to us for harm into a deeper good and higher purpose. We worship the God of renaissance. He gives fresh starts. New chances. He can get us sober. He can break addictions. He can send us love again. He can mend broken relationships. He can restore financial stability. He can recreate honesty and integrity in us again. It is not too late this morning for any of us to begin again.

It begins when we realize that we have wandered far from home. We have done damage. We have been damaged. We have overspent. Overspent in dollars. Overspent in sex. Overspent in trying on so many different ways and means of living. Like the prodigal, we can hear Christ calling us back to ourselves. Get up. Come home. Confess your sin. Receive my forgiveness. Ask for me to take over and be willing to live a different way.

Do you want the vision of possessing your body in dignity and holiness, in clean forgiveness and integrity? Do you want the vision of living quietly, working for a living and living within your means? Reach out to Christ Jesus. Confess your sin and ask forgiveness: he will restore you. Offer your life to him to live a different way. He will lead you. Call one of your pastors or church leaders. Let's talk it through. Let's rejoin the community of abounding love that bears witness to the God of overflowing grace and new beginnings.