

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

He's overnight at a sleepover with friends. In the corner of the room, 3 boys are snickering as they stare at a smart phone screen. He walks over and with one glance knows these are pictures he shouldn't be looking at. Come here, one of them says – take a look! The college freshman sits studying in her dorm room. Her roommate walks in and says, “Hey – uh would it be any trouble for you to be away tonight till around 10? My boyfriend is coming over and we're going to be busy in my bed if you know what I mean.” The young man has been dating for a year. His friends keep prodding him – “so, have you done it yet? Come on, you guys have been dating forever, what are you waiting for man?” He stalls and redirects the conversation, but they don't let up. It's girls night out and all the ladies are talking about the sequel to 50 Shades of Gray, she avoids engaging in the conversation, but then one asks – did you see the first movie? He's far away on a business trip and as he's being wine and dined, a business contact wants to take him to a club he knows he shouldn't be at. “Come on!” he pesters, “What's the harm?” So what happens if the boy won't look at the smart phone pics? What if the roommate would say, “I would appreciate it if you wouldn't do that in this room?” What happens to the woman who dares to question whether the sequel to 50 Shades is something her friends should be reading or watching? What happens to the young man who says to his friends, “My girlfriend and I are waiting till we're married.” What happens to the man who says “no thanks” to the potential business partner who wants to “have a little fun.” Not pleasant is it? The eye rolls, the snickers, the put downs.

Christians might not stick out because of the way their hair looks, or because of the cars they drive, or houses they live in. We can blend into society pretty well and not seem too much different from anyone else. But when it comes to the realm of marriage and sex, living as Christ wants will makes us different – different to the extent the people would see us as abnormal – repressed, repressive. In fact, I would argue that living as Christ desires and advocating that lifestyle doesn't just make us different, it puts a big giant target on our backs. And when we face that kind of pressure, the little voice inside us starts to prod us. “Do I really have to endure this?” “Does God really want me to live this way, or are these just a set of rules made up by churches who want to control me?” “If God does really want me to live this way, why? Is it really that important?”

It seems that the Christians in Thessalonica might have been wrestling with those very thoughts. And so God, through his Apostle Paul, shares the words we study today. **1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 As for other matters, brothers and sisters, 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. 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 your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8 Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.**

First off, in regard to the questions, “Is sexual purity something God defines or is all about rules made by churches?” look at verse 8. **Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.** This isn't about the church, it's about God. So maybe you're thinking to yourself, “Oh boy here we go, fire and brimstone, here it comes. Pastor is going to preach against all the sexual sins so pervasive in our society to try and guilt us into living like we're supposed to.” But take a look – take a look at the whole of how Paul handles this topic with the Thessalonians. Paul doesn't just remind them that it was God who commands sexual purity, he gives them the why and the what. His goal wasn't to simply modify their outward behavior to get them to obey out of fear of what God would do to them. He wants them to understand what sexual purity is, and why God commands it, with the goal that they would gladly and freely practice it. And let me assure you that this is my goal today. Not to modify outward behavior, but that you and I would understand the what and the why of sexual purity and that we would practice it gladly and willingly.

So let's start with the “what.” Paul begins by putting his words on sexual purity in context. It is a specific application of Christian living. Earlier, Paul had urged the Thessalonians in a general way to live as God commands with the purpose of showing thankfulness to God and to be living witnesses to the world. He compliments them that they have made good progress “as you are now doing,” he says. He then shares the expectation that they would mature – do it “more and more.” Then he uses a big theological word—did you catch it? He says, **it is God's will that you be sanctified.** Do you know what that word means? From your catechism days, maybe you remember that when we talk about sanctification, we are talking about the process of growing in Christian living. But the term sanctify actually means to be set apart. You could say it this way: It is God's will that you be different (set apart). Paul is getting them ready, as he encourages the Thessalonians to be sexually pure, he is asking them to do something which, if they follow through, will make them different. You see, cultures that normalize sexual immorality are nothing new; in fact you can make a pretty good argument that sexual immorality was even more pervasive in Greek culture during Paul's time than it is now.

Then Paul gets to the point, he says, **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 your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage**

**of a brother or sister.** So just what exactly does it mean to be sexually immoral? Is he just saying don't sleep with someone else if you're married? No, even our culture goes along with that for the most part. It can be helpful to hear the word we translate as "immorality" originates from the word *porneia*, the root word of our English word "pornography." The word we translate as immorality refers to anything that devalues, or taints the sexual relationship as God intends it. Well, OK, but what is God's intention for sexual relationships? To answer that question we need to go back to the very beginning of the Bible, and the creation of the first people. As God brings Eve to Adam, Adam says, **"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.'**" And then the key verse: **24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.** With these few sentences, God sets up the institution of marriage – one man, one woman, publicly committed to each other for life, and he ends with the curious phrase **and they become one flesh.** What's that referring to? It's the sexual relationship.

This is a profound truth that is missed by so many – including many Christians. Sex is the physical expression of the marriage relationship. I'll say it again: sex is the expression of the marriage relationship. That's why the same apostle Paul talking about sexual immorality with the Corinthians says, <sup>15</sup> **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!** <sup>16</sup> **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."** Paul is saying why would you physically express a marriage (one flesh) relationship with someone whom you are not married to?

So if the meaning and purpose of sexual relationship is clear: "It is the physical expression of marriage," then the definition of sexual immorality is clear. It's any thought word or action that takes sex out of the marriage relationship, or any thought word or action that demeans or devalues the sexual and marriage relationship. That would be a pretty long list wouldn't it? And guess what, you can't go to a page in the Bible that has that list of every "sexual wrong." But it isn't needed – just ask the question—"Is this word, thought, or action taking sex outside of the marriage relationship, or demeaning or devaluing the sexual relationship or the institution of marriage?" and you have your answer. If it is, that's sexual immorality.

Alright, so we've identified the "what," but how about the "why?" Why would God ask us to behave in a way that is often so different from what our culture considers normal, in a way that will often put a target in our backs? What is God's purpose whenever he gives us a command? Is it to make life better for him up in heaven? No. Is it to test our loyalty by seeing how much we are willing to suffer for him? No. Whenever God makes a command, he intends it to be a blessing for us and for others. And that's not any different when it comes to his commands regarding marriage and the sexual relationship.

In fact, when we follow through on God's directives for sex and marriage, in spite of the ridicule we might face, we will experience some of the richest and deepest blessings that God offers us in this life. We enjoy the blessing of deep companionship – husband and wife can share their deepest thoughts and fears and hopes and dreams. We have God's perfect vehicle for raising children – a team that can encourage and support each other and their children. Even secular psychologists acknowledge this. And yes, we have the blessing of sexual pleasure and fulfillment, and if you don't think that's God's intent, then ask yourself why Song of Solomon is in the Bible! All of this protected by the commitment that these are things you share only with your spouse.

On the other hand, when we try and remove or experience the blessings of marriage outside of marriage, we experience some of the biggest hurts that can be had here on earth, and not just us, but others. **No one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister,** Paul writes. And believe me, I have seen those hurts up close from the counseling desk and from 4 years of teaching classes to those healing after broken marriages. God wants us to be sexually pure so that we do experience the blessings of sex and marriage to the fullest and that we don't experience the pain which so often results from sexual sin.

But it's more than that. Finally there is a connection between our sexual purity and our primary purpose in life as Christians. As Pastor Haugly shared last week – we live as lights. We live not just for ourselves, but in a way that God can use to draw others to himself. Maybe we don't often think of being sexually pure as a way to do this, but truly it is. Strong marriage relationships bolstered by sexual purity are a blessing to God's church. The financial stability and social stability that a strong marriage brings allow more time and energy and resources by husbands, wives, and children in service to God's kingdom. The mutual encouragement that a Christian marriage brings means husbands and wives are blessed with someone to express forgiveness, or rebuke, or advice based on God's Word. Strong marriages and families – as much as marriage is mocked – are still something that people look up to and desire. When they see one in action, they may very well wonder why that marriage is strong, a possible bridge to sharing the Savior Jesus who is the foundation of that marriage. Why does God want us to be sexually pure? He wants to keep us from the hurt and heartache that comes in the wake of sexual sin, and he intends to bless us and those around us, and strengthen the spread of his message through it!

Now before I finish today – let me acknowledge that each one of us have been guilty of some sexual sin or another, and some certainly have either committed or been the victim of sexual sins and have had to live with the deep pain that sometimes results. Understand this – that doesn't make you a second-class Christian, or a lesser person than someone who hasn't. Remember, Paul's words look forward not backwards. Christ's suffering and death have erased all of our sins – that includes sexual sins too. Each one of us here has a clean slate. Each one of us here stands to be blessed and be a blessing as we strive to be sexually pure in the future. So as you walk forward, as we mature in our walk of faith, strive to be sexually pure and do not be afraid to be different. AMEN