



Sermon Transcript

June 2, 2019

When Jesus Turns Your Life Around

A New Sexual Revolution

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 2, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

¹ Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ 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.

⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Introduction

The tone of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians changes dramatically at the beginning of our passage this morning. Up to this point, in the first three chapters of this letter, the tone has been deeply affectionate. Paul was concerned for this new church because of all the forces that were working against it. It was this very opposition—persecution—that forced Paul to leave them before he really wanted to leave them. Paul tried over and over again to visit them, but it was too dangerous. So he finally sends Timothy to check in on them and when Timothy returns, to Paul's great delight he discovers that this young church is not only making it, but they are thriving. You can capture the tone of Paul's deep affection—his sigh of relief—when he writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:8-9, "*For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.*"

But now as we come into 1 Thessalonians 4, the tone of the letter becomes much more directive. In fact, there is a real seriousness to how Paul opens this chapter, "*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus. . .*" First of all, Gordon Fee says that the word "*finally*" is not a good translation of the awkward Greek phrase that is used at the beginning of this passage. Clearly, Paul is pretty far away from concluding this letter. Count them up and you will find there are more verses to come in this letter than there are verses before 1 Thessalonians 4. Instead, Fee suggests that a better translation would be "*As for other matters*" or "*As for what remains to be said.*"¹ I think that these "*other matters*" that Paul spends the rest of the letter addressing are the issues Timothy told him about when he returned from his visit.

Fee translates verse one this way, "*As for other matters . . . we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus.*" That word *urge* is a strong word and it is a word Paul often uses when he is calling the church to a certain ethical standard. This is the same tone he exerted when he was with them. He reminds them of this in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 when he was recalling how he interacted with them when he was with them. He said, "*we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God.*" And that is exactly what he is doing at the beginning of this chapter, as well. He is urging them to not forget what he taught them in "*how you ought to walk and to please God.*"

So what "other matter" does Paul address first? What is it that is so "urgent" for them to tend to as a church? For starters, rather broadly speaking, Paul says in verse 3, "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*" The word *sanctification* is a fancy church word. But very simply it is a word that means "holiness." It is the process whereby God is

changing our lives to be more like Christ. The tagline for this sermon series is “When Jesus Turns Your Life Around.” That is another way of describing “*sanctification*.” Paul captures the essence of what *sanctification* looks like when he says in verse 1, “*we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.*” It is living a life that pleases God, but clearly it is a progressive process. It is something learned. It is something you are doing. It is something that you want to do yet “*more and more.*”

But notice what Paul says next. He narrows his focus on *sanctification—holiness—how you ought to walk and please God* down to one specific topic: “*that you abstain from sexual immorality.*” It strikes me that this is what Paul finds to be most urgent. When he begins this section “on other matters” the issue that rises to the top is Paul’s urgent call for the church to practice a godly sexual ethic that is different than the surrounding culture. This was not an easy or safe thing to do in this Roman setting. Matthew Rueger wrote a book called *Sexual Morality in a Christless World*.” He has a whole chapter on the sexual ethic of the Roman Empire. What you discover is that “our early Christian ancestors did not confess biblical chastity in a safe culture that naturally agreed with them . . . Christian sexual ethics that limited intercourse to the marriage of a man and a woman were not merely different from Roman ethics; they were utterly against Roman ideals of virtue and love.”² This is exactly why Christians faced so much hostility. Their sexual ethic threatened the very ideals of the Roman Empire.

Do you think if Paul was writing us a letter and wanted to tell us *how we ought to walk and please God* that the matter of sexual morality would be at the top of that list? I can’t think of a more pressing matter than this. Tim Challies writes, “Today we are experiencing a sexual revolution that has seen society deliberately throwing off the Christian sexual ethic. Things that were once forbidden are now celebrated. Things that were once considered unthinkable are now deemed natural and good. Christians are increasingly seen as backward, living out an ancient, repressive, irrelevant morality.”³ But this is not the first time that a sexual Christian ethic has clashed with the direction of a culture and called into question the very ideals held by our culture. Paul’s words here timely and we need to be reminded of “*how you ought to walk and please God.*”

I am not here this morning to complain or rant about the sexual ethic of our culture. Rather, quite simply and plainly, I am here to urge the church to *abstain from sexual immorality*. Tim Challies made the observation that in the Roman Empire the Christian sexual ethic was not the traditional ethic “but was at one time its own revolution.”⁴ It is a revolution our world needs again. It is not a revolution that will advance through

political legislation. Rueger says, “There will be those who grow tired of godless immorality and want to know what God’s Word says. To them, Christians must proclaim the biblical message of Christ as Savior. A better life can be built through his saving Word. And it is a life not merely ordered by more laws but a life reconciled to God through purifying grace.”⁵ It takes the church answering the call to holiness. That is what Paul says in verse 7, “*For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*” So I would like to *urge* the church to *abstain from sexual immorality*. I urge you to embrace the *instructions Paul gave through the Lord Jesus*.

There is a Good

The first instruction we hear from Paul is that we are to “*abstain from sexual immorality*.” The word he uses for “sexual immorality” is the word *porneia*. Michael Holmes says that “it is a broad term for any type of sexual sin.”⁶ It applies to anything that deviates from what God has ordained to be good with sex. It is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 7:2 when Paul writes, “*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*” From this verse we can see that Paul’s command to *abstain from sexual immorality* applies to any sexual activity outside of the marriage bond between a man and a woman. The classical Christian teaching on sexual behavior is summed up through two principles: “purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage.”⁷

That sounds like a very radical statement to our culture: “purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage.” But it was arguably more radical to the Roman culture than even to where we find ourselves today. Ironically, we are often told that we are behind the times in our view of sexuality and we need to be more progressive in our views of sex and sexuality. If you understand the Roman culture, this view is horribly misinformed. There is nothing new at all here. There is nothing “progressive” about the sexual ethic of our culture. You could say that the prevailing thought of our culture is not “progressive” but “regressive.” It is going back to a “pre-Christian” view of sex.

In the Roman world, sexual orientation wasn’t really the focus of sexuality. In other words, sexual identity—heterosexual or homosexual—wasn’t how they thought of sex. Instead it was more about male dominance. I want to be discreet this morning, but I also want you to know what our Christian ancestors were hearing when Paul says “*abstain from sexual immorality*.” In the Roman culture, the sexual ethic was about the strong male who exercised his dominance over women and men and slaves and boys. It didn’t matter if he was married or not. It was normal and celebrated and central to the

Roman way of life. Rueger summarizes it this way, “The Christian converts to whom Paul ministered had been influenced their whole lives by very open sexually promiscuous behavior, pornographic art, sexually suggestive theater, and religious rituals that sometimes included sex acts. Paul brought Christ to people who had themselves been sexually exploited. In these congregations there was no doubt male members who had homosexual experiences, made use of prostitutes, and even participated in the sexual abuse of slaves.”⁸ This was the norm of Roman culture. As Christianity began to grow, the Romans didn’t like being told that some of their favorite activities were displeasing to the Christian God. They saw the Christian ethic on sex as attack on Roman culture the Roman ideal of virtue and masculinity.

This is the context where Paul is urging these readers to “*abstain from sexual immorality.*” You get the sense from verse 2 that Paul had this conversation with them—he had the “talk” with them—when he was with them. Remember, he was only with them for a very short time. But this issue is at the top of the list of “other matters” because it was so counter-cultural and it needed constant reinforcement. So it is with us.

Contrary to what you may hear,, the Christian ethic on sex is not repressive. Rather, it elevates sex to the good that God designed it for in the context of marriage. Tim Keller put it well in an interview on why sex outside of marriage is so destructive. He said the more you have sex outside of marriage the more you “devalue the currency.” But he said that sex in marriage is like “magic.” He said it is like “blowing on the coals of a beautiful and powerful flame.” He noted that sex inside of marriage is more about giving of yourself than taking for yourself. When done in the exclusive relationship of marriage it becomes sweeter and more pleasurable as the years go by. He said, “ironically, me and my wife don't look as good as we used to. But it is a more powerful experience because you haven't devalued the currency.” In his concluding statement he said this, “Sex is a way of saying to another person, I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you and that is something you can only say inside of marriage. And when you use sex to say that, it is incredibly valuable and rich.”⁹

What do you hear when Paul says “*abstain from sexual immorality*”? Do you hear a negative? Do you just hear words that prohibit you from doing what everyone else is doing around you? Or, do you hear a positive—a good to embrace? There is “a good.”

There is a God

I am intrigued by what Paul says next. Starting in verse 4 he says, “*that each one 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.” Obviously, when it comes to the issue of sexual purity, there is the issue of exercising self-control. That is a constant battle and challenge—but like Paul says at the end of verse 1—it is something “*you are doing, that you do so more and more.*” Our sanctification is progressive and it ongoing. But what really jumps out at me in these two verses is defining what governs my view on sex and what governs how I conduct myself sexually. I’m either controlled by God or I am controlled by my passions. In essence, Paul is saying that the reason these Romans act the way they do is because they really don’t know God. The issue of sex and sexuality is a spiritual issue. It is a God issue.

As Paul addresses the topic of sex in our passage, it is interesting to see how often he appeals to a higher authority. In other words, he is not just giving you his opinion on the matter. In verse 2 he says, “*You know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*” Some people say that Jesus never addressed homosexuality and so his silence on the matter speaks volumes. And yet, whenever Jesus addressed issues like adultery the standard always had to do with the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. That is the ideal Jesus held to. Paul goes on to say in verse 8, “*Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God.*”

Any conversation regarding the ethics and the morality of sex has to begin with God. This is what put the early church in conflict with Rome. The Romans lived in a culture where the Emperors of Rome were to be worshiped. If the sexual ethic of Roman culture had to do with male dominance, you didn’t get more dominant than the Caesars. They were known for their open and abusive and brutal promiscuity. We would say in our day that they abused their power for their own self gratification. But there was no “#Me Too movement” back then. Instead this was part of the virtue of the culture. So when the Christians came and said that God—the teaching of Jesus—is the starting point for understanding sex, it wasn’t just a debate they were having with Rome about sexual ethics. It was an attack on the Emperor himself and social order of the Roman Empire.

To some degree, this is our challenge as well. We live in a culture that identifies “self” as the starting point for what is right and wrong. We are governed by our passions. And so Christian teaching on this matter is an attack on the virtues of our culture. The reason we are like two ships passing in the night with our culture on this issue of sex is because we have different starting points. We start with God and we believe sex has purpose and meaning and it has everything to do with holiness. This is not just an issue about your body and what you do in the privacy of your bedroom. Sex is a “God-issue.”

Remember, our focus this morning is to call the church to sexual holiness. We feel the tension of our culture. Many within the church have softened their view of sex and sexuality in light of the prevailing winds of our culture. It is also a sad truth that sexual abuse has been part of the story emerging from the church across denominational lines. And in many ways, we struggle with the temptation that is readily available and constantly present. There is a personal appeal in verse 4 when Paul writes, “*that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.*” We too need reminded of these teachings—this truth that our understanding of sex starts with God.

Melissa Kruger wrote an article called “Sex in the Sermon.” She writes, “Over the past few years, my now 12-year-old daughter has been exposed to some rather uncomfortable subjects. Prostitution, homosexuality . . . rape have all been discussed in her presence. You might wonder what type of parents we are. Do we let her watch too much TV? Allow her to listen to the wrong radio stations? Surf the internet without guidance? Actually my husband and I are fairly strict about the influences we allow into our home. It’s been one particular outside influence that has reached our daughter . . . We take her to church.”¹⁰ She said it was hard to avoid these topics when your pastor does a nine month series on the Book of Leviticus. But then she wonders, “Could it be that we face so much sexual confusion in the church because we fail to preach faithfully through all of Scripture? Society shames sex by speaking of it too often in the wrong context, with smirks and innuendos. Conversely, we in the church often shame sex by failing to speak of it, missing the opportunities the Word of God appropriates for our instruction.”¹¹

We must continue to bring this subject back to God as our starting point. This is what keeps us and enables us to be agents of God’s grace in a sexually broken world.

There is a Goal

Finally, there is a goal in living a Christian sexual ethic. Paul indicates that sexual immorality carries consequence with it. He warns in verse 6 “*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 before hand and solemnly warned you.*” Clearly, the Roman view of sex led to many being “wronged.” Whatever form of sexual immorality you can name, it brings harm to others. It hurts individuals. It hurts marriages. It hurts families. It hurts generations that follow. In fact, it hurts entire civilizations. Will Durant wrote in his book “*The Lessons of History* that “sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume in chaos both the individual and the group.”¹² Many feel that this is what led to the fall of the Roman Empire.

But the converse is true. When the Christian teaching on sexuality was taught and embraced it brought a new dignity to women and protection to children. In Christianity, a woman in the Roman Empire found a culture of genuine love that saw her as equally important as any man in the eyes of God. She was sexually equal with the man in the marriage union. The bottom line is that there is blessing following God's design for sex. It leads to human flourishing and it is designed to foster an environment of love.

I find it interesting how this passage ends in verse 8. After calling us to holiness, Paul says, that God *gives his Holy Spirit to you*. It is a reminder to me that the pursuit of holiness—sexual purity—is not always an easy pursuit. We need God! We must always remain vigilant. We need the work of the Holy Spirit and each other. No one is above falling. But each one of us—with the help of God's people and the Holy Spirit—can *control his own body in holiness and honor*. It is vital for the church to embrace this “revolution” because our culture needs more than rhetoric. It needs examples of humble holiness and we need to be a place that demonstrates forgiveness and healing in this area.

I urge us—the church—to abstain from sexual immorality. Why? I want you to hear this. The issue before us is greater than sex. This is more than just a conversation about abstaining from sexual immorality. This is not even about winning the culture or preserving the culture. Rueger says, “There is a higher purpose in Christian sexual ethics, namely to proclaim a Savior whose single-minded love for His fallen people led him to a life of devotion and self-sacrifice.”¹³ It is the gospel that we proclaim and that gospel message is that Jesus has come to redeem fallen and broken people—people who have suffered from sexual brokenness: victims and perpetrators.

You may be discouraged because it seems that the tide of culture has shifted and in your lifetime the masses may not be moved by the Christian message. But that is ok. Some will. Some will hear and some will be moved to respond to the love of Christ and to follow with us in living a life of sanctification—a life of holiness—a life pleasing to God. And so it is critical that we depend on the Holy Spirit and that we embrace a Christian sexual ethic for the wellbeing of those around us—the church—our families and for the effective proclamation of the gospel.

Conclusion

When it comes to sex—there is a good—there is a God— there is a goal.

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- ¹Gordon Fee *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 138-139
- ²Matthew Rueger *Sexual Morality in a Christless World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2016) Kindle Reader Location 304
- ³Tim Challies “3 Awful Features of Roman Sexual Morality” www.challies.com October 17, 2016
- ⁴Tim Challies “Sexual Morality in a Christless World” www.challies.com October 11, 2016
- ⁵Rueger, Kindle Reader Location 3053
- ⁶Michael W. Holmes *1 & 2 Thessalonians; The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 125
- ⁷Dennis Hollinger *The Meaning of Sex* (Grand Rapids: Backer Books, 2009) 30
- ⁸Roeger, Kindle Reader Location 704-705
- ⁹Tim Keller video interview <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKdSLsGMcnA>
- ¹⁰Melissa Kruger “Sex in the Sermon” www.thegospelcoalition.org March 10, 2013
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Donald L. Hilton, Jr “Slave Master: How Pornography Drugs and Changes Your Brain” in *SALVO*, Issue 13, Summer 2010, 40
- ¹³Rueger, Kindle Reader Location 1807

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**COMMUNITY
GROUPS**



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is your favorite summer activity?
2. Thinking about sex and sexuality, what issue do you find to be most “urgent” and pressing to address?
3. What is one thing you are taking from the sermon?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3. What do you learn about sanctification from this passage? Why do you think it is an urgent matter that we know “how to walk and please God?”
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6. What lessons do you learn about sexual purity from this passage? How does sexual purity help us proclaim the gospel to others?
6. When talking about sexual purity with those outside of the church, how can we make sure “that the goal is not to win an argument but to plant a seed that the Holy Spirit may or may not use to bear fruit?” What might be “a seed to plant” when talking with others?
7. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8. How can we urge each other onto holiness in the area of sexual purity?



Taking It Home

(Given the nature of the topic, you might want to break into groups of men and women for greater transparency.)

8. What is one thing you are taking from your conversation?
9. Is there something you need to do in light of your conversation.