

# Study 5: Sex and the Gospel

## Introduction

Today we will be talking about Paul's instructions in 1 Thessalonians regarding sex. Thessalonica was a community of Gentiles familiar with the Roman Empire and its culture. It had more in common with Rome than it did with Jerusalem. As a result, many Thessalonians practiced Roman, pagan religion. Paganism at the time did not equate morality with sexual behavior. In fact, many pagan religions tolerated or encouraged sexual behavior that God considers immoral or sinful. A key part of Paul's mission in Thessalonica was to minister to believers there by showing them the error and the immorality of these behaviors.

We currently live in a culture where a predominant belief is, "as long as I'm not physically hurting someone or if both my partner and I are consenting adults, what I do in the privacy of my bedroom is nobody else's business." However, the Bible makes it clear that this is not true. Although humans might be naturally inclined to justify sexual immorality as not hurting someone else, as we will see in this study, there are often victims of sexual immorality and perhaps more importantly, we cannot close out parts of our life from God if we intend to deepen our relationship with Him. God cares a lot about what we do in the bedroom and although He provided sex as a gift, it is a gift intended for particular circumstances and purposes. In this study we will unpack these issues and obtain a deeper understanding of God's intentions with the gift of sex.

## Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

*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. <sup>2</sup> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*

## Discussion

1. In verse 1 Paul describes the Christian life as a walk. Walking gets us from point A to point B. It is symbolic of making progress along a goal. But walking doesn't always take us directly to our goal. Sometimes we get lost or there are detours that take us away from our goals. We don't often think about it, but each step constitutes some risk. With only one foot firmly planted on the ground we run the risk of losing our balance, being pushed off track, or stepping into trouble. **What are some other ways that the Christian life is like a walk? What are some of the risks (and potential benefits) of advancing through Christianity like walking to a desired location?**

-Some possible answers include the following:

- We make ourselves vulnerable to the outside world either through persecution or living up to the expectations people have of morally upright people, yet just like Christ, we are tempted just like everyone else
- We are called to love our God with all of our heart and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves; although this carries great joy and freedom, it is often very difficult to practice

-The Christian life is a journey and it rarely follows a linear path; it is filled with ups and downs, wrong turns, and detours; yet, like most walks, the goal is to reach a destination and in this case the destination is to deepen our love of God and our neighbors

2. Note that verse 1 concentrates on both actions and motives. To walk is to take action and if we are walking the Christian life we are taking actions that please God. "To please God" focuses on our motive. Many people walk the walk, but they are not necessarily doing it to please God, which distinguishes morally upright secular people from the Christian world. Without God and God's Word as a foundation it is easier to get off-balance or end up stepping into trouble. **Why do you think Paul uses the terms "ask" and "urge" when he implores his followers to recall the lessons he had previously taught the Thessalonians to both walk the Christian life and do it seeking God's pleasure as a motive? What is the significance of saying urge you "in the Lord Jesus," rather than simply saying "urge you?"**

-There are a range of answers that might be appropriate here, but the bottom line is that Paul is clearly concerned that his followers are not following his past guidance and therefore they run the risk of leading others astray

- "Ask" is translated to be an informal request similar to how an individual might request a favor from someone of equal standing; by using this word, Paul is treating the Thessalonians reading the letter as fellow believers

- "Urge" is a more formal term and is more emphatic, thereby emphasizing the criticality of his request.

-The use of both terms puts additional emphasis on what will follow in his instructions.

-The addition of "in the Lord Jesus," is not by accident or a common formalism that Paul would add in a letter like this. It emphasizes that Paul's message is not his own, but that it comes from God himself, for which he is simply the messenger. Again, all of this emphasizes the critical importance of his instructions.

-In order to understand Paul's emphasis here, it is important to understand the underlying context of the Thessalonians on a deeper level. Unlike the Jews who converted to Christianity, the Gentiles of ancient Rome did not have the Law to guide them. By this point in history, inhabitants of the Roman Empire were morally decadent to the point where prostitution was a common occurrence at the Roman temples. Living a holy life grounded in Christ was a completely new concept to many of these people and ran counter to the culture these people grew up in.

3. Paul emphasizes a few key points that are worth noting in verses 1 and 2 before unpacking his specific instructions: 1) he does not imply that they are not walking with God, 2) he says that this is how you must live (in other words it is not an option), and 3)

he emphasizes the need to do so more and more, implying that they, like all other Christians, need to continue to grow in their faith and in their walk. **Why does Paul incorporate these points into his opening exhortation to the Thessalonians?**

- Paul is not intending to criticize or condemn the Thessalonians for their missteps; as seen in other books where he takes a more emphatic position with new converts, here he takes a more gentle approach
- It seems like Paul is walking a tight rope here; on the one hand he is trying to be gentle, but he simultaneously wants to emphasize that a morally upstanding walk is what we must do and that this is not an option
- Paul encourages his followers here by acknowledging that the Christian walk is rarely black and white, there are many shades of gray, and ultimately we should move in the path of deepening our relationship with God and other followers by leaning into our faith more and more over time
- As a result of these points, Paul is empathizing with the Thessalonians that the Christian walk is a difficult, yet necessary path, but he recognizes it is a path they are on and that they are working towards deepening their reliance on God
- It is not enough though to simply hear the Word and acknowledge it; we must live it and it must be reflected in our actions; Furthermore we need to continually press deeper into our faith, seeking further growth and development of our faith

#### **Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6**

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

#### **Discussion**

4. Read Ephesians 2:3, Romans 8:8, and 1 Peter 2:15. **Based on these passages and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, how would you describe the “will of God” when it comes to sex? Why does Paul emphasize this instruction as being the “will of God?”**

- Paul is laying out instructions that are consistent with other parts of scripture
- Sex is a gift from God (it is not evil in and of itself), but it is intended for the institution of marriage between a man and a woman
- Paul knows though that all men are tempted to follow the desires of the flesh and mind, which at times are opposed to the will of God
- Sex becomes immoral when it is acted upon in a self-centered way that is contrary to God’s plan (e.g., adultery) and by exploiting or hurting others

Paul emphasizes that this “will of God” is also your sanctification. In other words, it is also God’s will that you be sanctified, in this case by avoiding sexual immorality, learning to control your body in a way that is holy and honorable, and that as a result no one will wrong another or take advantage of another in the process.

5. Paul lays out three specific instructions in verses 3 through 6: 1) abstain from sexual immorality (verse 3), 2) know how to control your body in a way that is holy and honoring to God (verses 4-5), and 3) avoid trespassing and wronging another person. Generally speaking sexual immorality refers to any sexual behavior occurring outside of marriage, which is forbidden in Christianity, as well as Judaism. **Why was this particular instruction so foreign and difficult for a pagan culture like the one many Thessalonians were raised in? Are there similar parallels with our contemporary culture?**

- Ancient Roman pagan culture tolerated and even encouraged certain behaviors that were sexually immoral
- A man having a mistress (as well as other forms of Polygamy) was often tolerated in Roman culture
- Slavery in the Roman Empire made it relatively easy for slaveowners to take concubines
- The Roman public did not discourage these behaviors and even certain religions in the society encouraged and sanctioned these behaviors
- In Greek religion, which the Roman religions derived from, prostitution was condoned and encouraged by some churches
- Although our society has not institutionalized these behaviors in the same way that these immoral behaviors were institutionalized in Roman culture, our contemporary culture condones many acts of sexual immorality
- This conversation might get uncomfortable for some people in the group. It is important to be clear in this discussion about what the Bible says about sexual immorality to avoid confusion. 1 Corinthians 5-6 lays out some more specific guidance. Sex that occurs outside of the institution of marriage and outside of God's design is immoral, which includes adultery, premarital and extramarital intercourse, homosexuality, sodomy, and other perversions.
- It is also important to draw a distinction here between the sinner and the sin. We are not called to judge those who are engaging in these behaviors; that is God's job. Our job is to love our neighbor as ourselves, even if their lifestyle is not consistent with God's will. Specifically, in this passage, we are simply called to live a holy life and to adopt God's will for our life as we proceed along the Christian walk, which requires us to avoid these behaviors. Therefore, if the conversation takes a turn to criticizing or judging those who are engaging in immoral behaviors, it would help if study leaders steered the conversation back to encouraging followers to simply not engage in those behaviors themselves and to pray for and encourage those who are engaged in these behaviors to learn from Christ's example.

6. The second instruction, to control one's body in holiness and honor, emphasizes that the body is intended for more than simply exercising the temptations of the flesh. Here Paul is most likely encouraging followers to exhibit sexual self-control, which is suitable before

God and humans. Read 2 Timothy 2:20-21 for more information on what God says about self-control. **Within a loving marriage, how should we be honorable and holy to both our partner and to God (hint: see 1 Corinthians 7)? Outside of marriage how should people be honorable and holy towards God?**

-1 Corinthians 7 provides some useful guidance on how we should honor our partner in a loving marriage

-First and foremost, we should be faithful to our partner and honor them and God through practicing fidelity

-We should respect and value our partner. We should esteem our partner and they should be precious to us. A Christian marriage is intended to be a life-long commitment of ministry and love to complement and complete one another.

-Marriage should not be entered into for convenience, a means to power, or an excuse for sex. When these attributes dominate one's life, they lose self control and these motives will exceed the personal commitment to a partner.

-For those who are not in a marriage, controlling one's body in holiness and honor might involve many constructive behaviors, including practicing abstinence.

-Unmarried people can devote time and energy during this period to understand God's purpose for marriage and to prepare themselves for entering into a lifelong commitment that is focused on ministry, rather than the superficial lusts and desires that sometimes drive the unbelieving world.

7. In verses 4-5, Paul's appeal for sexual morality focuses on doing the will of God and for the benefit of the individual's marriage. In verse 6, Paul appeals instead to relationships with others. When Paul refers to brother here, he is likely referring to both the victim of infidelity (a spouse that is cheated on) and the partner engaging in the forbidden act.

**Why is the partner engaging in the infidelity wronged by the act of sexual immorality? Is sexual immorality both a sin against God and a sin against people? How so?**

-The partner is involved in an act that goes against the will of God; In these situations there is an opportunity to conform to the will of God and praise the Lord in the process if the forbidden act is avoided; if it is not avoided then both partners engaging in the act are taking actions that run counter to God's will and therefore they are both sinning

-When sexual immorality occurs, there is often a victim in the act; Someone is often exploited or cheated on; Therefore although someone engaging in the act might try to justify it by saying that they did not intend to hurt anyone or that it was an act among consenting people, the reality is that the act is a sin against others as well as God's will

8. Paul identifies one of three reasons for obedience in the second half of verse 6. **Why should we be obedient based on what Paul asserts in verse 6?**

- We will wrong others that we care about and God will judge us for our transgressions
- The judgment might not be immediate, but it will occur, whether it is a broken relationship with our spouse, a sexually transmitted disease, other broken relationships, or an ultimate judgment occurring upon our death
- Paul asserts that God will judge all things, including all forms of sexual immorality, so if we want to avoid that judgment we should obey; but more importantly we should obey to honor God and to do his will
- Paul also asserts that we've been warned of this, so we should know when we engage in these acts as believers that we are performing acts that run counter to God's will and will therefore receive God's judgment

### Read 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8

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

### Discussion

9. Verse 7 identifies a second reason why we should obey God. God calls us into a purifying relationship, sanctified by Him. So even if a believer was raised in a pagan culture that condoned or encouraged impure acts, as a believer we must resist urges of the flesh to live a clean and pure life worthy of God's holiness. **How does Paul refer to such acts throughout 1 Thessalonians and what can we infer about how God views such acts based on these descriptors?**
  - In verse 7, Paul refers to these acts as impure and not holy
  - We can infer that God views these acts as unclean or filthy and that believers that engage in them need to be cleansed; directly translated verse 7 suggests that these acts are "refuse"
  - Sexual immorality frustrates the purpose of God's call for his people
  - In the context of pagan cultures, like the one that existed in Thessalonica at the time, Christ's plan was to clean those believers in those cultures up, which intended to reform their thinking on those sexual acts
  - God intends for believers to be set apart from the mentality and action in the world that does not know God
  
10. Verse 8 sets forth a third and final reason to obey God: sexual purity is grounded in the truth of God's revelation and God has provided his Holy Spirit to enable us. Paul's reference to the Holy Spirit to enable us is important. Paul (and God) recognizes that practicing sexual purity can be difficult for us and that is the reason why He has given us the Holy Spirit to assist us. **Keeping this in mind, what are some practical things we can do to resist temptation and obey God's will for sexual purity?**
  - Pray, we can ask for the Holy Spirit's help when we are tempted to disobey God

- When tempted, we can engage in some other constructive behavior that affirms our commitment to God, such as reading scripture or engaging deeper in our relationship with our spouse
- We can remind ourselves of the lessons described here in 1 Thessalonians and in 1 Corinthians about what a committed marriage looks like and what God's design is for sex in a committed marriage that honors God
- If we are willing to open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit in these moments of temptation, we might be surprised by what we hear and how God might provide exactly what we need to avoid temptation and live a more holy, pure life that glorifies God

### **Connection to the Gospel**

Read Matthew 5:27-30.

*<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He makes it pretty clear how he feels about sexual immorality. Jesus condemns not only the acts of immorality, but simply thinking about them as well.

Read John 3:19-20.

*<sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*

Based on this verse in John, to reject sexual purity, as well as other holy acts, is to reject God Himself. This point reinforces that God ultimately judges all of our acts. However, Jesus does offer us hope that is consistent with Paul's teachings in Thessalonians. Read John 14:26.

*<sup>26</sup> But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

Jesus recognizes that we would not be able to maintain purity on our own. This is a key reason why the Holy Spirit is with us today and why it helps us to maintain our purity, if we are willing to listen.

### **Closing/application**

As we examined throughout this study, God intends sex for the specific institution of marriage between a man and a woman. He condemns all forms of sexual immorality and there are often several victims when sexual immorality occurs. We corrupt others by not acknowledging and following the will of God and we also disobey His plan for our life and our relationships. We examined three reasons to obey God and these included 1) we will wrong others if we do not obey and God will judge us for wronging others, 2) God calls us to a pure and holy relationship with Him, and 3) sexual immorality is against the truth in God's revelation and we reject God if we engage in it.

This passage is not intended to discourage us. Instead it gives us hope that God desires a deeper relationship with us and in order to obtain that deeper relationship with Him, we should aim to exercise self control to only engage in sex within a committed God-centered marriage between a man and a woman. God recognizes that we might not be able to do this on our own and therefore, we have the helper, the Holy Spirit, to remind us of God's teachings on issues like sex and guides us to how we might better manage our lives to obtain a deeper relationship with Him. We discussed various ways to engage with Christ when we are tempted to turn our backs on Him. It is important that we self-examine our own lives and find those areas where we are turning our back on Him. We can work to address those areas through prayer, reading scripture, and discussing those issues with others who might be further along in their faith journey. Just like a walk between point A and point B, we might get detoured or lost at times, but if we are able to keep our focus on the goal and engage in our journey seeking a deeper connection with Christ in the process, we can surmount the obstacles in our path.

**References:**

Bible.org, 2020, "7. The call to Holiness (1 Thess. 4:1-12)," from the series: 1: Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary, available online: <https://bible.org/seriespage/call-holiness-1-thess-41-12> (03 January 2021).