

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8  
God's Will, Your Sanctification  
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Wondering why I am standing down here and not up there? This morning I am going to be speaking with you about a subject that is very real, immediate, and delicate. It's the subject of our sexuality and our sexual ethics. And instead of standing up there robed in ecclesiastical authority, I want to stand here as a man who is a part of this community, a person who is not unaffected by what God's word has for us. I want to speak with you softly today as someone who is trying to work this out in his own life, and who like each one of us struggles in one way or another as God seeks to shape and change my life.

**Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should 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 you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.**

In these last few weeks, we've been looking at the Apostle Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Very briefly, what has happened thus far is that Paul, the Apostle, came to a group of people who did not know God, a group of people who placed their hopes in idols. Then after sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with them, everything changed, and they decided to follow the good news.

What is that Good News? Hear me now, the Good News of the gospel is that God loves you more than you can imagine. All of those things that cause us to feel alienated and distant from God are taken away, and you are brought near to God through the merciful love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on the cross and redeemed our lives with his grace. The Good News is that through Jesus Christ you are accepted by God. This letter was written to a people who have embraced the fact that we are already accepted, already loved, already showered with grace, because Jesus loves them as he loves you.

Now last week, we focused on a phrase that concludes chapter two. It's Paul's encouragement of them to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of God—that God's message would be clear through you. And we do this by being people who are compassionate and not critical, forgiving and not grudge keeping, patient and not demanding, humble and not haughty. Walking worthily very simply means that we allow

the power of the good news of Jesus to flow into our lives, and then we live if that message were really true.

Today's verses from chapter 4 are a continuation on this theme, and today's passage has to do with walking worthily in the area of sexual ethics. Now I realize that there is no other topic that is more divisive, more uncomfortable to talk about, and more challenging than the topic of sexual intimacy. Which is why I want to preface our treatment of it by going to the text to see what Paul says before his discussion of sex.

If we turn to today's verses, we see Paul reiterating some of the things he's already said to them. Verse 1: **as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.** Then skipping down to verse 3, **For this is the will of God, your sanctification.**

By a show of hands, how many of you in your conversations around the dinner table this week, or at work, or out with friends used the word *sanctification*? Nobody? I am shocked.

The will of God for our lives is that we would become more and more like Jesus. This is really what sanctification means. It is the process of becoming more and more holy, and because Jesus is the holy one, it means becoming more and more like Jesus. This is a theme we see in the OT and NT alike (Leviticus 20:26 – You are to be holy, because I the Lord, am holy; Matthew 5 – Be perfect as the Lord your God is perfect; and 1 Peter 1 – Be Holy because I am holy).

It's here where we come to our first lesson about this word sanctification. The person who is ready for this is the person who has stopped trying to make themselves right before God and has accepted the fact that God loves and accepts them, and has accepted the fact that Jesus Christ has set them free by grace. Jesus has redeemed them from their sin, and has washed them with clean water and given them a new life in him. The person who is ready to hear about sanctification is the person who is already able to sing the words "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me..."

The second thing we learn from this word sanctification (the process of becoming holy, pure, strong, like Christ) is that God wants to see each one of us growing and changing, becoming more the person he created you to be when God envisioned you before the foundations of the earth. And one area—though it is not the only area—in which God is inviting us to grow, is in the area of our intimacy.

If it is God's will for our lives that we are being sanctified, that is changed, so that we are more and more like Jesus, the first question I want to ask is this: why is it important that God's will also shape how we practice intimacy? (Practice our sexuality one way and not another?) And for that I want to look to verse 6. Here Paul says so **that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter.**

Paul wrote this letter from the City of Corinth, which was hub city of commerce, culture, and religion. And within the city of Corinth, there was a tremendous amount of abuse and exploitation. In fact, this word exploitation is the Greek word *Hyperbeno*; it's a compound word, *beno* means to walk and *hyper* means over. Literally it means to walk over someone. Here Paul is not just looking at this from the perspectives of one gender having loose mores, but that there are men who will use power and domination to trample or walk over one another, women and men who use the power of sex to manipulate and get what they want from another person.

In verse 3, he uses the word fornication, and the Greek root of this word is *porneia*. We get from this the word porn. *Porneia* is the exporting or selling of a product for someone else's consumption. One of the most dangerous and damaging aspects of our society is our addiction to pornography. This is one of the silent killers in the church. We are quick to address sexual issues that are out in the open. But the elephant in the room is the countless men and women who struggle with internet pornography, and how it is damaging our intimacy. It is destructive because it reduces men and women to objects for the lustful gratification and exploitation of others. It takes the image of God that was intricately and beautifully woven into every living person and desecrates it for a cheap, momentary thrill. As Paul puts it, men and women have become commodities, reduced to mere bodies while neglecting the unique and beautiful soul and spirit of each being.

One of the ways in which God wills to change us is in our view of the gift of sex. Our culture labels sex as what we receive to meet our physiological needs. God's will for our sex lives is that they would be seen through the lens of altruism. It is a gift that we give to our husband or wife within the **covenant** of marriage. In this way, understood in this light, sex is essentially self-giving and not self-serving.

Whenever I meet with a couple for premarital counseling, this is the most important piece of advice I give them, and it relates to sex. If you are going into this relationship for the purpose of having your needs met—we've got problems. Covenant love – that is, patterned after God's covenant love with humanity – says I love you so much that I am willing to forsake my own needs, even laying them down, for you, and within this relationship we will do this mutually. Marriage and sex are essentially about honoring and loving the unique, image-bearing person you are with, and giving yourself fully in service and love for them.

Unfortunately, so many relationships are either built upon or devolve into just getting my needs met. The problem with this model is when one person's needs are not fully being met (even when those needs change or are unrealistic, they feel justified to break their covenant). This self-serving ideology has ruined many a relationship. I love the story of Billy and Ruth Bell Graham's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary where a reporter asked Ruth this question, "Ruth, how is it that Billy Graham has made you happy all these 50 years?" Ruth responded with a smile, "Because I realized on our wedding day that making me happy was not his job."

Now, before I go any further I want to address one thing. There are those who, in areas of sexuality, say that Paul is too fixated on the rules, Paul is a misogynist and a kill-joy. They will also say that Jesus never spends much time addressing marriage and sexuality. However, Jesus did talk about marriage. In Matthew 19, he says: **have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and fold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh?**

Whether you think Paul is a kill-joy or not, I think the more pressing matter in our lives is that we focus on letting God heal and strengthen our relationships, that they would be a living example of the gospel of God visible for the world around us.

Secondly, Jesus also spoke about adultery. And lest we think that adultery is something that only *those* people do, hear this: **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.**

In his treatment of this, Jesus is drawing every single one of us into this relationship of culpability, because there is not a single one of us who has not at one time in their lives looked at another person with self-gratifying motives in our hearts. And so for that reason, Paul treats this topic of sexual ethics as something that is universally relatable. For all of us, how we practice our sexuality matters immensely to Jesus. It matters because getting this part of life wrong can be so utterly detrimental, and getting this part right can be so incredibly life-giving.

The reason God wills for us to practice our sexuality according to his will is so that we will not, as he says in verse 6, **wrong or exploit one another**. And let me be clear, just because it happens within the context of marriage doesn’t mean that it’s immune from exploitation. God wills for our relationships to be those of self-giving love and not self-serving.

How do we go about doing this? Not just with our sexuality, but in any area where God is inviting us to change. Do we do it by gritting our teeth, or by having someone shame us into changing our behavior? No. We are changed, we soften, we grow in our lives by hearing and believing God’s unconditional self-sacrificial love is for us. Not only the grace that saves us from the hells we endure in this life and the next, God’s grace infuses us with his power and desire to make serving God our number one priority—and not that self-serving thing (sex, power, money, comfort, etc.).

There is a verse in another of Paul’s New Testament letters, Titus 2, that says, **For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled,**

**upright, and godly.** God's greatest desire for our lives is that we, in our sexuality, in how we treat our families, in how we approach our jobs, or our finances, would be shaped by His grace, that amazing grace. Grace that lifts others up, grace that serves and exalts others, grace that finds the deepest sense of peace imaginable in trusting that God is the one who leads us to ultimate joy and contentment. God's will for our lives, our sanctification, comes by grace. Let's pray.