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Flee Sexual Immorality!
1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

If you had told me when I first started out in pastoral ministry that I would find it necessary to preach on this text with the particular focus that I will bring today, I would have laughed in your face and written you off as either naïve or overly pessimistic.

I have to confess that I was more than a little surprised and somewhat discouraged upon hearing that there are people at Bridgeway who, for whatever reason, believe that sex before marriage is permissible. Pre-marital sex is commonplace in our culture, but to hear that it is present in the church is extremely disheartening. My surprise upon hearing this is that I would never have imagined that such a view could even exist among professing Christians. There are some things that are so patently obvious in the Bible that one simply takes for granted that everyone who has spent any amount of time in church life would understand this. But I guess I was wrong. And that is the reason for my message today.

In my preparation leading up to today I did some research. Now remember: statistics can be deceiving. There can be numerous unknown or unstated factors that skew the results of any public opinion poll. That being said, a recent survey of professing evangelical Christians indicated that nearly 60% said they would have or have had sex before marriage. There was no indication in the survey as to whether or not they regarded pre-marital sex as morally permissible. Some (perhaps many) may believe it to be morally and biblically sinful but engaged in pre-marital sex anyway. Thus, the urgent need for my message today.

The Nature of Porneia in the NT

I suppose the only place to begin is by taking note of the terminology that we find in the NT. The Greek word that is most often translated as “sexual immorality” is *porneia*, the word from which derive our English term, pornography. But don’t ever think that the Greek *porneia* is referring primarily to visual portrayals of sexual activity. We must never read back into the NT the meaning of our modern English words. Rather we must allow the NT to define its terminology in its own way.

Together with the noun *porneia*, there is a related form that is often translated “the sexually immoral.” There is also the verb “to commit sexual immorality.” Together these words appear 42x times in the NT. I don’t have time to cite them all, so here is a sampling to give you an idea of how it is understood.

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife” (1 Corinthians 5:1).

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one” (1 Corinthians 5:11).

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9).

Now it may be helpful to pause here and point out that whereas adultery and homosexuality are forms of *porneia* or sexual immorality, *porneia* is a much broader term that includes any and all sexual activity before or outside the marriage relationship.

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13).

Again, a brief word is in order. Here we see that God clearly created the human body for a purpose, and it is *not* for sexual immorality. Thus when a person engages in sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage he/she is violating the very purpose for which God has created us as sexual creatures.

“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18).

“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2).

“We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (1 Corinthians 10:8).

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality” (Galatians 5:19).

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (Ephesians 5:3).

“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5).

In this text we see that God doesn't single out sexual immorality as worse than other sins of the flesh. Idolatry and covetousness and theft are equally heinous in the eyes of God.

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4).

“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

There is no gray area here. There are no exceptions or qualifications. Nothing is subject to nuance or interpretation. The Bible is crystal clear that all expressions of *porneia* or sexual immorality are forbidden. The biblical authors refer to *porneia* as defiling, evil, improper, sinful, fleshly, earthly, and against the will of God. Those who continually and unrepentantly practice it are guilty of unrighteousness and will be subject to judgment by God. Perhaps the most sobering and shocking of all is the repeated declaration that those who continue to practice sexual immorality and do not repent *will not inherit the kingdom of God*.

Let me be explicitly clear on that point. *Unrepentant sexual immorality puts a person's soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation*. We're not talking merely about the physical dangers of sexual immorality, as if the only reason for abstaining is to avoid an STD (sexually transmitted disease). The danger to which you expose yourself when you engage persistently and without repentance in sexual immorality is the danger of hell itself. I'm quite sure that some of you don't want to hear that. But I have a sacred responsibility to tell you what God has said in his written Word. And he has said, as we just saw in 1 Corinthians 6:9,

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9).

Every Greek lexicon or dictionary of the NT is in agreement, that *porneia* refers to any form of sexual activity before or outside the relationship of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. It can refer to pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual practice, prostitution, bestiality, and all other expressions of sexual activity outside the marital relationship between a husband and wife.

I want to pause here and say something important. The reference to homosexuality in these texts does not mean that people who struggle with same-sex attraction are in danger of eternal damnation. Many faithful Christians of both genders struggle to varying degrees with same-sex attraction. But it is same-sex physical intimacy practiced without repentance that subjects one to judgment.

Together with these clear and unequivocal denunciations of and warnings against *porneia* or sexual immorality there is an equally clear affirmation that the only proper context in which sexual intimacy is permitted is the one flesh marriage between one man and one woman. Any other sexual activity that occurs either before or outside of the union of husband and wife in marriage is prohibited. It is to be avoided and abstained from by all who claim to be followers of Jesus.

God Is For You!

The most important thing to remember as we talk about sexual purity is this: ***God is for you! God wants you to win.*** People often view God as their adversary when it comes to sex: “He’s against me. He hates sex. I’m repulsive to him. He’s ashamed of me for what I’ve done. And to be perfectly honest, I can’t blame him much.” Misconceptions such as this only serve to convince us that our situation is hopeless and drive us farther away from the arms of him whose love and support and affirmation are the only thing that will enable us to win this war with the flesh.

We must embrace the truth that ***no one wants our sexual satisfaction more than God.*** I know that sounds bizarre, but it’s true. This being the case, you may rest assured that he has provided everything necessary for your success and for your holiness. This is important to understand because people who struggle with sexual sin feel hopelessly locked in to an unbreakable cycle of failure. Their experience has convinced them there is no reasonable chance for change. Worse still, they are convinced that God is disgusted with them and that they will never be of any use in the church. Certainly God is grieved by sexual sin, but it is a grief rooted in love. The only reason God is grieved by our failure is because he loves us so much. If he didn’t love you, if his heart wasn’t for you, why would he care what you do?

We also need to understand and believe that ***God knows what is best for us.*** He knows what leads to optimum flourishing and the deepest satisfaction. He knows what will bring us the greatest happiness in this life and in the next. He is our Creator. He is the one who formed and shaped our bodies in our mothers’ wombs. ***And he never commands anything that does not ultimately serve to enhance and deepen our welfare and our joy and our capacity to flourish as individuals.*** If you don’t believe that, nothing else that I say to you today will make any sense whatsoever. How do I know God is on our side when it comes to sex? Paul states it clearly in 1 Thessalonians 4.

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

Excuses

Trust me when I tell you that I think I’ve heard every conceivable excuse or justification or rationale for engaging in pre-marital and extra-marital sex. Here are a handful of them.

- The Bible doesn’t address the issue.
- How can something so healthy and life-giving and loving be wrong?

- A sexual relationship with one person, even though it is outside marriage, has been extraordinarily healing and restorative to me, as it has helped me overcome the rejection and shame that I experienced from past sexual abuse.
- Everyone is doing it. Whereas it may have been unacceptable in previous generations, times have changed.
- We plan on getting married someday anyway.
- We can't afford not to live together. It saves us so much money.
- The Bible doesn't carry that kind of authority with me.
- We are faithful to each other. We don't sleep around. We are monogamous in our immorality.
- We need to find out if we are compatible for marriage.
- It's too late. Since we've already had sex we might as well continue to do so in the future. You can't change the past.
- We love each other. (No, you don't).
- Our parents and friends said it was ok. They can't all be wrong, can they? (Yes, they can and are.)
- For you to tell us that we should not engage in pre-marital sex is judging us. While others may choose not to do this, we have to come to our own decision. Who are you to tell us we're wrong.
- But we've grown so accustomed to relating physically in this way that it would be virtually impossible to suddenly stop.
- We like it! It has really brought us closer together, not just sexually but emotionally and spiritually.

Whose opinion matters more to you: your own, or God's? I'm speaking for myself here, but it doesn't matter what I want or what I believe is in my best interests or what makes me feel good. If God says No, I defer to his authority and wisdom and I know that he only has my best interests at heart. If your feelings are opposed to God's Word, it isn't because his Word is wrong, oppressive, or impractical, but rather because your heart is rebellious, wicked, and sick with sin (Jeremiah 17:9).

Your Sex Life and the Will of God

Did you hear those words in v. 3 – “This is the will of God”. Do you cringe when you heard it? Does it stir up images of an inflexible task-master whose greatest delight is in making sure no one else has any fun? Try something radical. Replace the English word “will” with “**want**” and listen to the Father's heart for your holiness: “I **want** you to feel the joy and satisfaction that come from experiencing the fullness of sexual delights. I **want** you to revel in the physical passion I had in mind when I brought Eve to Adam. Don't squander the opportunity by twisting and perverting what I made for your enjoyment.”

Most of us hear the word “will” and instinctively envision a celestial frown. God sits in heaven scowling at us, angry with us, disgusted by us. The phrase “will of God” often conjures up the mental impression of an inflexible and colorless lawgiver whose sole concern is for his own reputation. No! Nothing could be farther from the truth.

When I hear Paul speak of God's “will” for human sexuality I think of his **heart's desire, his yearning, his fatherly passion** for our maximum enjoyment of one of his most precious gifts. I hear God saying, “This is what I **long** for you to experience as a sexual being. I made you. I put those sexual impulses in your spirit and in your body. I created hormones. Trust me when I say that I know far better than you what will bring the greatest joy and optimum pleasure.” The point is simply that God's “will” for you and me is always an expression of his love. So what exactly is it that God “wants” of us when it comes to our sexual behavior?

God's desire for his people is that they abstain from “sexual immorality” or from *porneia*. Don't believe the propaganda the world is peddling. This is *not* God's way of robbing you of fun and pleasure. It is his passionate desire to intensify it. **This prohibition exists in order to protect and preserve the beauty and joy of marital sex.** Our laws against theft and murder exist because of the high value we place on personal property and human life. So, too, with this prohibition against illicit sex. The purpose is to guard, preserve, and enhance something far more exciting and fun and full of pleasure, namely, marital love.

The biblical exhortations to resist sexual sin are motivated by a recognition of how it deprives us of even greater satisfaction. The principal reason for saying No to physical immorality is that it undermines the ability of our hearts

to deeply enjoy the multifaceted joys that God provides for his children. ***Sexual sin diminishes our capacity to feel God's delight in who we are. It drains us of his power and hardens us to the loving overtures of his Spirit.***

If you are currently engaging in pre-marital or extra-marital sex and find yourself arguing silently with me and pushing back in your mind against what I'm saying, that proves my point. It demonstrates how you are numbing your heart to the overtures of God's Spirit. It is evidence that your commitment to sin in this way has deafened your spiritual ears to what God wants you to hear.

I remember standing in line at the grocery store one day when I made the mistake of scanning the covers of several rather tawdry tabloids. The headline on one of them virtually shouted at unwary customers: "The Greatest Sex You've Ever Had!" No, I resisted the urge to read the article . . . because I've read the *book!* The Bible! God, yes *God*, has a prescription for great sex for his people.

Paul's way of expressing this idea sounds a little odd at first. He speaks in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 about each of us knowing how to "control his own body in holiness and honor." One translation renders it more literally as, "possess" our "own vessel in sanctification and honor." What in the world does *that* mean?

The word translated "possess" in the NASB is translated "control" here in the ESV. It means *to gain mastery over* something. The word rendered "vessel" by the NASB is rendered by the word "body" in the ESV. This was probably a euphemism for one's sexual organs. It's a vivid image: each of us must learn how to control our sex drive; how to channel its release in that way which its creator has fashioned; how to live each day in control of our impulses; how to submit our bodies to God for holiness and purity.

This sexual self-mastery is to be done in "holiness" and "honor", again interesting words, but especially the latter. When we behave in sexual purity we not only "honor" God, whose "will" we embrace, but also others. ***Sexual immorality dishonors the other person by depriving them of the opportunity to enjoy sex as their Creator intended.*** God knows that *really good sex* is found only in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship.

This point is made again in v. 6 where Paul exhorts us not to "transgress" or "defraud" our brother (or sister) in "this matter." When Paul mentions "this matter" he has in mind the issue of sexual purity. His warning here is that Christians must not use their familiarity or friendship with others in the church to gain sexual favors. We must never exploit the trust that exists between fellow-believers for the sake of sexual gratification.

But how does sexual immorality or impurity defraud or wrong another Christian? In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul says that the one who commits fornication sins against his own body, but here he goes further and says it also transgresses and defrauds his or her fellow Christian. How?

Consider two ways. First of all, adultery is an obvious violation of the rights of another. You are *stealing* what doesn't belong to you. And secondly, pre-marital sex defrauds the future marriage partner of the person with whom you are involved. You are robbing that person of the virginity and single-minded intimacy which ought to be brought to a marriage. Thus, sexual impurity is as much a social injustice against others as it is a personal sin against God.

Beyond this, illicit sexual conduct also dishonors oneself. We were meant for better. We besmirch our dignity as image-bearers and rob our bodies of their divinely ordained function when we step outside the bounds of God's "will" and seek for sexual satisfaction in ways he knows will only bring disaster, disrespect, and often disease.

Make no mistake about it. God will not permit his children to sin with impunity. There *are* consequences for sexual impurity. But please note that God's discipline does not mean he is disgusted with you. God's recompense is not rejection. It's hard for people to conceive of a God like this, but according to Hebrews 12:5-13 God chastises and disciplines *because* he loves.

More important still, we should pursue purity because the purpose of our redemption is holiness, not impurity. Impurity runs counter to everything God had in mind when he created us, called us, and redeemed us in Jesus (v. 7). And remember, says Paul, that it isn't just God we reject when we indulge in sexual impurity, it is "the God who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (v. 8).

It's important you know that the verb translated "gives" in v. 8 is in the present tense, not the past tense which is Paul's normal way of referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The point is not so much that God "gave" us his Spirit in the past, when we first came to saving faith (although that is certainly true enough in itself), but that in the present, right now, God is committed to us as seen in the on-going, ever present impartation of his Spirit. In fact, he is perpetually sustaining and supporting us through the Spirit even now in the midst of our struggle over whether or not to obey his will in regard to sexual purity.

Better still is the fact that God doesn't simply give us his Spirit, he gives the Spirit "into" us. Not just "to" us, but by an act of what can only be called *intimate impartation* his Spirit resides within to encourage, energize and enable. The Spirit isn't just here, he's inside.

There is tremendous hope in this truth. The God who says, "My will is for you not to submit to the temptations of the world or the passions of the flesh" is the God who also says, "I am right now giving you my Holy Spirit to help you say yes to purity! Come to Me," he beckons. "I won't put you to shame. I'm not here to ridicule but to restore. I'll cover you. I'll cleanse you. I'll quicken your soul with divine energy to say No to illicit urges. I'll do it by setting before you the surpassing delights of trusting in my promise of superior pleasures."

There is hope! There is help! Whatever God requires, God provides. He requires holiness, so he provides the infinite power of the Holy Spirit to assist you and me to do it. Don't despair. Don't give up. Don't resign yourself to live in bondage. Even as you read these words, the power of God is being infused into your heart to break the power of sin.

So often when we tell our children, for example, to do something we believe to be their moral obligation, we expect them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps with little if any assistance from us or anyone else. Perhaps we're simply too busy to bother. Perhaps some, tragically, just don't care. Maybe you sincerely believe that helping them would undermine the development of their moral maturity. So, yes, we encourage them, we cajole, we plead. But often in our frustration with their failure we turn to angry threats or shame-based warnings.

Not God. With every word of exhortation comes the wind of his Spirit to energize and uphold us, instruct and inspire us. If you find yourself doubting where God stands when it comes to your sexual impulses, if you fear he will abandon you when impulse turns to indulgence, recall this simple truth: he is ever-present *in* you, through his Spirit, to empower your Yes to sexual purity.

As I said earlier, God is no killjoy. He isn't out to rob you and me of fleshly pleasures. He is, however, determined to protect the sanctity of the sexual experience so that we might enjoy it to the fullest. And the fullest and most complete enjoyment is something that he has reserved for the marital union of husband and wife. Let me remind you of what Paul said in Ephesians 5. There he was perfectly clear that the relationship between a husband and wife is illustrative or a portrait of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church. That is why it is so vitally important that we protect the purity of the sexual relationship by keeping it confined to marriage.

If you are currently in a relationship with another person, and you are wondering, "Should I have sex with him or her?" there is only one question you must answer. It isn't, "Do I love this person?" The only relevant question is: "Am I married to this person?"

Now some may push back by saying, "Well, we're not having sex. But we are living together in preparation for marriage. So, surely it would be ok to co-habit just so long as we refrain from sexual intimacy." Well, no, it isn't ok. And there are at least two reasons.

First, the Bible doesn't simply command us to abstain from sexual immorality but to "*flee*" from it (1 Cor. 6:18-20). The word translated "flee" means to run away, escape, do everything in your power to avoid it. In fact, the word translated "to flee" is the Greek term from which we derive our English word "fugitive." Do you recall when Joseph was confronted with temptation from Potiphar's wife? He fled! He turned 180 degrees and ran in the opposite direction. Simply put: you shouldn't linger in the presence of temptation. Trust me: you aren't as strong as you think. No one is. Only the incredibly naïve person would think that living with someone of the opposite sex is safe and won't present the temptation to engage in sexual immorality. I don't know who said it, but I echo this sentiment: "How inappropriate it would be to pray to God, 'lead us not into temptation' when we willingly remain in a tempting environment."

Second, the Bible speaks clearly to our responsibility to the world. We are here to be light in the midst of darkness and witnesses to the truth in a culture of lies and deception. We are responsible, therefore, not simply to ourselves and the person we say we love but also to the world to set an example of the kind of life that God would have all of us live.

Conclusion

“Sam, you’re nothing more than an old-fashioned fuddy-duddy completely out of touch and lagging far behind the times. Our culture has long since abandoned your vision of sexual ethics.”

You are right! But when it comes to what we are to believe as true and how we are to behave in terms of sexual ethics, I couldn’t care less about the times. Culture and popular opinion have no bearing whatsoever on what is true or false or on what is good or evil.

At the core of Christianity and being a Christian is voluntary and enthusiastic submission to the Bible as our highest authority. If you want to continue living in unrepentant sexual sin, call yourself culturally sophisticated, call yourself socially liberated, call yourself in step with changing times. Just don’t call yourself a Christian.

Let me close with a few words of practical counsel.

First, if you are unmarried and have never engaged in sexual relations, don’t ever think for a moment that you have somehow “missed out” or fallen short of what brings true happiness. Persevere in your commitment to sexual purity and avail yourself every day of the power of the Holy Spirit whom God the Father is continually pouring into you. The older you get, the greater will be the temptation. But the greater the temptation, even greater and more powerful is the energizing work of the Spirit in your heart.

Second, if you are unmarried and are contemplating engaging in sexual relations, I plead with you: Don’t! God pleads with you: Don’t! Whether or not you ever get married isn’t important. What’s most important is your grace-empowered, Spirit-filled obedience to God’s prescription for true happiness and satisfaction in life.

Third, if you are unmarried but have already engaged in sexual relations, whether once or often, but are now determined to walk in sexual purity until such time as God brings you a spouse, or perhaps forever, in the event that he desires for you to remain single your entire life, know this: There is no sin of whatever sort that cannot be forgiven by virtue of the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. You don’t have to live under a cloud of guilt or a sense of being forever stained by your sin. Confess your failure and embrace the full and free forgiveness that Jesus so richly and happily supplies.

Fourth, if you are unmarried but are currently engaging in sexual relations, God’s appeal to you is that you would stop, immediately. As difficult as that may sound, he is pouring into you more than enough power from the Holy Spirit to enable you to reverse the direction of your life in this regard. So repent, and make whatever sacrifices need to be made so that you will not be in a position to succumb to temptation and repeat the sin that you have already committed.

And remember, there is no reason to despair. You are not forever defiled or marked or disqualified. For with God there is always forgiveness and restoration and hope and a new beginning. I pray that beginning will begin today.