

Holiness—God’s Will for Us

1 Thess. 4:1-8

Background: Whenever Paul went to a new town, he went first to the synagogue. There he would find Jews along with a few Gentiles who appreciated the one God of Israel and the ethical standards of the Jews. These two groups would have been living according to the high moral standard of the Ten Commandments and the other laws of Moses. However, as the gospel began to reach more and more Gentiles who had been living a pagan lifestyle, these Gentiles brought their pagan ways to church with them. Paul of course did not attempt to keep them out of the church—but he also could not compromise the holiness required by God. Therefore many of his letters contain sections such as this first part of 1 Thess. 4, reminding his readers of God’s moral demands.

Since the first 8 verses deal primarily with sexual immorality, it is helpful to know a little bit about the sexual standards of the first century. Most adults were married, but sexual relationships outside marriage were common and even expected. Many men had courtesans in addition to their wives, and some had concubines that were always available. Prostitution (heterosexual and homosexual) was also a normal part of life in the Roman Empire. Even pederasty was accepted by many. The strict rules of the Law of Moses forbidding sexual activity outside marriage were considered unreasonable to most Gentiles.

Text: Paul starts a new section in 4:1-8, containing primarily ethical instruction. He reminds them that he has already spoken to them about such matters before and that they are already living the new life that “the Lord Jesus” wants. The reader has to love the end of verse 1, in which Paul says in essence, “Keep living the way you are living, but even more.” One suspects that he has heard from Timothy that most are doing well but that some of the new Christians are struggling.

Paul calls on his readers to avoid sexual immorality by being “sanctified.” Paul can use the term “sanctification” in two ways. In one sense Christians are already sanctified, that is, made holy by the blood of Christ. In another sense, sanctification is the process of growing in holiness and righteousness. It involves both God’s work in us through His Spirit and our efforts to do what is right. Paul often calls on his readers to put forth effort, to “work out” the implications of their salvation, to “walk by the Spirit,” to become what they are. That is what he is doing here.

4:4 is translated in two different ways in various translations, because the Greek is ambiguous. The older translations interpret Paul to mean that each man should learn to acquire a wife so that he will not be tempted to sin sexually. Most newer translations interpret the Greek to mean that each person should learn to control his or her own body and thus to avoid sexual immorality. In either case, verses 5 and 6 caution against following lustful desires like pagans and against sinning against a brother (or sister), presumably by having what we would call an affair.

In verses 7-8 Paul does not hesitate to remind these Christians of what he told them in person and has hinted at in this letter. Jesus is coming again and will punish those who are guilty of these sins. God's purpose for Christians is that they live lives of purity, as He has shown by giving us His Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. The Greco-Roman world of Paul was probably even more sexually impure than the world that most of us live in. However, it is clear that today's sexual standards are far below God's standards (and seem to be falling further). What are the most obvious sexual sins of our society? What are the least obvious but perhaps still as serious? Is it possible that Christians are sometimes hypocritical about the sexual sinfulness of the world?
2. Paul talks about the sexual immorality of the pagans "who do not know God." Can there be sexual ethics without God? Our culture seems to be moving somewhat in that direction. What are the ethics regarding sex being taught on TV, in the movies, and elsewhere in our culture?
3. How does Paul address the problem of sexual sin? Paul certainly condemns sexual immorality, but he does more than that. What are the most effective ways of dealing with sexual sin in our congregations today?
4. How do we balance Paul's emphasis on grace (elsewhere) with his emphasis on judgment of sinners (4:6-8)? Does Paul think that Christians who sin receive continual forgiveness or that they will be punished at the judgment?
5. We all know that Christians often reflect the excesses of our culture, just as Paul's converts reflected theirs. Many Christians in fact are caught up in sexual sin that they feel powerless to defeat. How should the church handle the problem of various sexual addictions that plague us?
6. Paul has sometimes been accused of promoting marriage primarily as a way of avoiding sexual sin (see 1 Cor. 7:1-7 and the present passage, 1 Thess. 4:3-4). Paul's critics accuse him of having a low view of marriage, reflecting the ancient view of some that women were almost the property of men. Is this true of Paul? Where might one go for a high view of marriage in the letters of Paul? (See Eph. 5) What is the purpose of marriage?