



## A PASSION FOR PURITY

Catalog No. 1011  
 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12  
 Fifth Message  
 Gary Vanderet  
 September 24th, 1995

We are going to talk about sex this morning. Sex, one of the great mysteries of life, is a subject that is of great interest to everyone. Now, despite what the popular media say, it was God who invented sex; it was not Playboy magazine. And the Bible says that sex is very, very good. Genesis 2 declares that in the beginning, God placed a man and a woman into a garden and gave them the privilege of uninhibited sexual freedom.

There are two striking statements in that chapter of the first book in the Bible. The first is this: God said that "the two shall become one flesh." The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 that that expression, "becoming one flesh," is an idiom for sexual intercourse. Sex, therefore, is a gift of God. The second striking statement is this: "the man and the woman were naked and not ashamed." They were positively unashamed in their nakedness. The Bible makes a good case for fig leaves outside of marriage, but within marriage, what God expects is uninhibited freedom in the area of sexual relationships. It was God who created lovemaking.

But there is something very wrong with sex as it is portrayed today. Rock groups, television shows, movies, and the media in general encourage all kinds of sexual activity that offer no satisfaction. "What's love got to do with it?" asks singer Tina Turner in one popular song that, like so many others, completely disconnects sex from relationships and love. I read a statistic that I cannot confirm, but it appears accurate, that says that less than six per cent of the sexual acts portrayed on television and in the movies take place between husbands and wives. That means that ninety-four per cent of all sex that we see portrayed takes place outside of marriage, the context which God planned for lovemaking.

We come today to the fourth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and to an abrupt change of topic. In chapters 1-3, the apostle has been looking back to the events of his visit to Thessalonica and defending himself against the accusations of his critics. In chapters 4-5 he looks to the present and future of the Thessalonian church and addresses certain practical problems which were troubling the church. He changes his style from narrative to exhortation, from an explanation of his own behavior to instructions regarding theirs.

In this passage Paul makes it crystal clear that it is God's will that Christians be holy. God's will has more to do with our morality than it does with his direction in our lives. In fact, I believe that ninety-nine per cent of

God's will is revealed in the Bible. God's will has to do with our behavior. What we don't know, about God will take care of in other ways; we don't need to worry about that. God will get us to the right place at the right time. It is much more important to be the right kind of person. God's will, therefore, centers mostly on behavior.

Here is what Paul has to say. Verse 1 of chapter 4:

**Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; (1 Thess 4:1-3, NASB)**

The word that is translated "sanctification" is almost the same as the word "holiness," which comes later on in this passage. We often think of holiness as grimness. Holy people have a reputation for being dismal and dull. They frown at anything that is fun or pleasurable. They look like they have been soaked in embalming fluid. But that is a caricature. The Old Testament speaks about "the beauty of holiness," that inner attractiveness that is apparent when people function as they were intended. Holy is really "wholeness"—becoming people who are admirable, strong, trustworthy, loving, compassionate and, particularly in this context, pure. Wholeness includes moral purity.

Paul says that it is God's will that we avoid sexual immorality. We don't have to be in the dark and guess at what is right and wrong. We can know. A cartoon in one of the Christian leadership journals pictured a clergyman talking to his wife. The caption read, "I still believe in sin. I just don't know any longer what qualifies." That's the problem with the world as it is today. We still believe in sin, but we don't know what qualifies any more. Relativism reigns in our world today. Abraham Edel, in his book *Ethical Judgments*, puts it this way:

It all depends on where you are;  
 It all depends on when you are;  
 It all depends on what you feel;  
 It all depends on how you feel;  
 It all depends on how you're raised;  
 It all depends on what is praised.  
 What's right today is wrong tomorrow;  
 Joy in France and England sorrow.

It all depends on point of view,  
Australia or Timbuktu;  
In Rome do as the Romans do;  
If tastes just happen to agree;  
Then you have morality.  
But when you have conflicting trends;  
It all depends, it all depends.

That is the relativism that is subtly taught in the schools and spread in the media. And the world wonders why we struggle with morality!

But Paul reveals in this passage what qualifies as sin. Sexual immorality is sin. If we want to be holy, if we want to put our bodies to their intended purpose, if we want to do God's will, then we need to take the apostle's words seriously—and he says we should avoid sexual immorality.

But what is sexual immorality? The term that Paul uses is the word from which we get the word "fornication." It is the Greek word, *porneia*, which originally meant "to buy or sell." Over time it came to refer to the cheap kind of sex that one buys or sells. In the New Testament, it refers to any sex outside of marriage: sexual intercourse between two unmarried people, between a married and a single person (also called adultery in the Bible), and homosexuality. Today, the world views homosexuality as the moral equivalent of being left handed. It says that homosexuals were created a little different. We don't have time to deal with that topic, but the Bible is very clear about homosexuality. The Old Testament says a man should not lie with a man like he does with a woman. In the Book of Romans, Paul says that homosexuality is a distortion of nature; it is a perversion. While it is not the worst sin in the world, the apostle's point there is that it is one of the most undignified things one can do with one's body.

Now it is God's will for us to "abstain" from these things. The word means, "to stand off from." Some things are so toxic you should not even want to sniff the bottle. But why does God limit sex to marriage when we feel such powerful urges within us? Why must it be disciplined, curtailed and reserved only for marriage? Paul goes on to give some answers to these questions.

The text suggests at least three reasons. First, *sexual immorality defiles the body*. Verse 4:

**that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (4:4-5)**

Paul exhorts us to learn to control our own bodies. But that's not easy, is it? Our bodies have certain hormones that have a profound effect on how we behave. At puberty, new hormones pour into our bloodstream. These, together with other sexual changes, create powerful drives within us. Now these "urges to merge," as someone has described them, are God-given, but they need to be controlled. The world, however, says that sexual appetites should be treated just like other appe-

tites, such as hunger and thirst, and fulfilled whenever the opportunity affords.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul elaborates on this word about controlling our bodies. He begins by quoting a saying of the Corinthians (verse 12):

**"Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"—but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor 6:12, NIV)**

In other words, everything is lawful for us, but something used out of context can become our master. Verse 13:

**"Food is for the stomach, and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor 6:13, NIV)**

The Corinthians were saying that sexual urges are very much like a desire for food. Today, the commercial says that if you get a "Mac attack," eat a hamburger. The Corinthians said, and our world today agrees, if you have a sexual attack, satisfy it. But Paul says no. That is what magicians call a categorical error. It's like comparing apples and oranges. It is true that the stomach was made for food, but it is not true that the body was made for sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The body is made for the Lord.

That was a shock to the Greeks and Romans of Paul's day. They regarded the body as immaterial. They trivialized it. The only thing that mattered, they said, was ideas. They treated the body in one of two ways. They either became stoics, and disciplined their bodies severely, ruthlessly controlling all their desires; or they became Epicureans, and satisfied all their desires. To them, it didn't matter whether one was a monk or a drunk; the body was unimportant. Not so, says Paul. God loves your body. It may be lumpy, you may still have a chest (although the middle drawer is sticking out), but God still loves it, and he wants to fill it and flood it and put it to its intended use.

Before we go back to the letter to the Thessalonians, let's read the rest of this passage from Corinthians. Verse 14:

**By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. You see God has an eternal purpose for our bodies. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.**

**Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is**

**in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.** (1 Cor 6:14-20, NIV)

This is the same argument as that of 1 Thessalonians 4. God wants your body for himself alone; but sex outside of marriage prostitutes our bodies.

Returning to 1 Thessalonians now, Paul's second point is that *sexual immorality defrauds others*. Verse 6:

**and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.** (4:6)

We often hear it argued that an act of sexual immorality between two consenting adults doesn't hurt anyone, so why get uptight about it? But the apostle says that sex outside of marriage always hurts someone. Someone is defiled, someone is injured. Paul will go to say that there is a uniting that takes place in the sex act, and breaking that relationship always involves a tearing. Adultery always destroys. It breaks up marriages and leaves scars.

When that happens, of course, children suffer most. They are the victims of sexual immorality. This was graphically illustrated in an account that I read of a conversation of a sixth grade teacher with her class in a school in an upper middle class neighborhood in California. She gave the students a creative writing assignment, asking them to complete a sentence that began with the words, "I wish..." She expected them to ask for material things, like pets, bicycles, or vacations, but twenty of her thirty students made references to their disintegrating families. I will read a few of them: "I wish my parents wouldn't fight." "I wish my father would come back." "I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend." "I wish I could get straight A's so my father would love me." "I wish I had one mom and one dad so that kids wouldn't make fun of me. I have three moms and dads and they botch up my life." I do not share this to make anyone feel guilty, but merely to emphasize the apostle's point that sexual immorality defrauds others.

Homosexuality degrades and defiles our humanity. They may deny it, but the gay community is anything but gay! Addiction to pornography is not without its scars, either. It separates the sex act from a relationship. You can't have a relationship with a *Playboy* magazine. Photographs are nothing but dots on a page; no commitment and no responsibility are involved. One of the worst things about pornography is that it causes men to regard women as objects to be used and abused.

The third thing that Paul says is that *sexual immorality will destroy us in the end*. We defile our bodies, defraud our brothers and sisters, and destroy ourselves. Notice how he puts it, in verse 6:

**and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.**

Sexual immorality exacts a heavy price. Sin always destroys! The New Testament indicates the judgment of God is revealed in his simply letting people have their way. He takes his restraining hand off them and they suffer the due consequences of their error in their own bodies.

For corroboration of this, read Paul's words in the first chapter of Romans. Referring to certain people who no longer were thankful (although they knew about God they chose not to believe in him), Paul says, in verses 24-28:

**Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.**

**Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.**

**Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.** (Rom 1:24-28, NIV)

That is what Paul calls the "wrath of God": God simply takes his hands off us and lets us have our own way. At once our lives begin to deteriorate. Our bodies disintegrate; our souls come apart. We lose our sense of humanity and become degraded. We find that sex no longer is our servant, but our master. Sophocles, who lived a little before Paul, said this of his own life: "My sexual passions are an angry and insane master."

I am sure there are some people here this morning who no longer participate in sex acts because they want to, but because they have to. If that is true of you, know that, in God's design, his judgment is always redemptive. His purpose is to bring us back to him. He is Immanuel, "God with us." Whether God is with us in our walk with him, or whether he is with us in his judgment, he is still with us. He will not leave us alone. The flip side of the truth that God will not leave us or forsake us is that he will not leave us alone, either. He will harass us with his love until we are willing to listen to him, take him seriously, repent of our sin and return to him. And when we repent, there is immediate forgiveness and restoration. He is waiting, just as he waited in Revelation, for the church to repent. He was knocking at the door, waiting for sounds of life in that church, waiting for someone to open the door and let him in. God's judgment is always redemptive.

It is quite apparent that we need help in this area. How do we control our sexual urges? Some would say, "Just say no!" But unfortunately, that does not work. It

doesn't work in the fight against drugs, and it doesn't work in handling our sexual drives. People who have trouble with substance abuse know that they cannot simply say no. They are in the hands of an insane master. So what can we do?

There is something about us that cannot be contained or even explained, some deep urge within us to be more than we are, something that keeps us from being satisfied with material things. That is why we can go from one thing to another and never find the possession that fills us up. We are forced to admit that the most important thing in life is not things. There has to be something else to fill us.

That something is this: We were made for God and we find satisfaction only in him. That is the truth about us as human beings.

Spirituality and sexuality are inextricably linked. These deep urges we have to merge are really urges to merge with God. These deep longings, unsatisfied desires and monumental passions that we have within us are passions for God. Lovemaking is merely a small representation of that greater urge.

That is why we will never be satisfied, even within marriage. Our sexual struggles and appetites don't end after we get married, because the urge is too great. It is an urge for God, a hunger for him, a heart crying out to his call. He is saying to us, "Seek my face, seek my face." As David puts it, "When your heart says to me, Seek my face, I will seek your face." That is God's deep calling to our deep. These subterranean urges that we have for something more are really an urge to merge with God. And that is why these figures about Christ "in" us and we "in" Christ are the answer to our longings.

So if we really want to tackle our sex drive, we must work on our relationship with God. We must study his word. Through it we come to the Living Word who loves us, and learn to respond back to his love with love, worship and devotion. All of our hungers are really God saying to us, "Come a little closer. I want to love you. I want to satisfy you." This does not mean that we won't struggle with sexual urges anymore. It would be nice if we could cross the goal line, spike the ball, and be done with it, but it doesn't work that way. And here is another thing: age doesn't take the struggle away. We find rest and satisfaction only when our deepest longings are being met by God.

Paul concludes with a word about "excelling still more" (verse 7):

**For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. Consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you. Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write**

**to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, (4:7-10)**

I was struck by that phrase, "excel still more" (it is repeated in verse 1). In other words, it is a matter of progress. It is not that we will suddenly be able to master every illicit thought and every sexual urge. But there can be progress if we put our roots down into God.

I have always wondered why David took five stones into battle against Goliath. Faith would lead us to believe that he needed only one. While some people say he gathered five stones because Goliath had four brothers, I am inclined to believe he thought that Goliath might not go down with the first stone.

Sometimes when we go out to defeat Goliath, we miss and he wins. But God gives us grace to get up, dust ourselves off and continue on. By faith we can know that he is working inside of us. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that is through faith *and patience* that we inherit the promises.

Some of you are probably thinking that it's too late for you. You are thinking, "I have already trashed my life. I have so much guilt and remorse over the past that there is no hope for me." If that is how you feel, let me remind you of that dear woman in John 8. The religious leaders caught her in bed with the wrong man, and they brought her before Jesus. As you think about your situation, put yourself in her place. You are standing there, before the Lord of lords, unkempt and ashamed. Everything looks ugly and hopeless. But as you look into his eyes, he appears to be on your side. You hear him say to you, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." His words anticipate the cross. As you look at him, all your guilt melts away.

The cross speaks of the sinner's unconditional acceptance. Jesus paid the price for sin so that justice could be satisfied and judgment averted. And, like that woman, we can be saved not only from sin's guilt, but from its power. Her chains fell off, and she was free. We can hear Jesus say, "Everything is going to be all right." We can begin again, "not defiled in ruin," but, as Paul would say, "purified virgins."

God's mercies are new every morning. Every day marks a new beginning. His lovingkindness endures forever. His faithfulness is great. It is that grace that enables us to forget the past and take the first step as though the past never happened. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. It is all paid for. If we repent and accept his forgiveness, every day can mark a new beginning for us, just as it did for that woman who was dragged before him on that day, only to walk away later, forgiven and cleansed, unto newness of life.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino