

January 3, 2021  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: 1 Thessalonians  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## **YOUR SANCTIFICATION IS GOD'S WILL**

### **1 Thessalonians 4:1-8**

I was a teenager when the sexual revolution came of age in the mid-1960's. The revolution had been simmering for about a decade before it exploded throughout our culture. At about the time I was born, Hugh Hefner and Marilyn Monroe collaborated to make published nudity acceptable to the society. But then in the mid-60's, with the advent of the birth control pill, women's liberation, feminism, and the rock-and-roll scene with expressions of unbridled passion fueled by alcohol, drugs and marijuana, blatant sexuality exploded. Suddenly, open sexual expression, like that highlighted at Woodstock and the subsequent Hippy movement, was acceptable. Striking became the fad on many secular college campuses.

But the power of unbridled sex is much like a pandemic. Experimentation leads to addiction and, like a snowball rolling down a hill, it gets out of control very quickly. People learn too late that sexuality is as addictive, and, therefore, as destructive as drug addiction, alcohol addiction, or any other behavior that an individual is unable to control.

We are now living with unplanned, unexpected consequences of letting sex get out of bounds. We are now a culture that is characterized by being governed by basic animal instincts. We are deeply sunk in the consequences of thoughts and actions that were once deemed fun and harmless.

Now sexual addiction has destroyed multitudes of families, wiped out thousands of leaders, and has so confused the whole society that almost no one seems to be able to think logically about the issue, much less biblically. Today one of the most crippling problems our culture is dealing with revolves around questions about

gender identification. Children whose mothers have allowed them to be birthed are growing up in utter confusion not knowing for sure if they are male or female in spite of the biological certainty at birth. That is where the sexual revolution has led.

Thinking people should be able to understand now why God requires that His created beings keep some things closely guarded in the box of morality and ethics. When foolish unbelievers open Pandora's box of sensuality, it is very difficult to get it back under control. It is much like ripping open a feather pillow, shaking out the contents into the wind, and then trying to retrieve all the feathers you let out of the pillow.

There is a very good reason why God addressed this issue in a letter written to a local church. Unbridled sexual expression has been the ruin of many gatherings of God's blood-purchased people. Because we live in weak and temptable human flesh, it is good and necessary for us to hear God speak on this issue periodically. God gives this very serious warning, because the consequences are more serious than we can imagine and more serious than people who are ignorant about God are willing to admit.

### **God Wills Our Sanctification (vv.1-3a).**

It is God's will for His people to live a pleasing life more and more. Wouldn't everyone, saved and unsaved alike, agree with that? But in God's will, living to please God is important. *Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God (v.1a).*

Often, the best that a friend, parent, teacher or pastor can do is *ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus*. The language of this statement implies that there is an issue that needs attention, a change that needs to come about, progress to be made. Again this word translated "urge" is the one Paul uses so often that means to come alongside. Here he challenged the new Christians to come alongside an important principle or standard.

Our urging of others, like Paul's asking and urging, is done *in the Lord Jesus*. It means that Paul appealed to the authority the Lord Jesus gave him as an apostle. It also means that he is asking and urging on the basis that they all share union in Jesus Christ – who

they desire to please. Shouldn't it be easy to desire to command Christians to do what pleases Christ? But often a command will cause resistance instead of compliance.

Whatever is the subject of the request, it is a matter of doing what pleases God. Pleasing God matters to His people. The first question in the Larger Westminster Catechism is, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" The answer: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." More accurately, the idea here is that the purpose for which God created us is to glorify Him and enjoy pleasing Him forever. The purpose of the flesh is to enjoy self, which we accomplish by serving self. That is to stand God's creation on its head. God created us to please Him and therein we find joy.

We, like the Christians in Thessalonica, should know that. The apostle had already given sufficient instruction about *how you ought to live and to please God*. This is precisely the situation for second and third generation Christians. We grow up in Christian homes, Christian churches, and Christian schools. We have an incredible amount of knowledge from instruction about how to live in a way that pleases God. But we also have a very powerful flesh that desires to please self. The constant battle is whether we will submit to the desires of our flesh or submit to the desires of God revealed in His instruction. The battle becomes most intense when leaders who claim to be followers of Christ give instruction that contradicts the instruction from God's Bible.

Very often writers who say very encouraging things are promoted by undiscerning Christians. A little research will turn up the truth that there is a basic flaw in the writer's relationship with Christ such as, for example, he or she believes in universal salvation, or that Christ was not necessarily God in the flesh, or that church authorities replace Christ as the mediator, or that there are many ways to salvation. But if you point out these basic flaws, you are considered to be a critic, a negative person, who is responsible for making other Christians feel bad. But by ignoring these flaws, the undiscerning Christian is buying into much false teaching without seeing it for what it is. They are ignorant that Satan makes himself to be an angel of light.

That is exactly the kind of stuff the Judaizers and enemies of Paul said about him. In his letters to the church in Corinth it becomes obvious that Paul's enemies painted him as an unwavering dictator who demanded that people obey him. There is nothing new under the sun. But in spite of false accusations against him, God's servant continued to urge Christians to live in a way that pleases God.

Specifically, the instruction Paul gave teaches that sanctification indicates there is always room for improvement. He urged the Christians to please God, *just as you are doing, that you do so more and more (v.1b)*. The issue about which Paul was urging the new Christians was continuing to learn how to live pleasing to God. They were already on the right road but they needed to continue. All of us who truly follow Christ will need to do so more and more. We will never fully achieve godliness while we live in this flesh. Therefore, our entire life will consist of getting rid of ungodliness and reaching out for more conformity to His character.

Finding joy in pleasing God is His will for us. And it is true as Paul said, "You know God's will" (vv.2-3). We know the Lord Jesus' instruction just like those first-century folks did. *For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus (v.2)*. In fact, we know more because we have the completed Bible. Like all Christians we receive instruction *through the Lord Jesus*. He authorizes His representatives to teach. *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12)*. And the Lord Jesus expects His people to listen and to grow through that instruction. The pastor/teacher Christ gives to the Church *must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach (Titus 1:9-11)*.

This instruction is *through the Lord Jesus* and at the same time is *from Jesus*. The word of the Lord Jesus is the Bible. God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – reveals Himself and, therefore, His will in the Bible. And therefore, we know God's will.

Knowing God's will, we know that God sanctifies us. Paul wrote for us, *For this is the will of God, your sanctification (v.3)*. Obviously, the will of God is what He desires for His people. But more than being what God desires, His will is also what He decrees. God is not sitting in heaven saying, "I wish My people would be more conformed to My character." Rather, God has decreed that people who are truly born again will be in the process of becoming more and more like Himself.

That means that true Christians will be becoming holy. *But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16)*. True Christians will be conformed to the image of Christ through the "all things" (Romans 8:28) that God allows in our lives. *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:29)*. And because we truly believe we will be with Christ, we actualize (obey the imperative) the indicative (what God promised to be true). Consider how the redeemed person who is waiting for final redemption lives. *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3)*.

This is the imperative (command) and indicative (actuality) relationship that we talked about Wednesday evening. God's instruction clearly states that **His people must be in the process of becoming** (imperative) more and more like Him and less and less like the world we were once part of. God's instruction clearly states that **if we really are His people, we will be becoming** (indicative) more and more like Him and less and less like our world. Because this is true, sanctification or the lack of it is a good measurement for the reality of salvation. This explains why we see kids who grow up in Christian homes and make Christian affirmations begin to drift and then drift more and more from their Christian affirmations until they finally deny them altogether.

## One Particular Area of Application (vv.3b-8).

Because we are being sanctified as God's Word instructs us, we must abstain from Gentile-like lust (vv.3a-5). In this short passage, we find two commands and an application. The first command is that we must avoid sexual immorality or, as Paul wrote it, *that you abstain from sexual immorality (v.3a)*.

The Greek word for sexual immorality is *pornea*. Obviously, that is the basis for the English word pornography, pictures and videos of sexual sins. The Greek word would have referred to any sexual intercourse outside the bounds of marriage. But it is also used to speak of any kind of fornication or sexual impurity.

It shouldn't take a theologian to figure out that God is opposed to any and all such licentiousness. The first command is that we must continually, always abstain from this particular sin. To abstain is to maintain a distance from something. It is the same Greek word used in Luke 15:20 where we read that the father saw the prodigal son while he was *still a long way off*. God's will is that His people will be sanctified, staying far away from sensual sins. You can't stay a long way from this sin if you look at it in pictures or videos or read about it in questionable novels and stories. You can't abstain from sensuality if it governs how you think, which will result in how you act.

Rather, sanctification is what the second command in this statement requires. We are to know how to control our flesh. Paul explained *that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor (v.4)*. God's instruction about sanctification tells us how to keep our bodies under control. God has predetermined that His people will be conformed to the character of Christ. God's instruction teaches us how to do that. We learn how to control ourselves. It is a bit odd that so many people want to control everyone else but not themselves. This phrase speaks clearly that we should know how to "possess our vessel" which is full of sexual overtones.

It is our responsibility to carry out the commands that make us what God said we are. This is a perfect illustration of God's divine sovereignty holding the individual responsible for submission and obedience. The professing Christian who refuses to learn submission

and obedience calls into question God's sovereign design for him or her.

Control is being able to tell our flesh "No." Paul was not instructing these Christians to do something he had not learned himself. He confessed to the Corinthians, *But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:27)*. The term "body" in this statement is an all-inclusive term for the flesh.

How do we know if we are achieving that goal of holiness? God's instruction defines holiness. The goal, the plan, the measure for controlling our flesh is holiness. Frankly, that very statement is rejected outright by most professing Christians in our culture. Most people agree that trying to be holy will make you unacceptable to a sinful world. But in spite of knowing that, professing Christians prefer to pattern their lives after what is popular and acceptable rather than after God.

Holy is the character of God. The Greek word is *hagios*, which means to set apart. It teaches us that God is distinct from, set apart from the sin that infected this world and everyone in the moment Adam rebelled against God. *Hagios* is what God does to the sinner at the moment of salvation. Immediately upon the miracle of regeneration, God sets us apart from the sinful world, and from the penalty for sin, unto Himself. That is why we read a past tense verb when Paul described the changed condition of Christians in Corinth. Speaking of an array of sin and wickedness, Paul wrote, *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11)*. Now God simply expects those He set apart from sin to live "set-apart-from-sin" kind of lives. The Bible defines the character of such lives.

Furthermore, God's instruction describes the honor with which we are to treat our bodies. Quite the opposite of what we once were, we now use our bodies in honor. The idea of honoring the physical body, using it honorably, was quite foreign to the Greek/Roman cultures. It is not honorable to drag your body into the pits of sin.

Then the application of those two commands works out so that we are not controlled by Gentile-like passions. We control our flesh and use our body in holiness and honor, *not in the passion of lust like*

*the Gentiles who do not know God (v.5)*. That statement might strike us as unkind. Who or what are Gentiles in this sense? The term is not used in an ethnic sense here. It is used as a contrast to Christians. Ethnically, many Gentiles, including me, become followers of Christ. But in the sense used here, the term Gentiles represents unregenerate-kind of people, the opposite of the redeemed.

The unbridled passions common among unsaved people must not determine our standards. Unsaved people are governed by the desires of their flesh. They have no other choice because they are devoid of the Holy Spirit and they reject the truths of the Bible. Ultimately, the problem is that they do not know God. They know about God. For the most part, they reject God's self-revelation. Therefore, not having an intimate relationship with God, they cannot conform their lives to God's character.

Go to any public gathering and you will be smacked head-on with sensuality. It is seething at the amusement park, the mall, the ball game, almost any place where a dozen or more Gentiles are gathered. Often Pat and I will be in a place of public entertainment, and we will look at each other and say, "Vanity Fair." You will remember that Vanity Fair is the place where, in Bunyan's *the Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Faithful found themselves on their journey toward the Celestial City. Everything about Vanity Fair was opposed to the character of Christ who called them to follow. The whole culture was so opposed to Christ that Christian and Faithful were arrested and persecuted and Faithful was martyred.

We forget too easily that unsaved people do not know God. How can we become comfortable living like people who do not know our Savior, our Forgiver of sins, our only Hope for eternity?

The warning is necessary because Gentile passions tend to creep into the Church. In any given local assembly, there will generally be some folks who claim to be born again, claim to be living in fellowship with Christ, and claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit. But the sad reality is that none of those things are true for such professors. They are religious to be sure. Having been reared in structured religious teaching, they are quite familiar with Christian teaching and expectations. But because they have never experienced the miracle of regeneration and are, therefore, not filled with the Holy

Spirit, they experience no conviction or discomfort in living just like other Gentiles who don't know God.

Do people like that set your standards for living? Who sets your standard for manliness, your Gentile world of unbelievers or Bible principles? Who sets your standard for pretty and attractive, fashion websites and celebrities or Bible principles? Over the years I have occasionally heard a woman say, "I never wear anything my husband does not approve of." That is a good response. . . . as long as your husband loves God and is being sanctified. But your husband is as capable of acting like a Gentile as you or me or anyone else is. Too often even professing Christian husbands think and live more characteristically of a Gentile than of God. If that becomes the case, letting your husband set the standard for how you dress can be bad. I knew a pastor who is now with the Lord who, during his years of ministry, did a lot of counseling. One time he said, "I have learned from my experience that the husband lays a foundation of sin and the wife builds a superstructure on it."

People who control the impulses of their flesh should, by all means, act responsibly in their relationships (vv.6-8). And so the command here is to guard against getting out of bounds with a brother. Controlled people will be careful not to transgress in this matter. We must see *that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter (v.6a)*. Brotherly love is the theme Paul takes up in 4:9-12. The context here means that the transgression or wrong is in the area of sensuality or sexual fidelity. Causing a brother or sister to step over the boundaries is not a trait of sanctification.

The reason for the warning is *because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you (v.6b)*. God knows all, sees all, and rewards all. God is in charge of paying back all who ignore or purposely reject His instruction.

The principle that comes to bear here is that the greater relationship tempers the lesser relationships (vv.7-8). God has called us in holiness. *For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness (v.7)*. This call to holiness is such a necessary point of address because of the blatant sexuality of the Greek and Roman cultures. Fornication and adultery were the expected norm. Many of the false religions offered prostitutes in the temples supposedly to perform some kind of sacred worship, but it was more likely a means to raise

money. Inn keepers typically owned slave girls which they offered to their guests for money.

In a culture where many marriages were arranged to continue or enhance social standing or material benefit, the wife served the purpose of continuing the family line, but sexual pleasure was expected outside the marriage. The ancient Greek philosopher Demosthenes stated the depth of depravity quite plainly: "Mistresses we keep for our pleasure, concubines for our day to day physical well-being, and wives to bear us legitimate children." Is the American culture all that different?

Now here is the principle: Acting like a sinful Gentile disregards God first. *Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you (v.8)*. Rebelling against the instruction about sanctification God gives in the Bible is serious. It is not a matter of rebelling against parents' standards, or the preacher's opinion, or an older generation's refusal to get on the right side of history. To disregard Bible instruction is to disregard God. It grieves the Holy Spirit and grieving Him who is our teacher and guarantee of eternal life should make us very miserable.

We too live in a society that is thoroughly saturated by sensuality. We can adapt our standards and lifestyles to it or we can stand against it. If we stand against it, we will become quite obviously non-conformist. Someone might ask what is wrong with us. That is a good thing according to Peter who wrote, *But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15)*.