

## Message #9

## I Thessalonians 4:1-8

The Thessalonian church was totally and completely cemented in grace/faith theology. They totally embraced non-works righteousness. If you understand this you will not ever fall for any false works system of religion. You are free in Christ. But even though this is theologically and positionally true, Paul did not want these Thessalonians involved in things that were sexually immoral. They could not ever lose their eternal salvation, but they could miss out on their personal sanctification.

It really doesn't matter what the dispensation or time period happens to be, the fact is one of the major enticements to lure God's people is the enticement of things that are sexually immoral. The Thessalonian church was a great church, but let's not be naïve about this point; even in a great church there is still the lure of things that are sexually immoral and believers who truly do grasp grace can fall if they are not careful.

Paul thanked God for this Thessalonian church. We have seen that one reason why he so loved this church was because it was completely focused on receiving the Word of God. However, that does not mean the believers were free from a sin nature or a flesh nature that potentially could be lured away from a focus on the Word of God. In **verse 1**, Paul begins by using an adverb "finally." This particular word does not mean "let me end this letter"; it means "I have some further matters that I need to address."

The first century world was a world that not only flaunted sexual immorality, it promoted it. Many religious worship places featured sexual immorality as part of their religious ceremonies. The Roman culture had no moral compass as to what immorality even was. These immoral things were a lure to the Thessalonians; they have always been to any church.

Just because you are a believer in Jesus Christ does not mean you are exempt from immoral lures and temptations. Many a believer has fallen for this trap. There could be someone right in this church who is actively involved in immoral activity and most of us wouldn't know it, but of course God would. Frankly some believers are throwing away their sanctification because they will not walk away from immoral things. Paul did not want that happening to the Thessalonians, so when he writes this part of the letter, what he says is this:

**GOD WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO EXCEL IN THEIR SANCTIFICATION AND HOLINESS AND PLEASE HIM AND IN ORDER TO DO THAT WE MUST GET AWAY FROM AND ABSTAIN FROM ANYTHING THAT IS SEXUALLY IMMORAL.**

The word "sexual immorality" in **verse 3** is the Greek word *porneias* (πορνείας), from which we get our English word "pornography." This word, in biblical times, referred to all kinds of sexually immoral things; from fornication, to adultery, to prostitution, to homosexuality (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 373).

The only sexual activity that is not viewed as immoral is that which takes place between a husband and wife (man and woman) in the context of marriage. Anything else is classified as sexually immoral by God.

Now let's be very candid here. The immoral lure that exists today for most churches is probably not in the actual worship services. It is other things. It is the internet. It is estimated that up to 80% of what is on the internet is pornographic. It is television. Immoral sex is a dominant theme of the TV screen. Advertisers use it to try and sell anything. TV programs promote immoral themes. There are adult TV channels; there are adult bookstores and adult clubs. All of these things are designed to promote that which is immoral.

What God's people need to know is if you are going to these places, if you are involving yourself in these things, you are not just struggling with your flesh; you are not pleasing God, you are rejecting God and you will be paid back by God. God does not want His people involved in impure and immoral things. Hopefully our journey through these verses today will be used by Him to accomplish that in every one of our lives.

Now there are two main admonitions that are brought out in this passage:

**ADMONITION #1** – God wants us to receive instruction and live in ways that please Him.  
**4:1**

The conjunction translated “then” connects us back to what Paul just said, which is in view of the coming of the Lord Jesus, it is critical that believers have holy lives. He follows that up here by saying we need to “walk” or “live” in a way that pleases God. He wants us to excel in ways that please Him and if we choose to live our lives in ways that please Him, this will be the result—we will excel all the more.

Notice in **verse 1** that this exhortation is to those “in the Lord Jesus.” The address that Paul is going to give about things sexually immoral is specifically aimed at believers who are “in the Lord.” **This prepositional phrase means we are actually united to or in union with Jesus Christ.** In fact, the only possible way one may potentially live life in a way that pleases God, is to be in the Lord. One may do many things and be involved in all kinds of religious and social causes and works and God views it as nothing more than “filthy rags.” Only when one is “in the Lord Jesus” is it possible to actually please God.

Biblical instruction is for believers. Moral instruction is for believers. It is the believer who is in a position to make adjustments in his or her life that will please God. That is exactly what Paul wanted for these Thessalonians.

Paul did not want them just pleasing God, he wanted them “excelling” in pleasing God. He wanted them to abound in a walk and life that pleased God.

As we walk in the ways of God and in ways that please God, we excel and abound more and more in the Word of God and in our relationship with God.

**ADMONITION #2** – God has given a specific commandment for His people to stay away from sexual immorality. **4:2-7**

In order for us to live our lives in a way that pleases God, we must get away from and stay away from things that are sexually immoral.

Now before we tackle this, I want you to carefully and clearly see **that staying away from sexual immorality is not a matter of salvation, it is a matter of sanctification. Staying away from sexual immorality is not a matter of justification, it is a matter of sanctification.**

Paul is very clear on this point. In fact, the word “sanctification” shows up three times in this context (**vs. 3, 4, 7**). The word “sanctification” (αγιασμος) is one that refers to being ceremonially and morally clean and pure in the sight of God (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 6). The idea here is that God views a person as set aside unto Him because he is clean and pure. To live a life that pleases God, we must be clean from things sexually immoral.

A person could be saved and be sexually immoral, but a person cannot be sanctified and be sexually immoral. A person cannot be clean before God and be involved in things that are sexually immoral. **It is impossible to be involved in things immoral and be in a relationship with God in a way that pleases Him.**

In the first century, sexual immorality was not even considered to be sexual immorality. These were pagan cultures that promoted immoral things as if they were normatives for everyday life. A married man could have a mistress (εταιρα), a concubine (παλλακη), or go to a prostitute (πορνη) and it was perfectly acceptable in this culture. It wasn't considered bad or wrong. Homosexuality was publicly promoted and flaunted to the point that there was no need to “hide in a closet.”

What God says is if you are “in Christ,” you need to make a complete break from these immoral cultural norms. **It is impossible for one to be clean and right in his relationship with God and be involved in sexual immorality. Paul is very clear on this point and in fact, he speaks in behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Now there are ten critical God-revealed points Paul communicates about sexual immorality from this text:

**God-Revealed Point #1** - Staying away from sexual immorality is a commandment of the Lord Jesus. **4:2**

The word “commandment” (παραγγελω) means that this is a direct command or order that has been transmitted from the Lord Jesus to the believer (*Ibid.*, p. 338).

F.F. Bruce said, “there is an authoritative note about the word commandment “*παραγγελια*” (*I & II Thessalonians*, p. 79). D. Edmond Hiebert said this has a military tone to it (*The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 164).

Paul wanted these Thessalonians to view this statement as a New Testament, Grace Age commandment given directly to the church by Jesus Christ, and it is to be obeyed. If a believer gets involved in anything immoral, he is disobeying a direct commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ. You do not earn rewards by disobeying direct commandments.

**God-Revealed Point #2** - Staying away from sexual immorality is the will of God. **4:3a**

Years ago, there was a confrontation between a leader of a church and a brother who was in immorality. The leader of the church admonished him and warned him to immediately stop the immoral behavior. The man in immorality said, “I will pray about what God’s will is in this.” This is not something you need to pray about in order to determine God’s will; this is the will of God.

A couple weeks ago a minister’s son said that God made him gay. In other words, he said it is the will of God and the work of God for him to be involved in homosexual sin. Well, sexual immorality is not the will of God, getting away from it is the will of God. Now that kid can go on a lecture circuit and tell people how much he loves Jesus, but the day he gets before Jesus, he will suffer the consequences for a life that did not please God and did not obey the will of God. In fact, it was Jesus who said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

**God-Revealed Point #3** - Staying away from sexual immorality is your sanctification. **4:3b**

God does not want His people dabbling around in anything that is sexually immoral. The Lord specifically singles out this sin and says abstaining from this sin is the only way one may be clean and pure in the sight of God. What Paul is grammatically saying here is this is the key to being clean and pure in your relationship with God. This is a major issue when it comes to God.

This is it; this literally is your sanctification. You can do many things as a Christian. You can promise not to lie (immoral people mostly do lie). You can promise not to steal or not gossip. You can go to church and be involved in all kinds of church things. You can sing hymns, teach Sunday school, and be in the choir; but if you do not stay away from immoral things, you are not sanctified in a clean and pure way before God. God does not view one who is immoral as one who is clean and pure.

**God-Revealed Point #4** - Staying away from sexual immorality is by abstaining. **4:3c**

Now the infinitive “to abstain” is important to parse. It is a present tense middle voice word.

**First** of all, it is a present tense word which means this is to be a continual and habitual abstaining. If one wants to please God, he must continually abstain from immoral things.

**Second**, the word is in the middle voice, which means each child of God is to stay away from this “in and of himself,” or “in and of herself.” The point is stressed by the fact that the pronoun “you” is in the original. We could view this as “you yourself.” Each believer is responsible and accountable in and of himself. I am accountable for me and you are accountable for you.

**Third**, the actual word “abstain” (απεχω) is one that means to hold back, or keep away, or keep at a distance from something (*Ibid.*, p. 47). If we want to do the will of God and be clean and pure in our relationship with Him, we must stay far away from anything that is sexually immoral. Don’t go near it. Keep your distance. Keep away from it.

**Fourth**, the actual noun immorality, better translated “fornication,” is articular, which would indicate that Paul specifically has in his mind any specific sexual behavior that is contrary to God’s Word, which is outside of the context of marriage.

The mandate and commandment from God is that God’s people make a habitual clean break from things sexually immoral. It is impossible to be clean before God and please God if one doesn’t.

**God-Revealed Point #5** - Staying away from sexual immorality means controlling one’s own vessel. **4:4**

Now, there is a real debate that exists on what is meant by one’s own vessel. Whatever this vessel is, it is to be possessed in sanctification and honor. **Keeping away from sexual immorality is the key to sanctification and it is the key to a life that honors God.** The actual word “vessel” (σκευος) may be used in two legitimate metaphorical ways in the Scriptures, which both fit this context.

**(Metaphorical View #1)** - It may refer to a man’s wife.

The Apostle Peter uses this word to refer to a man’s wife in I Peter 3:7 and Paul develops a similar contextual point about staying away from immorality in a wife context in I Corinthians 6:12-7:5.

If this is the meaning, then Paul’s point is stay away from sexual immorality by enjoying physical intimacy with your wife within the context of marriage.

**(Metaphorical View #2)** - It may refer to a man’s body.

Paul uses the metaphor of a vessel to refer to our earthly bodies (II Cor. 4:7; II Tim. 2:21). If this is the meaning, then Paul’s point is stay away from sexual immorality by not involving your body in anything that is immoral.

**God-Revealed Point #6** - Staying away from sexual immorality sets us apart from a world that does not know God. **4:5**

The unsaved world is driven by lustful passions.

Many of us can testify that when we were in the world, we laughed about immoral things and pursued them. That is what the lost world does. As believers we need to be different. The world needs to see that we are not controlled by anything other than God. Sexual purity sets us apart from the lost world. You can make a great impact on people for the glory of God by keeping your distance from anything immoral. It sets you apart. Most people are trying to be involved in something immoral and when you talk and act differently, it sets you apart.

**God-Revealed Point #7** - Sexual immorality transgresses against and defrauds a brother.  
4:6a

Now, the Greek words here mean that if you are involved with another man's mate, you are actually sinning against him and taking advantage of him in a way that defrauds him. It appears as though this kind of thing was a threat in Thessalonica.

The word "defraud" carries with it the idea of someone having more or having an advantage over someone because he has more and is able to coerce a man's wife into an immoral relationship because of his power and position. Paul says one who does this is sinning against God and his brother.

**God-Revealed Point #8** - The Lord will avenge those involved in sexual immorality. 4:6b

Now, the Lord is a reference to Jesus Christ. So Jesus Christ is going to personally "avenge" one involved in immorality. The word "avenge" (εκδικος) refers to giving out a righteous, legal, vindictive, revenge penalty to someone (*Ibid.*, p. 137). In Revelation 2:23, Jesus Christ specifically said He was going to start killing people in the church, who were immoral.

This is a solemn and serious warning that is aimed straight at believers. If you are a believer and you are dabbling around in sexually immoral things, you need to be warned that Jesus Christ is going to hold you accountable.

**God-Revealed Point #9** - Sexual immorality is not what a believer has been called to do. 4:7

God has not saved people so they can dabble around in impure things. God has called us to be sanctified, clean and pure. Election is never an excuse for sin; it is a reason for holiness.

**God-Revealed Point #10** - Sexual immorality is a rejection of God's Word and God's Spirit.  
4:8

You cannot possibly be right with God and be involved in sexual immorality. Now a person can walk around telling people how much he loves the Lord, but he is living his life in rejection of God's Word and the promptings of God's Spirit.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and you are involved in immoral things, here is what you need to know. You are living your life in total rejection to God's will, God's Word and God's Spirit. You do not glorify God. You are not sanctified and clean, but you are accountable and you will face Jesus Christ and you will suffer serious consequences.