

Sermon: "The Challenge of Personal Holiness"

Text: I Thessalonians 4:1-8.

Sermon Outline.

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Introduction ~ "Baby Busters and Baby Boomers" – Not long ago, the Barna Organization did a comparative study on the difference between American adults in their 20's and 30's and those over age 40. The study confirmed that "A New Generation of Adults Bends Moral and Sexual Rules to Their Liking." [Barna Update, October 31, 2006] The research teams confirmed the depth of what you already know from casual observation. Perhaps no moral dimension has changed as much as Americans' perspectives and behaviors related to sexuality.

In all areas examined, "Busters," young adults in their 20' and 30's, were significantly different from older Americans (including Baby Boomers). In a given month, for example, "Busters were twice as likely to have viewed sexually explicit movies or videos; two and a half times more likely to report having had a sexual encounter outside of marriage; and three times more likely to have viewed sexually graphic content online."

We're continuing our sermon series on "the Disciple-making Church." And this morning, we arrive at, not just Paul's teaching on personal morals, but the basic apostolic teaching about sexual morality.

... We've been going through Paul's First Letter to the Church in Thessalonika paragraph by paragraph. Here, Paul had to reinforce his teaching about sexual morality and discipleship... probably because Timothy brought back a report that there had been a lapse with one or two people in the church at Thessalonika. What Paul writes here is what all the apostles taught wherever they went in the ancient world.

Every disciple of Jesus needs to know this specific text in I Thessalonians Four. This is the one place in the New Testament in which God's will about human sexuality is lined out with basic, straight-ahead simplicity. The core idea is this:

? The disciple of Jesus lives out God's standards of sexual morality. As a disciple of Jesus, you live out the biblical teaching on personal morality. The disciple lives out God's standards of sexual morality in your daily life and on the weekend.

? In this text, Paul spells out three elements in the sexual morality God expects of the disciple of Jesus Christ.

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I. The first element of the Bible's teaching on sexual morality is this: Jesus calls you, His disciple, to a radical break from what everybody else is doing. Discipleship to Jesus entails a radical break from a surrounding culture dominated by sin and by evil.

A. The Graeco-Roman world was notorious for its debauched sexual practices. Four centuries before Paul, Demosthenes in Athens described the common approach everywhere when he said, "We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes." And the double standard for the two sexes was taken for granted.

The Christian faith, radical discipleship to the risen Jesus, overthrew that pagan approach to human sexuality at every level in the ancient world. Tertullian, from North Africa, was a lawyer who became a Christian in the 200's. In a debate against a pagan philosopher, Tertullian said, 'We Christians will share everything with you – except our beds... and you hate us for it.'

B. In this passage, the phrase, "sexual immorality," translates a Greek word, *πορνεία*. In the Greek and Roman world, this word took in adultery, the use of temple prostitutes and regular prostitutes – there was temple prostitution in Thessalonika – casual sex between two random persons, and premarital sexuality.

B. Paul bluntly declares it is God's will that the disciple of Jesus avoids all such sexual immorality. He and all the other apostles affirm sex only within the marriage relationship.

The late Paul Little often spoke at InterVarsity's Urbana Mission Conferences. I went to two of them. Little wrote that excellent booklet, "Affirming the Will of God." It's a classic. Little used to tell the following story in person; it's also in that booklet.

One time after Little has spoken to a group of college students, an attractive co-ed came up to ask his advice. She said to him, 'I've been praying to discover God's will about a specific matter. My boyfriend has been pressuring me to go to bed with him, and I've been asking God to reveal His will to me...'

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Paul Little told her, 'Honey, save your breath. God has already revealed His will for you on that matter.' And he walked her through this passage and how it applied to her situation.

Paul the apostle was just as blunt.

C. This passage is for everybody –

There are many church attenders in America who do not know where to look for the Bible's teaching on personal morality. This Bible passage needs to be shared urgently with Boomers and Busters alike...

II. The second element in Paul's teaching is this: sexual morality is crucial to maintaining your personal discipleship to Jesus.

A. With regard to our basic diagram about radical discipleship to Jesus, you all remember that Paul, Silas and Timothy went for disciples, not just converts. Our diagram and applying it to this issue can give us some crucial insights as to why they did so.

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- One striking difference between a convert and a disciple is that a disciple of Jesus lives out the Bible teachings about human sexuality.
- Mere converts, adherents or sympathizers may or may not recognize the rightness of God's teaching, and at the same time take every opportunity to still do whatever they feel like doing... whenever. Converts view obedience as optional. The disciple of Jesus knows that personal obedience on this issue is a necessity if you are to maintain and hang onto your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul, Silas and Timothy taught and lived out the same standard, just like all the apostles. It really was "one standard for all disciples."
- In the Church at Corinth, there was a general tendency to treat this specific teaching as mere advice, and not the command of God. More than a few in Corinth engaged in misbehavior, and the result was disastrous for the whole church. Some believers and some families in that church were virtually ruined by that "anything-goes" approach.
- So, living out the apostolic teaching about human sexuality is, therefore, a "make-or-break" issue; it's a decisive threshold between being a sympathizer and being a real disciple of Jesus.
- Living out this teaching as a congregation, a whole group, is an essential group norm for the Church as the Body of Christ. This text is the place where it says so in the Bible.

At this point, let's pick and apply the Three Priorities to this specific issue. Always remember: the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ is characterized by constantly living out Three Priorities.

The Three Priorities of the Disciple of Jesus Christ are:

- I. A growing commitment to, or relationship with, Jesus Christ;
- II. A growing commitment to the Body of Christ (my face-to-face group of other disciples); and
- III. A growing commitment to the Work of Christ in my world.

The disciple of Jesus Christ thinks through and analyzes every personal and relational situation from the perspective of the Three Priorities. The Three Priorities can give you "a quick read" on what to do and what not to do in a given situation. For example,

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I. What impact will what I am about to do have on my personal relationship with Jesus Christ?

II. What impact, positive or negative, will what I am about to do have on my face-to-face group? the rest of the Body of Christ?

III. How will what I am about to do affect my personal witness to my family, friends and co-workers, my boss?

Based on these three questions you can easily see why Paul places all types of sexual immorality off-limits completely for the disciple of Jesus Christ. Such bad behavior flunks all three of those basic questions... Such bad behavior would have a major negative impact on your relationship with Jesus Christ your Lord.

III. The third and decisive element in Paul's teaching is a powerful reminder about the grace of God.

A. The final verses underscore the cleansing power of the grace of God in the Person of Jesus made real and actual by the Holy Spirit in your life. You can see this in verses seven and eight...

"7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8 Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you His Holy Spirit."

B. The Gift of the Holy Spirit is meant to empower you to live as a disciple of Jesus. In the midst of a sex-crazed culture, the only way any disciple can live out this teaching is by the Spirit's power. But if you engage in willful sin, you cut yourself off from the power of God. That final verse is a warning.

C. The disciple of Jesus no longer believes the lies of the devil – that 'you can do whatever you want;' that 'it's all too hard;' that 'I'm not really hurting anybody...'. The disciple of Jesus knows better and can live better.

D. The disciple of Jesus engages in constant mental hygiene. You know when to turn your eyes away; click that remote or that mouse; get up and walk away. You stay away from watching the soaps. You stay away from that porn website that popped up.

E. If you do blow it, you're not a failure; so don't act like one.

Whatever the consequences – and there are always consequences – the forgiveness and grace of God are bigger and deeper and stronger than anything you have ever done.

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F. Don't you ever consider quitting because you are not good enough. Listen, God always uses weak vessels. That immediately qualifies you and me. God always uses the unsophisticated and the damaged, the rejected and abused. And even the rich, the famous and the beautiful need the grace of God in the most desperate ways.

By His grace, God rescued all those former pagans in the Church at Thessalonika.

Always remember what God says in His Word about you: You are greatly loved by the living God. You are not barely acceptable; and you are not just barely making it into heaven. No, you personally are the object of God's great affection. He holds you in His arms. Your picture is in His wallet. You are in God's thoughts this very moment. God has big plans for you in this life and the next – and they're all good!

? The disciple of Jesus lives out God's standards of sexual morality...
BECAUSE OF THE GRACE OF JESUS.