

“Purity and the Will of God” 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8
Pastor Larry Nelson

Introduction:

1. Good morning and greetings from my home office, here in Sumas, WA
2. As I was preparing to preach from the text that is before us this morning, I suddenly realized that even though I have tried, by the grace of God, to live, and counsel, and teach it for the better part of 50 years, I can't remember ever preaching a sermon on it.
 - a. Occasionally someone will ask me, “*Pastor, how long does it take you to prepare a sermon?*”
 - b. Although the answer varies, depending on the text, I guess this one has been almost 50 years in the making.
 - c. And so it is my prayer that you will be blessed, and encouraged, and challenged to be more like our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, as you listen.
3. So please turn in your Bibles to First Thessalonians, Chapter 4.
4. I need to say at the outset, that although I am going to be very careful to guard little hearts and ears, Paul's text this morning was not written for young children.
 - a. However, with that said, as a father and grandfather, I need to exhort every parent to listen carefully, and then use what I you learn here to both guard and prepare your children for the battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil that is soon to come upon them, and that, usually long before they reach the teen years.
 - b. And as you prepare for this parental challenge, I would encourage you this morning to take careful notes.
5. So let's start off by reading the entire text.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

- 1 *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 excel still more.*
- 2 *For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.*
- 3 *For **this** is the **will of God**, your **sanctification**;, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;*
- 4 *that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*
- 5 *not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;*
- 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.*
- 7 *For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.*
- 8 *So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*

TRANS> I have entitled this message, “**Purity and the Will of God,**” so let's begin with Point #1:

I. **The Call to Excel in Sanctification** (4:1-3a) **<REPEAT>**

- A. Paul began this letter to the church at Thessalonica with praise and appreciation by commending them in verse 3 of chapter 1 for their “... work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.”
1. And then in verse 7, he continues his praise by declaring that this beloved congregation had become, “... an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”
 2. Unlike the church at Corinth, which needed drastic correction, the church at Thessalonica was an exemplary congregation, and Paul does not hesitate to praise them for the good job that they were doing.
 3. But like any good coach, our text in 4:1, finds Paul exhorting them to “*excel still more.*”
 - a. **<ILL>** Now I want to begin by saying, “*Without question, Rich Balswick was the best coach that I ever had!*”
 - b. And I will never forget his exhortations to us saying, “*We may not be the best team in the league, but we will be the best conditioned!*”
 - c. “*While the other teams are dragging their, you know what’s down the court in the 4th quarter, we are going to run the legs off of them!*”
 - d. “*Win or lose, we will not let up for a second until the last buzzer sounds!*”
 - e. Now one of the many things that I greatly appreciated about Coach Balswick was that when it came time for us to run conditioning wind-sprints, **up** and **down** the court, he did not just blow the whistle, he ran them with us.
 - f. There were many games that we won, not because we were better basketball players, but because we had a coach, like Paul, who cared about us, and who would cheer us on, to “**excel still more!**”
 - g. And when my young life seemed to be falling apart, it was Coach Balswick who put his hand on my shoulder, and assured me that things would get better someday.
 - h. So instead of taking my own life, the time came when I received Christ, and later I became a husband and father, and by God’s grace, I have been in the ministry for 45 years.
- B. Paul begins this letter by thanking God for the faithfulness of the Thessalonian church, and as he starts Chapter 4, he reminds them that they were his “**brethren,**” his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.
1. And he praises them, for not just listening and receiving his instructions, as to how they ought to live as Christians, but also for the fact that they were obeying him in an exemplary way, as they endeavored to please God, and not just themselves.
- C. Unfortunately, all of us tend to forget the joy and zeal that we experienced in those early days after we became a Christian.

1. Do you remember those days, when everything about the Bible and the Christian life was new?
2. Do you remember those days, when your appetite for God's Word was insatiable, as you spent hours reading the Bible, and seeking to conform your life to its commands?
3. But as with all new things, did the joy and wonder of your salvation and living the Christian life, eventually degenerate into just a **same-old / same-old**, and instead of pressing hard to glorify God, did you begin to just coast along, trying to feed off of yesterday's manna?
4. At the time of Paul's writing to the Thessalonian church, they were still burning hot in their faith and in their desire to please and honor God.
5. And so, with pastoral warmth, he exhorts them in our text to, "excel still more."
 - a. The word that Paul uses here for "exhort" is <par-a-kal-oo'-men>, which speaks of one who comes along side to help, and to encourage, and to comfort.
 - b. And it is interesting to note here that this has the same root meaning as <par-a-klay'-tos>, which Jesus used to describe the Person and ministry of the Holy Spirit, where He said in:

John 16:7 "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper, <par-a-klay'-tos>, will not come to you, but if I go— I will send Him to you.

- c. Paul was addressing this beloved church as a helper, and encourager, and yes, like a great coach, exhorting them to "excel still more."
 - d. ☺☺☺ So here is your "Nelsonism" for the day from Coach Nelson: "Good better best, never let is rest, until the good is better, and the better is best!" <REPEAT>
- D. It is a biblical fact that knowing, pleasing, and living for God, only comes as we know Him through His written Word.

1. The Apostle John wrote in:

1 John 2:14 "I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."

2. In *Ephesians 6:16-17*, Paul commands every Christian to take:
 - 16 ... up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
 - 17 And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.
3. And from Jesus' own words in *Matthew 4* and *Luke 4*, we learn that in order to overcome temptation and sin and the devil, the Word of God must be in us.

4. David said in:

Psalm 119:9-11

- 9 *How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your Word.*
- 10 *With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.*
- 11 *Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.*

5. Therefore, it is the memorized and internalized Word of God that the Holy Spirit brings to our mind, in the moment of temptation, so that we can stand in His strength, and not give into sin.

- E. Although Paul begins this 1 Thessalonians 4:1 text as an encouraging shepherd and coach, reminding them of his previous in-person instructions to them, he quickly reminds them in verse 2, that none of his exhortations were merely suggestions.

1 Thessalonians 4:2 *“For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the **Lord Jesus.**”*

1. And what he was about to say next was going to be no different.
2. The word “*commandments*” <par-ang-gel-**ee**-ahs> is only used 5 times in the New Testament, and it means a strong, powerful, authoritative order given by a commanding military officer.
3. It is the word that was used by the high priest of the Jewish Sanhedrin, in Acts 5:28, where he reminded Peter and John of his command for them not to speak about Jesus.
4. It is also used in Acts 16:24, when the Philippian jailer received the command to lock Paul and Silas into the inner prison.
5. And then in 1 Timothy 1:18-19, Paul commanded young Pastor Timothy to “... *fight the good fight ... keeping faith and a good conscience ...*”
6. Simply put, the first two verses of 1 Thessalonians 4 lay the foundation of authority for the strong exhortations that he was going to give in the next 6 verses.

TRANS> Which brings us to:

1 Thessalonians 4:3a *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification ...”*

- F. As the slaves of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, every Christian is called to understand and obey “*the will of God.*”
1. And this is one of the clearest commands of scripture for every Christian, “*For this is the will of God, your **sanctification** ...”*
 2. *Sanctification* <hag-ee-as-mos> is only used ten times in the New Testament, and three of them are right here in this text.

3. <hag-ee-as-mos'> is also translated as "holiness."

Hebrews 12:14 "Follow peace with all men, and holiness <hag-ee-as-mos'> without which no man shall see the Lord"

4. *Sanctification* means to separate, or to set apart something for a special purpose.
- Here is a way to remember the meaning of sanctification that you will never forget.
 - Most of us can remember times when your wife or mother was baking cookies, and the wonderful aroma was caaaaalling to you from afar.
 - And as the locusts descended upon the kitchen, we can all remember these words, "Hands off!, You'll just have to wait!, These cookies are for the church pot-luck tomorrow."
 - She could have said, "Hands off, these are <hag-ee-as-mos'> these are sanctified cookies!"

TRANS> Which brings us to Point #2 in our Sermon Outline:

II. The Command to Abstain from Sexual Immorality (4:3b-4) <REPEAT

1 *Thessalonians 4:3-4*

3 *For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality,*
4 *that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*

- A. For at least the last 60+ years, western society has been undergoing a sexual revolution, where millions of people now worship at the altar of sexual gratification.
- Today, most of our society believes that any kind of consenting sexual behavior, regardless of biological gender, is just another form of acceptable recreation.
 - And thanks to leaders like President Bill Clinton, who looked into the cameras 21 years ago and declared, "I did not have sex with that woman," most of western society today believes that anything short of actual sexual intercourse is not sex at all.
 - And because of this, there are even so-called "Christians" today, who believe that recreational physical contact and gratification are just fine, just so long as they don't actually have sexual intercourse.
 - But the Bible provides crystal clear definitions on this matter.

1 *Corinthians 6:9-10*

9 *Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do-not-be-deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,*
10 *nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.*

- "Adulterers" are married people who have sexual relations with anyone other than their own spouse.

5. But when Paul speaks of “*fornicators*,” both here and elsewhere in scripture, most of us in the English speaking world, just think of this as being sexual intercourse before marriage, but the Greek is much more general than that.
6. The Greek word that we translate as “*fornicators*” is <por-ne’-ah.>
7. And when <Por-ne’-ah> is used in the Bible, it is actually a very general word which speaks of any form of physical touching that stirs up sexual desires in anyone other than one’s husband or wife.
8. Now although <por-ne’-ah> would certainly include intercourse, it is much broader word than that.
9. So in point of fact, Bill Clinton lied, and according to Scripture, he really did “... *have sex with that woman.*”
10. Now please look again at our text.

1 *Thessalonians 4:3-4*

- 3 *For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality, <por-ne’-ah>*
- 4 *that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,*

B. Now this can get a little confusing, so listen carefully.

1. If you guessed that our English word, “*pornography*” comes from the Greek word <por-ne’-ah> you would be right.
2. And although the production of these photographic images is certainly dealing with biblically defined <por-ne’-ah> the actual looking at them is not, because the observer is not engaging in physical contact with the pornographic actors.
3. Now lest you think that looking at pornography is permitted, Jesus made it clear that it is NOT in!

Matthew 5:27-28

- 27 *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery',*
- 28 *but I say to you, that everyone who looks at a woman, with lust for her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

4. So it is not just the physical act of <por-ne’-ah> which is forbidden, because Jesus also warned us against lust, which is the fantasy of committing <por-ne’-ah> in the one’s mind.
5. Although the physical acts of <por-ne’-ah> and the viewing of pornography are both wrong and sinful, they are not the same thing.
6. In the Old Testament, the sexually immoral were hauled out of the camp and stoned to death, but those who lust in their heart are commanded to repent, and yield to the Lordship of Christ in their lives.

- C. Now please notice how Paul uses a poetic metaphor in verse 3 of our text, where he exhorts every Christian to learn “... *how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.*”
- God created us with the capacity to enjoy the pleasures of sexual love and gratification, but only between a man and a woman, and that only within the bounds of marriage.
 - So according to our text, every aspect of our sexuality is to be sanctified, set apart and reserved for marriage, which is the only honorable way to engage in sexual relations, PERIOD!
 - And the writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 13:4 that

Hebrews 13:4 “*Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled, for fornicators <por-**ne**’-ah> and adulterers God will judge.*”

TRANS> Which brings us to Point #3 in our Sermon Outline.

III. The Contrast Between Believers and Unbelievers (4:5) <REPEAT>

- While western civilization is becoming more and more perverted by the day, it still does not rise to the utter depravity and sexual perversity of the Greco-Roman debauchery of the First Century.
 - Along with all the sexual revolution and perversion that we are seeing today, all of the major Gentile cities in Paul’s day, accepted pedophilia, transvestism, even infanticide as being quite normal.
 - And for 1000s of years, many of the world’s false religions, have included ritual prostitution as a form of “worship.”
 - For example, the Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth is said to have employed a 1000 priestesses, who were nothing less than temple-prostitutes.
 - And it was into the perverted cities of Corinth and Thessalonica that the Apostle Paul planted churches.
 - Now I have no doubt that many, if not most, of Paul’s early converts were quite accustomed to the perverted lifestyles of this culture.
 - So he commanded them in *1 Thessalonians 4:4-5*, saying:

1 Thessalonians 4:4-5

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

- The word Gentile has two meanings in scripture.
 - While most of the time it just refers to anyone who is a non-Jew, but here Paul is speaking about those who are not Christians.
 - So Paul is commanding the church at Thessalonica to not live in “*lustful passion*,” like their unbelieving neighbors did, and even as they once did.

8. Listen to Paul's description of all people before they receive Christ in: Ephesians 2:1-3

Ephesians 2:1-3

- 1 *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,*
- 2 *in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.*
- 3 *Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*

- a. But praise be to God who did not leave us there! For Paul goes on to say in:

Ephesians 2:4-6

- 4 *But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,*
- 5 *even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*
- 6 *and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*

- b. And then he described what was to come next in:

2 Corinthians 5:17 *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature, the old things passed away, behold, new things have come.”*

- c. And that is what Paul was saying to the Thessalonian church.
- d. *“You are Christians now, new creations in Christ, so stop living in the idolatry of sexual lust, like you used to.”*
- e. Listen again to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, which I read a few moments ago, but this time I am going to add verse 11.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

- 9 *Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,*
- 10 *nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.*

- f. Please take special notice in verse 11, as I put the *em-pha-sis* on the correct *syl-a-bles*.

11 *Such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

TRANS> So far this morning, we have studied Paul's **Call to Excel in Sanctification, The Command to Abstain from Sexual Immorality, and The Contrast Between Believers and Unbelievers.**, Which brings us to Point #4 in our Sermon Outline:

IV. The Consequences of Defrauding Your Brethren (4:6) <REPEAT>

1 Thessalonians 4:6 *“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.”*

- A. For a Christian to “transgress”, means to sin against his brother or sister in Christ, by taking advantage of them.
1. And in this case, the sin is that of “defrauding.”
 2. To defraud means to stir up a desire in someone that you cannot or will not righteously fulfill.
 3. A home owner might be required to make a partial payment in advance, so his contractor can buy the needed materials to do the job.
 - a. However, if the contractor runs off with the money, without doing the work, he has “defrauded” the home owner.
 - b. Or if the contractor completes the work, and the home owner refuses to pay for it, then he has “defrauded” the contractor of his wages.
 - c. In both cases there were desires and agreements that were not fulfilled.
 4. But Paul is not talking about work and payments here, because the context is specifically referring to sexual defrauding, which is the stirring up of sexual desires in another person, that cannot be righteously fulfilled.
 5. Now God created and designed woman to become sexually motivated and stirred up, by the tender words and touch of her husband.
 - a. But selfish men often take advantage of women by defrauding them with words that they have no right to use, and touches that they have no right to make.
 - b. When a woman says, *“I love you”* to a man, he might react by saying, *“That’s nice, would you please pass me the popcorn.”*
 - c. But when a man says, *“I love you”* to woman, her heart can start doing flip-flops.
 - d. That is why I told all the young men, who wanted to court any of my daughters, that they were never to say *“I love you”*, until they were ready to put an engagement ring on her finger, and I was to be the first one to hear of it when they asked me for her hand in marriage.
 - e. Dads need to tell their daughters that when a man says, *“I love you”* before he is ready to marry you, he is really saying *“I love me, and me wants you.”*
 - f. For many women, an arm around the shoulder, or hugs, or even just holding hands, can be defrauding, because they stir up desires which cannot be righteously fulfilled, and if that’s you, then you need to tell him to keep his paws off.
 6. Now while the woman is created to become sexually motivated by the tender talk and touch of her husband, the man was created and designed to become sexually motivated by the physical form of his wife.
 - a. But because of the ruination of sin that has come upon all men, we can become sexually stirred up by looking at the physical form of any woman.

b. And that is why righteous Job declared in:

Job 31:1 “I have made a covenant with my eyes,
How then could I gaze at a virgin?”

c. As we have seen earlier, Jesus warned men not to lust after women, and thereby commit adultery in their hearts.

d. However, when we are walking down the street, it is not always possible to avoid noticing a woman, who is dressed in a defrauding manner.

(1) So it is not the unintentional noticing that is sin.

(2) It is the deliberate extended gazing, the second look at the woman, with lust in the heart, that is the sin.

e. And to my Christian sisters I say that, it is hard enough for us to avoid the second look, but when you deliberately or even innocently wear revealing or tight fitting clothing, you are defrauding your brothers in Christ and you are tempting them to stumble into sin.

f. I will never forget one arrogant woman who proudly declared, “*I have a right to wear whatever I want and to reveal as much as I want, and if men have a problem with that, its their problem not mine!*”

g. And just how serious is such arrogant selfishness?

h. Listen to Jesus’ warning in:

Matthew 18:6-7

6 *but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

7 *Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks!, For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to that man <or the woman> through whom the stumbling block comes!*

i. Simply put, Men and women, if you lay sexually defrauding *stumbling blocks* of temptation, that lead your sisters or brothers in Christ into sin, Jesus said in no uncertain terms that you would be better off being **drowned!**

j. Christians are to bless and encourage our brethren to holiness and sanctification, **NOT** defraud and tempt them to sin.

k. And if you will not do stop defrauding others out of love for them and love for God, then at least stop it out of fear.

l. Listen to Paul’s warning in verse 6 of our passage:

1 *Thessalonians 4:6* “*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.*”

- m. This powerful warning should strike fear into the heart of anyone who defrauds, because Paul is declaring that God Himself, will personally bring His vengeance upon anyone sexually defrauds others.
7. Apparently, Paul had *solemnly warned* them of the terrible consequences of sexually defrauding before, and now he was warning them again.
- B. Now before I move on to my final point this morning, I want to say something very positive and encouraging to those who make careful and deliberate efforts to prevent the defrauding of others.
- 1. As you can probably imagine, I have performed a ton of weddings over the last 40 years, and I require a minimum of 3 months of weekly premarital counseling, with piles of homework, before I will marry any couple.
 - 2. And as I cover this matter of defrauding very extensively in our first session, I encourage my couples to set their ***physical fence-lines*** very high.
 - a. Now what do I mean by a *physical fence-line*?
 - b. A fence is designed to keep some people **out**, and other people **in**, and so it is with a *physical fence-line*.
 - c. It is hard for couples to keep their emotions, and the fires of passion under control, so *physical fence-lines* need to be set up set up to prevent the defrauding of one another.
 - d. And just as I instructed all of my children, I also encourage my engaged couples to ***“Keep your lips on your own face!”***
 - e. Simply put, if you never start the fire of passion, then you won’t need to figure out how to bring the flames under control!
 - f. Therefore almost all my engaged couples have joyfully covenanted together to have no kissing until, until I pronounce them Husband and Wife.
 - g. Now as part of our pre-marital counseling plan, we build in a six week, and a six month, and a one-year counseling tune-up session after the wedding.
 - h. And at the six week session, I ask all my couples this question: *“Do you wish that you would have had lower physical fence-lines during your courtship and engagement?”*
 - i. Can you guess their answer? Without exception, every one of our couples has thanked me for encouraging them to *“Keep their lips on their own face”* and their “paws in their own pockets!!”

TRANS> Which brings us to our final point this morning:

V. The Conclusion of Paul’s Exhortation (4:7-8) <REPEAT>

1 *Thessalonians 4:7-8*

7 *For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.*

8 *So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.*

A. Simply put, Paul ends this section right where he started it.

1. God saved us so that He could produce a sanctified church of God-honoring, others-loving, **holy** people.
2. And according to this text, anyone who rejects Paul's extremely clear and practical admonitions, is not rejecting just another man's opinion, but he is rejecting God Himself, who gave us His Holy Spirit, to regenerate and empower us to live godly Christian lives.
3. Please remember *1 Thessalonians 4:3*, "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.*"
4. Let's pray together.