

June 6, 2010

## *Living in the Light of Christ's Return*

### *This is the Will of God – Your Sanctification*

#### **1 Thessalonians 4:1 – 8**

We are returning to these verses this week, not because Pastor Craig expounded inadequately on these a couple of weeks ago – he did a marvelous job showing us how all our life is meant to be lived to the praise and glory of God because God has called us to be holy, even as He is holy. We are the bride of Christ and He is coming back for a pure and spotless bride, a holy bride; and He has called us by the gospel to live entirely for Him. And that means that we walk pleasing to God – running from sin and running to God – not embracing the world but embracing the good of the gospel.

Ultimately, where we spend eternity has everything to do with how we have pursued holiness. The writer of Hebrews tells us to '*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*' Hebrews 12:14 This is not to say that our salvation is based on works – we would never say that because the Bible doesn't say that. However, if we spend our lives **acting** as though holiness were no big deal – if we spend our lives in the passion of lust like the unbelieving world – then it is clear that the gospel of grace has not impacted our lives and we do not have a saving faith. Because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation – and this salvation includes living lives of holiness to God. In other words, if we have a saving faith, then the exhortation to holiness and to abstain from sexual immorality will stagger us and turn our hearts to repentance and compel us to holy living. So this morning, I just want to add a few words to what Craig has already shared.

*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.* 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2 Paul says 'Finally' but like any good preacher, 'Finally' doesn't mean this is the end – but it is the beginning of the end. Paul has a lot more to say in the next thirty-eight verses. But the essence of his encouragement is this: **Please God.** Whatever you do – please God. Wherever you are – please God. While you are waiting for the appearing of our blessed Lord and Savior – please God. In your trials and sufferings – please God. And do so more and more. That is, excel in pleasing God.

For too many people, being a Christian means a lot of do's and don'ts – do read your Bible; don't read Playboy; do live holy lives; don't get drunk; do go to church; don't go to strip clubs; do good; don't do bad. And there is a sense in which that is true. But if that is all you have – you've missed the essence of saving grace and have adopted a flawed view of what holiness or sanctification is all about. While we were in Israel, I saw a lot of people whose lives consisted of a lot of do's and don'ts because those were the means to living a holy life. In one instance, I was asked to be the Sabbath Gentile – which consisted of plugging in an electrical plug for a Jew who could not do that on the Sabbath. He couldn't even ask another Jew, who was not religious to do it because it would have been as though he sinned himself.

But at the root of holiness or sanctification is the idea of being consecrated, set apart or dedicated to God. That is **God Himself defines the boundaries of your life.** When we come to Christ and He fills our hearts with His love and His Holy Spirit indwells us – a powerful change takes place. Instead of living our lives to please ourselves – we have this inner compulsion to please Him. Where once our world revolved around ourselves and our wants and our needs – it now revolves around Him. When we are confronted with choices in life, the deciding factor should always be – will this please God? When we are tempted to please ourselves with the temporary and deadly delights of sin, what keeps us from sin is a deeper delight in God and the desire to please Him. Do's and don't will only carry us far enough along to let us fall on our faces – **delighting in God and living to please Him will see us all the way to glory.**

Sanctification means being consecrated or dedicated to God which also entails that we are **set apart** or separated as well from all those things that do not please God. Paul goes on in verse three to say: *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;* 1 Thessalonians 4:3 The will of God for our lives is holiness – that is a life lived for the pleasure and glory of God, set apart from all sin. We ought to be separate from all those things that do not please Him. Sexual immorality is **unholy** because it does not please God.

Sex as God intended in the bonds of marriage is beautiful, pure and holy because as Pastor Craig noted it reflects the intimacy and relationship of Christ and His church. All other sexual activity dishonors God, diminishes His glory, and mars the image of Christ in us. Pre-marital sex, homosexuality, adultery, are all unholy because they do not please God and the primary reason to abstain from them is not first and foremost that they are wrong – but that God is not honored by indulging in them – **His glory is not shown when we temporarily please ourselves and the image of Christ is distorted and ruined.**

And to let us know that he is not just talking about abstaining from **some** sexual activity, Paul goes on in verses 4-5: *that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;* 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5 The word lust speaks to any inordinate desire that we have. We can lust after certain foods, or clothes or cars or we can lust after money or power or fame. But here the lust is specific: sexual lust – inordinate sexual desires. I take that to mean any sexual desires that dominate your life in ways they should not.

In this text, **lust is any sexual desire that dishonors the object of its desire and displeases God.** Notice the contrast between 'holiness and honor' and 'the passion of lust'. The passion of lust is just the opposite of holiness and honor. Sexual desire is good – God made it in the beginning – and He placed boundaries around it and created guidelines for it. Sexual desire was made to be governed or guided by honor toward the object of its desire, and by holiness toward God. Passion of lust is what happens when honor and holiness are missing.

In marriage, a man and a woman make a life-long covenant to honor each other with fidelity and love. Sexual desire serves the marriage bond and creates a unique intimacy between a man and a woman. So to say to another: 'I want to use your body for my pleasure, but I don't really want you yourself' is to dishonor them, and is therefore lustful. Lust is a sexual desire without the commitment to honor. And it dishonors God. Verse eight says: *Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.* 1 Thessalonians 4:8 Whoever disregards the call to holiness in sexual purity disregards and dishonors God Himself. The fundamental issue in lust is **regard and honor for God.** Holiness is living with the highest regard for God. Lust is not. It is the corruption of a good thing – sexual desire – by the absence of an honorable commitment and lack of regard for God.

And not allowing our sexual desire to be bounded and guided by a respect for the honor of others and a high regard for God is to defraud one another – literally to cheat one another. Listen to what Paul says: *that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.* 1 Thessalonians 4:6 Literally Paul is saying that to indulge your appetites in sexual immorality is to sin against your brother and to defraud or cheat him. All sin cheats – pre-marital sin cheats you out of virginity – adultery cheats your spouse – homosexuality cheats people out of the wonderful relationship between a man and a woman that God intended from the beginning.

The issue here is holiness and Paul reminds the Thessalonians again. *For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.* 1 Thessalonians 4:7 This is the same word he uses in verse 3: **hagiasmos** – holiness or sanctification. We've been called to be a people set apart from this sin-sick age – called out of darkness and into light – called from a life of impurity to one of purity – called from a life of pleasing ourselves to a life that is pleasing to God.

So how important is this? How much value does God place on abstaining from improper sexual desire? Read verse 8: *Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you.* 1 Thessalonians 4:8 This is not some made up man-rule – this is from God. And in verse 6 Paul says that *the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.* 1 Thessalonians 4:6 b I think this means that the consequences of unbridled sexual lust are probably worse than bad choices that can kill us. Jesus tells us in Luke 12: *'...do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear : fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell.'* Luke 12:4-5 In other words, God's vengeance on sin is much more to be feared than mere death.

This was so important that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: *"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 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. "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.* Matthew 5:27-30

**Heaven and hell are at stake in what you do with your eyes and with the imaginations of your mind.** Many Christians exempt themselves from Biblical warnings like this with an argument that says 'No matter what I do, I am eternally secure.' And if you are genuinely saved, you are eternally secure. But if you are not willing to fight this sin with the seriousness that is willing to gouge out your own eye or cut off your hand, there is some doubt that you are really saved. Now I don't want anyone coming up to me afterward or writing me letters accusing me of advocating self-mutilation. Jesus was not advocating that and neither am I. But what I am suggesting is that **you need to fight this sin with the earnestness of eternity in view.** Essentially Jesus said, if you don't fight lust – you won't be in the kingdom.

Look at the word of God: *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.* 1 Peter 2:11

*Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience,* Colossians 3:5-6

*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, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.* 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do you understand that **heaven is in the balance**? We need to disabuse ourselves of the suicidal notion that salvation in Christ is somehow divorced from sanctification by the Holy Spirit. Some would say that faith in Christ gets you into heaven and holiness only determines the extent of your reward. In other words, faith is necessary – holiness is optional. But I think the Bible teaches that both faith and holiness are vital. And the Bible continually exhorts us to wage war against the lust that would consume us and close heaven's gates. Galatians 5 describes that battle, not only against lust but all the bitter fruit of the flesh and it closes with this: *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* Galatians 5:21 In other words there is a battle that is only won by those who have been won by Christ.

Romans 6 tells us that *'...sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.* Romans 6:14 For those who belong to Christ – both the battle and the outcome depend on Him. We will have struggles with unholy sexual desires – and we will battle them. The victory Christ won on the cross doesn't make the struggle go away – but sin no longer dominates us to do its bidding. Because of the cross, His grace was poured out – grace that works in us what we could never work in ourselves. I love the words to that great old hymn: 'He breaks the power of cancelled sin – He sets the prisoner free – His blood can make the foulest clean – His blood avails for me.'

For those who do not know Christ – there really is no battle at all. Why would you fight against natural sexual desires? What is the point or the profit? It is only with those who have embraced the gospel, those who know God that this becomes an issue. Paul tells the Thessalonians to control their bodies in holiness and honor – *not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.* What that implies is that the root cause of lust is not knowing God. This is not just an intellectual knowledge of God – even the demons know God, but that knowledge doesn't save them. Knowing God here is to know His greatness and worth and glory and grace and power. It is the knowledge of God that staggers your heart and leads you to repentance. It is a knowledge of God that is so real, and so precious, so soul-satisfying and full that any thought, any action, any addiction that threatens to obscure this knowledge will be resisted with all the zeal and passion that would give an eye or a hand in glad exchange.

The revealed will of God for us is for our sanctification. And the way to fight for holiness and to fight off lust is to feed your faith with the knowledge of God. Do you know God today? Is your appetite for God growing day by day? Or are you depending on a one-time commitment in the past to carry you through to heaven? Are you resisting the sin that so easily entangles you? Do you meditate on His promises and ravage His word for gospel truth? Have you pondered the picture of Jesus in the word? Do you pray for a heart that is sensitive to sin and a will that is strong to obey? Today is the day of salvation and now is the hour of commitment. For those who have embraced the gospel yet so often find yourselves on the losing end of the battle against sexual desires, I want to remind you that as Paul tells us in verse 8 of this text, we are not fighting this alone but in the power of the Holy Spirit that God has given us. If it were up to us – we'd lose every time. But His Spirit in our spirit grants us the power to submit to the will of God even in the toughest of areas in our lives.

For those who do not know Christ, I urge you by the mercies of God to let the good warnings of Scripture penetrate your soul and awaken faith. It is a life and death matter. You have not come here by chance but by God's design and you need to respond to the Holy Spirit this morning and embrace the gospel and enter into life.

*Our good and gracious God,*

*Have mercy on us in our continual battle for purity and holiness against the deadly delights of lust. Oh how we cherish the victories You give. Let us live there more and more. Grant us the will and desire to say no to every temptation that would seduce us away from all that pleases You. Help us fight for holiness and give us the heart to make war on our impurities. Show us the infinite and all-satisfying glory of the crucified Christ. Let us know Your greatness and worth and glory and grace and power that staggers our hearts and leads us to repentance. A knowledge of You that is so real, and so precious, and full that any thought, any action, any addiction that threatens to obscure this knowledge will be resisted with all the zeal and passion that would give and eye or a hand in glad exchange. May Your name be so precious to us that we absolutely will not defile it. May we so delight ourselves in You that sin loses its appeal and we are consumed by Your glory. Let us live as those who have been made glad in God and live to make others glad in You we pray in the sin-conquering name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*