



1 THESSALONIANS

living in hope

LIVING TO PLEASE GOD

Sunday 6 November 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Someone comes up to you and asks you, "What is your purpose and meaning in life?" What would you say? I suspect that after the initial shock we would all fumble around for the short answer because it's such a large question. But right here, I think Paul perhaps sums it up beautifully in six words: "Living in order to please God." As indeed Paul says you are doing and all the more - again there's that tone of joyful encouragement.

Now, let's be clear that this is not living to earn God's forgiveness or salvation. Paul is writing to people IN the church who are already forgiven, saved and included. You simply can't earn or buy what Jesus is offering. Ok, so you're a believer - now what? Everything starts to change. Paul is saying that the life we live now we live by faith in Jesus, and we live with a new identity and purpose: no longer living first to please 'self', but to please God. How we please Him is through imitation and alignment of every part of our lives and desires around God. The big word for that is 'sanctification', which is just Christainese for 'becoming distinctively like Jesus'.

That's good in theory but Paul now wants to get very practical. Paul, in this chapter, is going to address how you live to please God in three interrelated areas: your **personal life** (vv3-8), in your **communal life** (vv9-10) loving each other in the church, and in your **public life** (vv11-12) being diligent and dependable working for the good of the city. Being someone who reveals Christ and wins the respect of others - really it's all the same life and the same call to live an integrated life. Today I am going to focus on 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

So, let's talk about our sexuality, and before I go on I want to say 7 quick things:

1. How much can you really say in a 30-minute sermon? I encourage you to read the full sermon transcript and I want to return to this for several weeks next year.
2. This is, like most of the New Testament, teaching on God's vision of sexuality, addressed to the church - it's an inside conversation. It references the wider culture but it's not designed to judge those outside the church and neither should we.
3. This topic is the source of pain or shame. I promise to tread carefully and this will be PG rated but if this brings up anything for you personally or concerning other people in your life then you have permission to play Solitaire, check Facebook, take a break and if you would like to speak to a Pastor you can email me (scott@grlc.org.au).
4. We often make too little of this topic or we make too much. I know I've made too little of it but some make too much of it. A lot of great harm has been done and is still being done leaving people feeling condemned and with burdens that Jesus has already dealt with. For that, I am deeply sorry.
5. I also don't think Christians can claim to have the high moral ground here because statistically we get divorced, commit adultery, and watch porn at similar rates to the rest of society. If you read carefully you'll discover that the Bible is a book full of sexually broken people all needing healing and grace - I'm one and so are you. We are all being saved by Jesus and there is enough grace for us all, no matter our history.
6. But all that doesn't allow me to reinterpret the Bible in a way that erases any chance of offence. I can't make it socially acceptable. I can't call what is wrong 'right'. Or think that the goal is to avoid any guilt or shame... All we can do with our feelings is bring them to Jesus.
7. Lastly: books. I have used and recommend anything by Ronald Rolheiser. I've heard several preachers I respect mention him so I've been reading and will reference his books 'The Fire Within', 'The Holy Longing' and others...

Now again, let's understand the context. The Christians back in Jerusalem and those who were Jews by birth had generations of teaching and culture around living to please God with their bodies and in their marriage relationships. But these Greco-Roman churches are birthed into a culture saturated in another vision of human sexuality which normalised 'passionate lusts' like sex being a male right, that men could have sex with anyone they wanted; where women were vulnerable in marriage and singleness, and powerless in

sexual relationships. Family incest was common. A culture where vulnerable children could be adopted by older men at the cost of being sexual playthings. A culture of temple prostitution, the mutilation of young men, the raping of young women, men and children in ritual acts. A culture where, as Paul says in Romans 1, men and women exchanged heterosexual relations for same-sex relations. All that comes into Paul's mind here when he addresses sexual immorality, which is the word 'pornea'. Pornea may be common in the culture, but Paul calls it all sin and wants them to see a new way of living: a way that connects your body and your desires and your discipleship.

Down the road in Corinth, Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 picks up on some common sayings in the Greek culture: "I have the right to do anything", "food for the stomach, the stomach for food." So, the worldview was that you can do anything you like with your body (if you are male) because it ultimately doesn't matter. It is not your spirit. All that matters is that sex is just another basic instinct like hunger. So, you can pleasure it any way you like because it's morally neutral and your spirit is eternal and that's all that matters.

And what Paul is trying to teach the church in this sexually driven culture was a more coherent integrated way to live. The way of Jesus is a whole-of-life thing, learning to live all-of-life in reference to God, to please Him. Some things from Paul's time are now taboo in our culture like paedophilia; but on the whole, our culture is as sexually saturated today as it was then thanks to the sexual revolution of the 1960's as well as an internet granting unfiltered access to pornea via your iPhone. A slow awkward walk past that section of the magazine stand at the newsagent is a very distant memory.

We live in a similar sex-saturated culture today, so let me take a moment to contrast the broad narrative of sexuality in the wider culture today with the widely understood Biblical narrative.

Cultural Narrative:

- We are the product of random chance - our bodies are morally neutral.
- Male and Female is just plumbing. Sex and gender are unrelated.
- Gender is what you discover by looking within to find your authentic self - there is an unlimited number of genders.
- Sexuality is more connected to your chosen gender than your birth sex.
- Sexual intimacy is for pleasure. If it feels good, do it with whoever, whenever, however.
- Love is a feeling you have when someone makes you feel good.
- Being sexually appealing and flirtatious is right through pop culture. Sex sells.
- Monogamy, having one intimate partner, is not natural and is oppressive.
- Marriage is an outdated and potentially oppressive social construct, which is fine so long as it makes you happy. And if not, leave it.
- You must be true to yourself so pick whatever combination of philosophies that seem to feel right for you.

The narrative of sex in our culture sells freedom and liberation, but is often so dark and demeaning – especially of women – that porn is rewiring young brains, distorting our expectations of sex, damaging marriages, and making love and commitment a distant second to 'feeling good'. Human trafficking and exploitation are rife in the sex trade. There are paedophile rings where young people are being groomed online into sexting images of themselves and then being extorted for money. There are a range of hook-up Apps that allow people to find each other for anonymous sex, and that just slowly erodes all your sense of agency and dignity...

I know this is an aggregate summary and not representative of everyone. But if half of that applies, I think you have a pretty dysfunctional and incoherent worldview that does leave a lot of people traumatised, used, insecure and alone. Honestly, how is this 'freedom' really working out for us as a society?

Biblical Narrative:

- We are crafted, not by random chance but by a Creator who made us in His image, male and female. The same, yet different and complementary psychologically and physiologically.
- Our sexuality is beautiful and core to our being as men and women who are made in the image of God. 'We are incurably sexual' (Rolheiser).
- Our sexuality, in its broadest sense, is about our hardwiring for connection and intimacy and relationship and to co-create. Our longing and desire in sexual intimacy is really a longing to be connected to one another, but also ultimately to God. That's why spirituality and sexuality are connected. Our longing and desire are designed to lure us back to God and each other because, like Adam and Eve naked and ashamed hiding from God, we feel cut off and incomplete in the world.
- The Latin word 'sexus' means to cut or divide into two. That's us! We feel cut off, incomplete, and we ache for connection and completeness and to bring forth new life from that connection. Sex does all that.
- Sexual intimacy creates a brain-body connection forming powerful bonds with another person that make us feel undivided and complete.
- The covenant of marriage in the Bible is about two people being glued together in mutual self-giving, into a permanent, legal, complementary bond of love and mutual submission. That's why sex matters so much inside marriage and why it's so painful outside of it. It is, as Tim Keller calls it, 'covenant glue.'

In summary, our sexuality is beautiful and powerful and a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. We are totally mistaken if we think God and the Bible are down on sex or pleasure.

We may apply this poorly as Christians, but what Christianity does claim to at least have is a coherent worldview on life and human sexuality. It's one that submits to an authority

beyond our own feelings and desires and looks to the needs of others. It seeks to understand human sexuality not through discovering your authentic self but through a holy God. There is no escaping the tension that comes with living in but apart from the worldview of the culture around us. This calling to sexual holiness was radical in its time, and now. It was so radically pro-equality between men and women. It is indeed considered a core reason why the church was so successful in the first centuries - 'their hearts and tables were open and their beds were closed.'

Paul says we are to learn to control your own body. The last-mentioned fruit of the spirit in Galatians is: Self-control. This is funny because it's a fruit of the Spirit, but it's SELF-control. It's a partnership. So, the Spirit has something to do in you, *but not all of it*. And you have some choices to make, *but not alone*. It doesn't mean just stop having sexual desires. They are God-designed, good desires. But rather it's partnering with the Holy Spirit to channel the fire of human sexuality within God's vision for your flourishing.

Ronald Rolheiser says, "Sexuality is not simply about finding a lover or even finding a friend. It is about overcoming separateness by giving life and blessing it. Thus, in its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humour, delight, and martyrdom so that, with God, we can help bring life into the world." Rolheiser says that sexuality in its full bloom looks like:

- When you see a young mother, so beaming with delight at her own child that, for that moment, all selfishness within her has given way to the sheer joy of seeing her child happy - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see a grandfather so proud of his grandson who has just received his diploma, that, for that moment, his spirit is only compassion, altruism, and joy - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see an artist, after long frustration, look with such satisfaction on a work she has just completed that everything else for the moment is blotted out - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see a young man, cold and wet, but happy to have been of service, standing on a dock where he has carried the unconscious body of a child he has just saved from drowning - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see someone throw back his or her head in genuine laughter, caught off guard by the surprise of joy itself - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see an elderly nun who, never having slept with a man, been married, or given birth to a child, has through years of selfless service become a person whose very compassion gives her a mischievous smile - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see a community gathered round a grave, making peace with tragedy and consoling each other so that life can go on - you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

- When you see an elderly husband and wife who after nearly half a century of marriage have made such peace with each other's humanity that now they can quietly share a bowl of soup, content just to know that the other is there – you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see a table, surrounded by a family, laughing, arguing, and sharing life with each other – you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see a Mother Theresa dress the wounds of a street-person in Calcutta or an Oscar Romero give his life in defense of the poor – you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.
- When you see any person – man, woman, or child – who, in a moment of service, affection, love, friendship, creativity, joy, or compassion, is, for that moment, so caught up in what is beyond him or her that for that instant his or her separateness from others is overcome – you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

Stop thinking your job is to extinguish the fire of your sexuality. Rather, channel it into communion with God and in giving life to others, into ways that are deeply satisfying and holy and selfless.

I don't have space here, but the next verses (vv9-10) talk about excelling at loving each other and, frankly, without creating a community where deep friendship, family, service, creativity and delight are expressions of that excelling at love, then you have no context for overcoming that separateness and healthily channelling your desire to give and receive love. These commands become exponentially harder in a loveless church. We have to back it up and that's why I don't think **we can get too worked up about people getting sex and sexuality wrong if we don't take love and community just as seriously.**

"...and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before." (1 Thessalonians 4:6)

No one should take advantage of another brother or sister. Sex is never just a private matter. It directly or indirectly takes something from another person. If you view pornography you are dehumanising or objectifying someone – usually women – but porn is no longer a male battle; it's a human battle.

When you have sex outside the covenant of marriage, you are taking advantage of another person because you are, as Tim Keller puts it, "lying to them with your body." In sex, you are saying, "I am giving you my whole self; I am all in..." but that's not true in a hook-up or sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend. You are not committing to them in a covenant. You are not saying, "You have all of me: my faithfulness, my finances, my affection..." You are not saying, "I make a public, legally binding commitment for life, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health..." Paul here is saying much of what we still need to hear today in

order to have healthy lives and families and communities.

What is the punishment? Paul is either referring to the passionate lusts of the pagans or the natural consequences Christians or pagans experience when we sin. I think it's the latter because of verse 7: *"For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life..."* You may be free, but not everything that is free comes without a cost. Again, as Rolheiser says, "Sex is never neutral or casual; it's either giving life or stealing it; bringing connection or isolation, joy or shame. It's a fire that can warm you or burn you."

You may be thinking that Jesus is way more relaxed than Paul about sexuality and living to please God. And you'd be wrong. A lot of people like to argue that Paul had a different view from Jesus on sexual ethics, but I think that's really dodgy theology. Paul talks about it a lot more because his audience was not Jewish. And note Paul explicitly writes in verse 2 that his words are by the authority of Jesus; and in verse 8: *"Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit."* Paul is explicitly teaching under the authority of Jesus. To carry on His way, life and ministry. "If you reject it, you reject God"

This is an important teaching for us, because *"living in order to please God"* is meaningless if it doesn't touch the deepest parts of our thoughts and behaviours. But do you know why it's so important for God? Because what God wants is for you and those you love is to be fruitful and flourishing in life. To find our completeness and identity in God and the community of God. And, just maybe, if we can trust Jesus with our eternal life, we can trust Him with our sexual life.

Is the Christian teaching of human sexuality confronting and offensive? Yes, and shouldn't it be if it's going to offer another vision for humanity than the one we are being evangelised by in our media feeds? Living to please God, living a holy life, is going to confront living to please yourself or blending in with people who are rejecting the way of Jesus. As Dave Lomas puts it, "If you are in the church looking for the church to be socially aware enough to remove the guilt and the shame that is associated with sex and what the Bible says - we can't do that." We can't remove shame by re-teaching it in a socially acceptable way.

We have to take it to Jesus. We take our guilt, shame and pain to Jesus who is our Lord and Saviour and who has loved us completely in our sin, dying our death, and heals us fully in our confession and repentance. And He adopts us with His Spirit.

Paul would say in 2 Corinthians 5:21: *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* And in Romans 8:1-2: *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."*

I know that shame is so powerful a force in people's lives and it's often associated with our sexuality and our humanity. We feel its weight and I watch people avoid church because they assume their burden will get heavier when they come. And you know, at one level it will because the Gospel confronts us and the priorities of our lives. But a conviction about how we are living is the Holy Spirit's work. Our work is to humbly minister truth and grace. That's why Paul follows on with excelling in love: being the community that welcomes all comers, loves in our brokenness, believes that Jesus is mending one another, and encourages holy living as the overflow of grace and mercy.

May we individually make it our mission to live to please God with our bodies and may we together be a church that ministers grace and mercy for all.