

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality. 1 Thess. 4:3

In December 2007 my family and I moved to the mountains of Port Alberni, BC from the rolling hills and forests of Eau Claire Wisconsin. One of the traditions we left behind when we came here was our annual fall season of deer hunting, which is as significant to those Wisconsin as salmon fishing is to those of us in British Columbia. One of the interesting statistics I read as we were leaving Wisconsin was that from July 1 through June 30 of the previous year motorists struck and killed nearly 40,000 deer on the roadways of the state. That number is significantly higher than the 18,000 deer-vehicle crashes reported for the previous year. The statistics also reflected that deer-vehicle collisions were once again highest in October and November, as they are every year, which are a result of the bucks being in rut during that time, and in concentrating almost exclusively on reproductive activities, they tend to be a lot less wary of cars (and hunters) than they normally would be. But deer aren't the only creatures who are often destroyed by a preoccupation with their reproductive urges – as we all know that countless human lives have just as well been ravaged and ruined by rampant sexual immorality.

This morning we continue in our Seeking Him series, which is focused on how we can know a deeper intimacy in our relationship with God - and today we will be looking at another means in God's Word, by which by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can seek God and grow in our walk with God. In the past weeks we've already seen the need, and have taken the steps of humility, honesty, repentance, grace, holiness, obedience, a clear conscience and forgiveness - and today we are looking at both the need and the means by which we can seek God through *sexual purity*. We have also learned over these past weeks that God created us for relationships, first with Himself and then with each another, and we've seen that there is an *intimate* connectedness between those two relationships that cannot be denied. The truth is, there can never be intimacy between one human being and another human being unless there is real intimacy with God first. This brings us this morning's subject regarding sexual purity.

Now before we start, know that this message is not rated R (Restricted) or A (Adult) as I will not get into any *specifics* regarding sexual behaviors or practices. Yet though I do not intend to be *graphic*, I do intend on being *truthful* about the issues we face in this area. It is ironic that while we live in a culture that is saturated with sexual images, sexual talk, sexual humor and sexual education, we are hesitant to talk openly and honestly about sex. And the problem is, when the church doesn't talk about it, we face a danger greater than just the discomfort of hearing the word “sex” in church. If we in the church are silent, if God's input about sexuality is not heard and understood and embraced then we are all left to fumble about on our own, getting tangled up in our own ideas and emotions - which will affect our children who then will hear and learn about sex from what they pick up from a progressively immoral media and agenda-driven teachers and their equally misinformed friends.

And this just isn't about our children, this is also about those of us who are adults, because we live in a sexually charged society. Sex is all over the Internet, on TV, and in movies and books and magazines and just about all advertising. No matter how much we, as a born again Christians, may desire to live a pure and holy life, it's hard to get away from this stuff. The culture keeps putting it out there from internet porn to Oprah and Dr. Phil to the Alberni Valley News. As adults we already know what the world says about sex, and so we need to start listening to what God says about it in His Word. In our text for this morning, God gives us a clear, truthful, family-friendly perspective regarding the most intimate physical, emotional and spiritual parts of human relationships.

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul diplomatically lays out a foundation for dealing with this very sensitive and serious issue. It seems strange to us that Paul would have to tell a people who claimed to know Jesus Christ that it was God's will that they abstain from sexually immoral behavior. But when you consider the background of the people, it is not so strange at all. Those in the church in Thessalonica had been raised in paganism all their lives and their moral ethics were totally perverted. None of them were raised in Christian homes or Christian churches - and so their concept of moral sexual standards was totally of the world and not in any way reflective of God's standards. Paul had come to understand that those in the Thessalonian church were not living godly lives in many areas, and so as he began to reach the end of the main body of his letter, Paul exhorted them and challenged them to live by the standard of God's holiness when it came to their sexuality.

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live 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. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 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; 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. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

A note here before we start. One month ago I preached a message on "Seeking God Through Holiness" which addressed the issue of what God's "holiness" is, and how we are to pursue God's holiness in our own hearts and lives. The bulk of that message dealt with defining the holiness of God, and dealing with the major obstacles or barriers we face in our pursuit of holiness – which were our lack of grace, our lack of forgiveness and our lack of love for God. Here we are again being called to pursue God's holiness, but the term Paul uses this time is *sanctification*: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." Sanctification is one of those big, complicated words of faith in God that is surrounded with a lot of confusion and misunderstanding. Some people think sanctification it is a kind of a religious event of *cleansing* that happens once and for all - and that once they have been cleansed (or sanctified) they are good before God and they never sin again. Others think that sanctification is an *ongoing extraction process*, where God uses some kind of sin magnet to slowly but surely extract sin from their lives so they can live for God as best they can in spite of the remaining sin in their hearts.

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification" What complicates our understanding of sanctification is that the Greek word for "sanctification" in verse three in our text is really the same word that is translated "holiness" in verse four. Some translations render this as "sanctification" but the ESV does a much better job at pointing out the difference. In my message on holiness from last month, I pointed out that there is a *personal holiness* that we are to live out toward God and a resultant *relational holiness* that we will then live out towards one another. We see the same idea in our text for today. But there is also a difference today. Last month we learned that our *positional holiness in God* is the character of God that sets us apart from the world, imputed into us through Jesus' death and shed blood on the cross. That is still true for our text for today. And we also learned that our *positional holiness in God* should cause us to bear the fruit of *relational holiness* (sanctification) which we should live out towards one another and others. This is still also true for our text for today. And so that might make us think the meanings of "holiness" and "sanctification" are the same in both texts. Well, they are not, because while they be the same words they are used in different contexts. The context of the last month's message on holiness spoke about a *personal relational holiness* (sanctification) that bears the fruit of "peace with everyone" (Hebrews 12:14) - while today's text speaks of a *personal relational holiness* (sanctification) that is *much deeper and more intimate* than "peace with everyone" - which should cause us to personally bear the fruit of *sexual purity*. This is the "sanctification" - the personal, relational holiness which bears the fruit of sexual purity – that began at the very beginning of creation.

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Genesis 1:26-28

What we reading here is that at the beginning of creation God created us to be "*male and female*" (men and women) who would be joined together in the divine creation of marriage to be a *mirror, a reflection*, of God's "*image*" over and on and in all the earth. The sexual nature of our relationship together as men and women is first revealed in God's command to "*Be fruitful and multiply*" and the depth and purity of our sexual nature is later revealed in Genesis 2:24 which tell us "*a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*" The depth of this same divine concept continues throughout the Old Testament where the relationship with God and His people is spoken of in terms of the intimate bond of the marriage relationship between a man and a woman - which also continues throughout the New Testament where the divine gift of marriage is to not only reflect our relationship with God but also mirror Christ's love for his church as well.

What this means for us is that sexual purity in marriage and in life are a given. As with everything else at the beginning of creation, sexual relations were not only good but "*very good*" (Genesis 1:31). The Bible tells us that God lives in our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, which means sexual relations are not merely biological functions but actions of our souls, spirit, heart and bodies in the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 the apostle Paul, in the context of dealing with sexual immorality, wrote: "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*" Sex, for followers of Jesus, is a Trinitarian relationship of God, self, and spouse. It is a "*mystery*" that is both divinely supernatural and physically pleasing. At its basic created roots, sex is a precious opportunity to share in the life-giving power of our Creator God. Sex is not to be trivialized into merely the physical, as if humans are merely sophisticated animals. Sex is not the emotional and physical drive of a creature, but a gift and a calling to share in the life of our Creator – as well as a "*very good*" gift to those men and women who are married together with Christ and in Christ - but which now still needs constant "*sanctification.*"

Notice how the apostle describes what sanctification is to look like in the Thessalonian church: "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 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 . . . For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*" Paul knew the cultural context surrounding the Macedonian provinces. He knew Thessalonica was of a pagan Greco-Roman culture, especially in the area of sexual behavior. I need not go into any more detail than to simply let you know that the aberrant sexuality that is all around us in our day is an exact reflection of the culture and day that Paul was addressing. That is why these words are more than significant to us today.

Know that when Paul defined *sanctification* by demanding that we "*abstain from sexual immorality*" he was not just saying that the *totality* of all sanctification is related to sexual purity. He was not ignorant that the pursuit of sanctification itself is an intense struggle in all area of our lives. But in this context sexual purity was his primary point, which we see in his elevating of this issue here because he truly understood what an intense arena of battle we face when it comes to human sexuality. Our sanctification is constantly under attack in this particular area of our lives, and Paul wanted these people to deal with it. And God wants us to do the same. We live in a world where sensuality can be publicly offered in light and attractive ways. Paul lived in the same kind of world where people tried to find fulfillment, satisfaction and release in things that were in opposition to the standards of God.

Yet, in spite of what the world says, God is the standard when it comes to sexual purity. God does not look on sex as a sin; as we've already seen, He looks on His divinely-created physical intimacy between men and women to be "very good." - and we see that truth for Adam and Eve at the end of Genesis 2 which says: "*And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed*" (Genesis 2:25). There is no way we can even imagine what that looks like today, because intimacy between men and women has become so severely perverted, that what God created as a wonderful, incredible gift is almost today unrecognizable. And that's not coincidental – it is a perversion that is intentional and purposeful.

We see that in Genesis 3:1. Immediately after describing Adam and Eve in *very good* terms, we read: "*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.*" And then Genesis 3:6-7 tell us of the fall that dramatically and fatally changed the relational and sexual purity between men and women: "*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*" It is significant that the first thing that happened after Adam and Eve sinned was that they realized they were naked. After sin, the first thing Satan attacked was their physical intimacy. When sin entered the picture, the sexuality between husband and wife was the first casualty. Full of shame, Adam and Eve began to hide themselves from each other. Yet the coverings they made to hide themselves went far beyond their bodies, as they also began to hide themselves both emotionally and spiritually from each other and from God. The devil attacked physical intimacy and the purity of human sexuality first because he wanted to do damage where it would go the deepest and where it would cause the most relational distance from God and from one another. That is why the evil one targeted the area that is most basic and deepest of avenue of human intimacy. He understood the intimate interconnectedness between human beings who are created in the image of God have with God and with one each other – and if he could create dysfunction in one area – especially in a deep intimate area – it would affect all the others. This still continues to happen in all of our lives through our relationships with each other as husbands and wives, as mothers and fathers, as brothers and sisters, and as friends and neighbors.

As so as a result of the fall we now live in a culture and society today where physical intimacy between a man and a woman is considered to be shameful. Yet sex was not created that way. Christianity is probably the one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body, and which believes that matter is good, and that God Himself once took on a physical body, and that a glorified body will be given in heaven to all who give their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ. Christianity has glorified marriage more than any other religion. If anybody says that sex is bad in itself, that person does not understand the Christian faith. We must, brothers and sisters, instead recognize sexuality as a God given gift - and we must also recognize that, like all the rest of life, physical intimacy must be used in conformity with God's will in the relationship of marriage so that we might be sanctified and holy.

But like any other gift God gives us, the gift of intimacy must be used properly. You can have a real nice fireplace in your living room, and if you use it properly, it will keep you warm and comfortable. But if you don't use it properly, it can burn your house down. Our God created appetites and desires that can only be truly be satisfied within the framework of love and marriage. Any other means or ways are illegitimate and fatal departures from the will of God. It is perfectly natural to walk by a popcorn stand at the movies and have your appetite stimulated. No one will question the normalcy of your desire to have some popcorn to satisfy your appetite. But if it is not within your means to lawfully satisfy it by buying some, no one would consider you justified in stealing it. The same is true for our appetite for sexual intimacy. There are legitimate and illegitimate ways to satisfy it. The Bible tells us the legitimate way is in a life commitment in marriage to another of the opposite gender whom you unconditionally love. That's God's standard. That is where we fully live out our sanctification.

Again remember that sanctification not only covers sexual sin; it covers all sins a person commits. But here, Paul put emphasis on sexual purity as God's will for every Christian. Unlike most of us, the Thessalonians grew up with no Christian teachings that forbid the practice of sexual immorality. The reality is that our present society is becoming ever more pagan, as our culture has unilaterally rejected the biblical teachings on marriage and the standards of God regarding sexual purity. The world will know no different unless we live out our sanctification in this area, so they might see the holiness of God through us in all of our relationships. *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification."*

We all have different personal obstacles to our growth in grace in this area. Yet in the opening words of our text Paul gives us a common key to how we might know victory not only in this area of sexual purity, but in the whole of our call to sanctification in holiness: *"Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and PLEASE GOD, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more."* The Christian life is a life lived out to "please" God. The word "ought" here ought to compel us to live to please God – and not out of duty but out of our delight in Him! 2 Corinthians 5:15 tells us because we have been restored back to our relationship with God through the crucified and risen Jesus Christ: *"those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."* Colossians 1:10 tells us that when we pursue holiness with God by living out our sanctification with one another we will: *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God,"*

If pleasing God were the central motivation for the way we lived out our lives, we would not only be sexually pure, but sanctification in any and all of our relationships would find new depths of personal holiness and relational fulfillment. We make countless decisions day after day about how we are going to live our lives, everything from how we are going to relate to people and what we are going to do that day – to the major decisions in life like whether we are going to buy this house, or that car, whether we are going to marry this person, whether we are going to go on that holiday/vacation. Now I am not saying that we need to think about things like what color of socks would please God. But we do need to consider if the way we go about living our lives is actually motivated by a deep desire to please God. The truth is - most of the time our decisions are made to advance our own personal goals, choosing what might be more fulfilling for us, what might make the most money, takes the least amount of time, and make us feel good about ourselves. We choose based mostly on things related to our own needs, our goals, our wants, and our own expectations. But just think - What if we chose to please God?

The Thessalonians were normal human beings like us, who struggled with the same struggles we do. So Paul reminded them, as God is reminding us, that there is a basic foundational principle of life that comes with a commitment of heart and soul to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Bible tells us that God is sovereign over all things and that Jesus Christ is the fullness of all things and that the Holy Spirit is power by which we can do all things. In Christ we are called to follow Jesus and to live joy-filled sacrificial lives that are pleasing to Him - by pursuing a deeper intimate relationship with God of personal holiness sanctification, which is the growing in grace towards each other and others as we grow in holiness towards God. You see, the purer our intimacy is with God, the purer our relationships will be with each other. We *"ought to live . . . to please God . . . do so more and more."*

One of the greatest struggles of our day for men (and women) is addiction to pornography – which has gotten exponentially worse because of its free access on the internet. There are programs, software and websites which offer help – and for the most part they do help in the area of accountability. But they cannot change the fallen human heart. Only God can do that. And He will when we *"abstain from sexual immorality"* which is *"the will of God"* our *"sanctification."* How can we abstain? We will abstain when we live *"to please God."* In knowing how widespread the problem of pornography addiction is we have decided to provide some help. Starting this month, at Men's Breakfast, we will be going through the dvd series: *Pure Pleasure: Fighting Pleasure with Pleasure in the Battle for Sexual Purity.*

God is the one who intimately created us, and even in our dead, lost and fallen state. He is the one who wooed us away from relationships with other gods to come back to Himself by the call of His Spirit. On that day, when Jesus captured our hearts, we heard His call to follow to Him and pursue a deeper relationship with Him. *“For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”* God has called us to holiness. He has given us His Holy Spirit so we might pursue spiritual maturity in God, sexual purity in marriage, and relational purity with one another. There can never be intimacy between one human being and another human being unless there is real intimacy with God first. God loves you and I like no one else can. His standard of love is far beyond human sexuality. Our desire for physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy is a reflection of our God-created purpose - but our distant fall in the Garden has shamefully poisoned those desires today. But God sent his son Jesus into the world to die in our place for our sin on a cross, so we might be forgiven and set free from the corruption of our desires. We close today by listening to David’s words regarding the shame of his sin (some sexual) and the freedom he found from sin when he sought refuge in the pleasure of God.

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame; they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.
Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!
Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.
For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who is the man who fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.
His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land.
The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.
My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses.
Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.
Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.
Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. Psalm 25:1-20*

*Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”
As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.
The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.
The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.
The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.
I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.
For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.
You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:1-11*