

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Intro July 1, 2007 Sexual Wholeness

One of the dangers of working through a book, verse by verse, of developing the sermon from the text, is that I am forced to address topics I would rather avoid. I believe this is not just my wish, but may well be the desire of some of yours this morning, as I begin with the warning that today's message may well be more specific than some parents may want younger ears to hear. I know that for some, I will say too little and for others, I've already said far too much. The problem is sex is not the joy we were lead to believe.¹

Midnight. John tries to explain his way out of calling his wife by another woman's name during their embrace.

One o'clock. Shelly, 16, is in her bedroom, cutting herself with a razor because of what her boyfriend made her do.

Two o'clock. His wife asleep, Steven is busy downloading images from Internet bulletin boards.

Three o'clock. Beth, who used to spend each Friday night in bed with a different man, dulls the painful memories and the loneliness with another drink.

Four o'clock. Pablo stares through the darkness at his ceiling, wondering how he is going to convince his girlfriend to have an abortion.

Five o'clock. After partying all night, Michael takes another man home, not mentioning he's HIV+.

Six o'clock. Lisa is in the bathroom, crying, her fears are confirmed, she's pregnant and so young.

Not quite what we expected from the sexual revolution.

Even those who lead the charge for absolute freedom now exhibit signs of fatigue and confusion. A few secular people toy with the idea of abstinence, abstinence borne not so much of purity as of boredom, fear, and disgust. What's more, some Christians give the impression they hold the same dismal view. Overwhelmed by the sheer number of things to warn about, they have forgotten how to do anything but scold.

So we come to this text and feel a tad awkward. The passage assumes not wholeness, but brokenness, it instructs us because we are askew, it commands because we are disobedient.

I could inundate you with statistics showing our society's sexual brokenness, such as every second 28,258 Internet uses are viewing porn or since we began worshipping this morning, \$7,381,536 was spent on porn. I could relate specific stories to remind you that we are anything but whole, well adapted people, but I don't think I really need to make that case. We know we are not the whole people God desires us to be. The details of our stories may differ, but the brokenness is the same.

You may be broken by the abuse as a child or broken by the experimentation as a teen. You may be broken by what sociologist Frank Furedi calls pornographication, the pervasive use of sexually charged imagery in our culture or the porn so readily available at our fingertips. We may be broken by the dashed hopes of unfulfilled intimacy or broken marriage vows.

The sad reality is that our sexuality touches at the most deep and most intimate aspect of what it means to be made in the image of God, as we just can't talk about it. But our passage this morning forces us to confront the need in our lives for sexual wholeness as Paul bluntly calls us to obey God's will regarding our lives. READ 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul makes a shift in his letter.

He begins with "finally..." the old preacher's trick of making you think he's almost done. But that is not how it functions here. *Finally* serves as the introduction of a new section with which he will conclude the letter. Having given extensive thanks to God for their lives, he now instructs the church more specifically as how they should live.

The topic at hand is not inconsequential. With emphasis he wants his readers to know the critical nature of his instruction. What he is about to share will guide them as to how they are to live, how they are to please God.

But even in those words there is the first hint of our brokenness. The word *urge* or *encourage* presupposes a difficulty. You don't encourage a successful person. These are not a defeated people, but they are far from a perfect church.

Paul is not giving them anything new, but reminding them of the instructions from the past. That term was often a military word, carrying with it a tone of authority.

What do we need to be reminded of here?

SEXUAL PURITY BRINGS WHOLENESS v3

God desires wholeness

The commandment is straight forward, but before we look at it, notice how Paul introduces it to us. People want to know God's will far more than they ever want to do God's will. For some there is a lifelong search for God's will as those it somehow got lost.

But as we have seen in the past, Deuteronomy 29:29 distinguishes between God's will that he declares in His Word and His will He decrees and we may never know. There is only one will we are called to know and that will is found in his Word and it instructs us how to live.

God's will is not discerned in the tealeaves of life, but is given to us to know and obey.

God's will is for our good, for our wholeness.

I am using the word wholeness in order to better communicate what is meant here.

Throughout our passage Paul speak of holiness. It is found in words like sanctification in v3, holiness in v4 and 6. The trouble is we have an unfortunate aversion to these terms.

We've meet people that speak of holiness and they look like they've been baptized in embalming fluid. And *sanctification* sounds like a water filtration process for raw sewage.

We want to be a saint, but we also want to feel every sensation experienced by sinners; we want to be innocent and pure, but we also want to be experienced and taste all of life; we want to serve the poor and have a simple lifestyle, but we also want all the comforts of the rich; we want to have the depth afforded by solitude, but we also do not want to miss anything; we want to pray, but we also want to watch television, read, talk to friends, and go out. It's a small wonder that life is often a trying enterprise, and that we are often tired and pathologically overextended.²

But our English term wholeness comes from the same root as our English word holy and we can begin to get our minds wrapped around the idea if we think of lives transformed by God's grace that look more like Christ and less like us, we have the idea of being whole, complete and well adjusted people. To be holy is to be whole.

But is purity possible?

God's will, our wholeness, demands our purity, in that we abstain from immorality.

Sexual immorality is a broad term. *Pornea* is the word used here, from which we get our term porn. It encompasses any and all sexual activity outside the marriage covenant. Purity means no sexual wrongdoing: no pre-marital sex, which encompasses all forms of contact. No extra-marital sex. No homosexual sex. No pornography. Purity is not asexuality; it is enjoying the deep and expansive pleasures of intimacy in marriage.

God's will for your life, your growth to reflect the God who made you, redeemed you, demands wholeness here, holiness is not an option. Paul's command is exacting. There are no small corners allowed

What is demanded is not a lessening, not a management, but abstinence.

The word has the idea of distance, of turning away. It does not mean that it has no power over you, that it is not tempting, but rather for that very reason, we willingly keep our distance.

In the forests of northern Europe lives little animal called the ermine, known for his snow-white fur in winter. He instinctively protects the purity of his white coat against anything that would soil it. Fur hunters take advantage of this unusual trait of the ermine. They don't set a snare to catch him, but instead they find his home, in a rock or a hollow in an old tree. They smear the entrance and interior with grime. Then the hunters set their dogs loose to find and chase the ermine. The frightened animal flees toward home but doesn't enter because of the filth. Rather than soil his white coat, he is trapped by the dogs and captured while preserving his purity. For the ermine, purity is more precious than life.³

For us, we don't even go that far. We, at times, will flee into the filth, embrace the stench of sin and think that there we will find pleasure and wholeness. But there is more than just saying no. Paul next outlines the priorities that bring wholeness.

SEXUAL PRIORITIES BRING WHOLENESS v4-7

The priority of control v4-5

For sexual wholeness, there must be control, not for the sake of just saying no, but with a view to holiness and honor. This verse is variously translated in different versions and we won't settle the issue in a few minutes here.

Some versions translate *body* as wife. So the idea would be that the man should possess a wife as a means for wholeness, but even that should be done in holiness and honor. The best way to view his word is one's own body, yet Paul uses a term to cause us to remember that who we are, the bodies we possess are given to us by God.

But let's face it; controlling our bodies is never an easy thing. We even know some things about our bodies today that Paul did not know, that explains why this is such a hard command to obey. Our bodies possess a remarkable capacity to churn out hormones. At puberty, new hormones pour into the bloodstream and we experience sexual changes, along with which come very powerful drives that urge us, and almost seem to compel us, to certain sexual activities. Society tells us that those urges are natural and therefore ought to be satisfied whenever opportunity affords. They argue that the sexual appetite should be satisfied just like the urge to hunger, thirst, sleep, or any other natural function. By extension, this argument says that there is nothing wrong with the fulfilling of sexual desires.

Sex is a natural function, but what they are not saying, and what the Scriptures reveal, is that all natural functions need certain degrees of control. Take hunger, for instance. You do not eat anytime you feel like eating. You learn to restrict your eating. If you do not want to put on too much weight, or if you want to enjoy your meals better, you do not eat between meals. Certain aspects and habits of control must be learned to handle the hunger function. The same rules apply to sleep. You do not go to sleep whenever you feel like it. (At least, I hope you do not, not now.)...

But all of these functions must be controlled. Control increases the enjoyment of a natural function. When a flooding river is controlled by banks, its intensity is increased. When the moral restraints have been removed from sexual practices, it results in a kind of listless flood in which you wade continually with no enjoyment whatsoever. But God has designed sex to be stimulating and arousing. That is why marriage constitutes a kind of channeled control for sex. There is ample provision made for the stream, but the limits increase the intensity and enjoyment. That is what God has in mind as part of the process of producing a whole person. Anything that tears down those boundaries destroys our wholeness.⁴

The priority of character v6-7

An important aspect of control comes in one's character, understanding why we do not step over the boundary lines God has established. Our character is well revealed in our sexuality. So when we embrace brokenness, when we reject God's priorities, our character is judged.

To transgress is to step over the line, go beyond the limits. Certainly this is the case when sexual intimacy occurs, but it begins often seemingly innocently, with the time spent, the gentle touch, the caring words and flirtations that take those dangerous steps nearer the edge of a dangerous precipice.

To defraud means to selfishly, greedily take something for personal gain and pleasure at someone else's expense. This too is a powerful picture of what happens whenever sexual brokenness occurs, when immorality is allowed to fester.

Paul adds the object of this theft – *his brother*. Here Paul includes the familial picture. You take not just from another man, but a brother, a word (*adelphos*) which comes from the root *delphus* which means womb, stressing the inherent connection we have with one another. We are, you see, womb-mates.

We may understand a husband's rage at adultery, but who is harmed when they are two consenting people, free from such restraints?

Certainly the future spouse is defrauded, as is the father who raised his daughter or son to remain chaste until marriage. When you view porn in any variety, lusting after the woman as an object, you are a thief, for that person is not a possession, an object.

This is not only a men's problem. The fastest growth in Internet pornography is geared toward women. It is easy and very wrong to assume this is a male issue, but in fact it is part of human brokenness, as women make up 1/3 of those visiting porn sites and studies have shown that they are more likely than men to act out behaviors in real life.⁵

SEXUAL POWER TO BE WHOLE

v8

What's the answer? What hope does this passage have for us other than telling us what we already know, that we are broken? How can we be made whole, holy?

The broader context helps us, as we saw last week in Paul's prayer for them, asking that God would establish their hearts blameless in holiness before God our Father.

This is not something you can muster up on your own, but the Father who sent his Son to redeem you will likewise conform you to his image. God mends broken people, but he wants us to come to him, seeking that grace. As soiled and broken you may be today, God will declare you blameless in holiness and then begin that work of changing your life.

In the opening lines of this section, Paul reminds them that they have already received from the apostles how they ought to live and please God.

This reminds us that what we are talking about is a persistent problem that existed in the first century and does today and will ten thousand years from now. But it is possible to live a life that pleases God; in fact we can have a life in which we find it a pleasure to please God.

Rather than the fleeting pleasures of sex outside of God's framework, we can have lasting pleasures in pleasing the God who made us.

Next, in verse 4, Paul describes the Gentiles who are controlled by the passion of their lusts, who do not know God. The presence of knowledge is no guarantee, but the absence assures of further brokenness.

Knowledge of God is not a prescription for a sexually pure life. But without it, we'll never understand what sexual purity is and why sexual wholeness is so important. Being made in the image of God, being redeemed at a great cost by Christ, directs us to sexual wholeness.

God's wrath is a powerful aid in this, too, as we see in v6

We should not ignore the warnings that when we break God's commandments, when we refuse to repent, there is no hope. If God's kindness does not lead us to repentance, we may only be left with the fearful truth that he will avenge the wrong we have done.

But the final reminder comes in v8. Here Paul points us to the ultimate source of this teaching.

But don't miss the last line, for there we see both the power and the hope we can have to live whole, redeemed lives. The God who commands is the God who gives His Spirit, the Holy One, to us to make us holy, to sanctify and cleanse us. If you are in Christ, you have the God's Spirit, who is Holy, who will work that sanctifying, life changing grace in you. Here is the source of your power, here is your help and hope.

This is the same warning and welcome we read of in 1 Corinthians 6. That we are the temple of the Spirit should keep us from sin, not by our power, in fear of offense, but because God the Spirit promises to work in and through us, not just as a body, a church, but individually.

God the Father has given His Spirit to you for a reason, to make you like Him, whole, holy, bearing his image by creation and in redemption. When you fail to embrace God's design for sexual wholeness, when you cross those boundaries, you need to know where your help and hope does lie – it is here, in the arms of a Father who receives broken people like us.

There was quite a mix-up at the Duke University Hospitals in North Carolina. In November 2004, maintenance workers had drained hydraulic fluid from the hospital elevators into empty detergent drums and then didn't get rid of the drums. Through a strange series of events, the drums were mistakenly redistributed to the people who clean surgical instruments. It took two months and 3,800 surgeries before anyone figured out something was wrong.

Washing the instruments in hydraulic fluid was not an effective means of sterilization. The biggest question is, what kind of damage has been done to the patients? No one was sure what the petroleum residue might do to people. The hospital assured the public, "We want to give people the message that we care about our patients," and no doubt they do. But if their instruments weren't safe, they were a threat to their patients no matter how much they cared.⁶

We may protest that we can be just as effective for Christ no matter who we fill our minds with, no matter how we live, but we are still a danger and need cleansing that only Christ can give. You and I need the Holy Spirit to be at work, make us holy for God. That is what this table provides, for here we have the gospel, to touch and taste, it is sensual in the best sense, for here we have God's grace given to us. God does not just tell us he cares, but rather he feeds and nourishes us with his grace.

¹ Taken from J. Budziszewsk, *What's Good About Sex*, reprinted from the November 1999 *Citizen Magazine*.

² Ronald Rolheiser, [The Holy Longing](#) (*Doubleday, 1999*), p. 9

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⁴ Ray C. Stedman Handling your Sex Drive Catalog No: 4093 1/3/88

⁵ <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html#anchor7>

⁶ Associated Press (6-13-05)