

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Sexuality

Key Idea:

Because God has called His people out of impurity and into holiness, sexual purity is not a cultural preference but a divine command — one the Holy Spirit empowers us to keep.

Key Text:

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. ² 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; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ 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. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 ESV)

Key Points:

- **Paul’s instructions about sexuality carry the full weight of divine authority, not human opinion.** In vv. 1–8, Paul stacks up phrase after phrase to make the source of his teaching unmistakable: “in the Lord Jesus” (v. 1), “instructions through the Lord Jesus” (v. 2), “the will of God” (v. 3), “the call of God” (v. 7), and “not man but God” (v. 8). He has already established this principle earlier in the letter (2:13). In every era, including our own, the temptation is to treat God’s Word on sexuality as one human opinion among many — but Paul closes that door firmly. To reject this teaching is to reject God, not merely a first-century cultural viewpoint.
- **God’s will for His people is their sanctification — a holiness that includes and specifically addresses their sexual lives.** “Holy” language appears four times in this brief passage, three times in connection with conduct and once in the name of the Spirit Paul mentions at the close. The specific arena of holiness Paul addresses is sexuality: abstaining from porneia (the broadest Greek term for sexual sin, encompassing sex before marriage, adultery, homosexual activity, incest, and prostitution), controlling the body in holiness and honor, and not sinning against others. This was not a peripheral

concern for Paul — it was central to his understanding of what it means to live as God's set-apart people in a sex-saturated world.

- **God's people have always been called to sexual holiness in the midst of sexually permissive cultures — and the call is no different today.** The Greco-Roman world of the first century was sexually permissive in ways that parallel our own moment. Demosthenes' famous statement — that men kept mistresses for pleasure, concubines for daily needs, and wives only for legitimate children — illustrates the sexual ethics the Thessalonians were asked to leave behind. The statistics Paul might cite today (90% of Americans having sex before marriage) would not have surprised him. The call to sexual chastity in the midst of moral decadence is nothing new, and faithfulness to that call is possible — because the Thessalonians did it, and God's Spirit is the same.
- **Sexual sin is not merely a private matter — it wrongs others and will be judged by God.** Paul's language in v. 6 is striking: sexual sin "transgresses and wrongs" a brother or sister. Adultery sins against the betrayed spouse — and against the spouse of the person involved if they are married. All sexual sin implicates the other person in guilt and harm. And Paul adds a sobering warning: "the Lord is an avenger in all these things." This is not merely a forward-looking eschatological warning, though it is that (cf. 3:13) — it is also the recognition that God's moral law cannot be evaded. We reap what we sow. Sexual sin, though intensely personal, is never truly private before God.
- **The Gospel — and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit — is both the motive and the power for sexual holiness.** Paul does not end with threat but with Gospel. God has called His people out of impurity and into holiness (v. 7), and He has given them His Holy Spirit to make that holiness possible (v. 8). The name "Holy Spirit" is Paul's final argument: the Spirit who indwells every believer is by definition holy, and His presence is both an empowerment for holiness and an argument against sin. The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Gratitude for the Gospel — for being bought with a price, called from darkness to light — is the deepest and most durable motivation for sexual purity. Duty alone will not hold; delight in Christ and dependence on the Spirit will.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened with statistics about contemporary sexual attitudes and practices — including that only a third of evangelicals said sex outside marriage is always wrong. Were those numbers surprising to you? What do you think has shaped the sexual ethics of the church more: Scripture or the surrounding culture?
- Paul goes out of his way to stress that his teaching on sexuality is not his own opinion but the command and will of God (vv. 1–3, 7–8). Why do you think he emphasizes the divine authority so heavily? What happens when we treat God's Word on sexuality as merely a human cultural viewpoint?

- The Greek word Paul uses for sexual immorality is *porneia* — a term that covers the full range of sexual sin (sex before marriage, adultery, homosexual activity, and more). Our culture tends to rank sexual sins, treating some as acceptable and others as uniquely offensive. How does Paul's use of a single comprehensive term challenge that tendency? Are there forms of sexual sin you have been tempted to treat as less serious than others?
- Bret noted that the Greco-Roman world was sexually permissive in ways that closely mirror our own — and that the Thessalonians were called to sexual holiness in the middle of it. How does it change your perspective on our cultural moment to know that this is not a new challenge for the church? What can we learn from the fact that the early church actually lived this out?
- Paul says that sexual sin “transgresses and wrongs” a brother or sister (v. 6) — it is not merely a private act between consenting individuals. Who are the people harmed when sexual sin occurs? How does recognizing the relational damage of sexual sin change the way you think about it?
- Paul warns that “the Lord is an avenger” of sexual sin (v. 6). This is an uncomfortable truth that is rarely preached. How do you hold together the reality of God's judgment on sexual sin with the equally real truth of His grace and forgiveness for those who repent? How do both truths serve our holiness?
- Paul ends not with a threat but with the Gospel: God has called us to holiness and given us His Holy Spirit (vv. 7–8). How does the gift of the indwelling Spirit change the nature of the call to sexual holiness — from law to grace, from impossible demand to empowered obedience? What difference does it make in practice?
- Paul's teaching on sexuality is consistently connected in the New Testament to the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:18–20). What does it mean practically to treat your body as a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit? How might that frame change everyday decisions about what you watch, read, or pursue?
- Bret asked: “Do I submit my sexual desires to God — or do I try to alter God's Word to fit my desires?” That is a searching question. What does it look like in practice to submit sexual desires to God rather than the reverse? Where do you most need the Spirit's help in this area?
- How can coming to the Lord's Table be part of walking in holy sexuality? In what ways does the Spirit work at the Table through confession, forgiveness, and empowerment?

For Further Study:

- For the New Testament's fullest treatment of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the call to sexual purity, read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. Note how Paul connects sexual holiness directly to the Gospel, the resurrection, and the indwelling Spirit.
- Read Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5, and Galatians 5:19 alongside 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 to see how consistently the call to abstain from sexual immorality appears across Paul's letters — confirming that this was standard apostolic teaching, not a Thessalonian-specific concern.

- Watch this week's episode of [After Hours](#) (available on Tuesday) for a fuller discussion of what Scripture teaches about human sexuality, including the male/female design of creation and the biblical understanding of marriage.
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [holiness](#); [sexual sin](#); [self-control](#); and [sanctification](#).