

1 Thessalonians 4: 1-5: "This is your Sanctification", Sermon # 16
in the series - "A Persevering Faith, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on July 27th, 2008, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

Paul's benedictory prayer, which we looked at last Sunday afternoon, concluded with his heart's desire and his prayer for the believers at Thessalonica, that "God would establish their hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all of His saints." Our hearts ought to often be meditating upon that Day, the Day of our Lord's return, when each of us will give an account of ourselves to our God, and to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for the deeds which we have done in the body. For that Day will surely come. When Christ appears, all sanctification will have come to an end, and glorification of the body will take place. These verses teach us one important and major way that we as Christians can be prepared for that great day. The goal of the Christian life, we now know, is that each and every Christian would be established in holiness. These verses, verses 1-12 of Chapter 4 tell us how we come to be established in holiness. There is a way that we ought to walk and to please God, it says in verse 1. And from this we can also infer that there is also a way not to walk and not to please God. It is my desire, and I hope that it is yours as well, to learn to walk in a manner which is pleasing to God. To learn to please God is to learn to do His will by taking the steps of obedience which are given to us here. Verse 3 tells us what His will is. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality." The way that this sentence is worded makes it seem as if all our responsibility in keeping the commandments of God, all of our sanctification in sight of our living Lord, is bound up in the keeping of this one commandment; that we should abstain from sexual immorality. That is the way that this sentence is given to us. And so we must ask ourselves, "In what sense is this true?" "What does the Apostle Paul mean by this?" Because there are many other commandments which are given to us in the New Testament letters of Paul and the other Apostles of the Lord. They are also the will of God. In what sense is this one commandment the all-encompassing commandment which defines whether we are sanctified? It must be true in the sense that the keeping of this commandment to abstain from sexual immorality affects the keeping of all the other commandments of God, and thus our entire sanctification is either progressing or it is hindered by the keeping or the not keeping of this commandment. It is the most basic matter related to our being faithful to our Lord. This is what I believe that Verse 3 is teaching us. So what I would like to do this afternoon is first, to define the commandment. Then 2ndly, I would like to show you the great duty entrusted to every Christian in relation to the commandment. And then the next time I speak to you from this Chapter I will give you the Apostolic warning attached to this commandment. But let's proceed on to the exposition of the text.

1st - Let's define the commandment. (Verses 3)

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality." The commandment is related to our sexuality. The Christian is to be a sexually moral person. The sanctification that is being spoken of here is a person's pursuing of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. To be sexually pure is something that each and every person who is old enough to understand it needs to pursue and to find by the grace of God. God has given us our sexuality and it often begins to manifest itself as a tremendous curiosity about our sexuality and the sexuality of others. It begins when we are 11 or 12 years old, sometimes younger and sometimes older. But it is God who gives a young man or a young woman the hormones that lead to sexual feelings and desires. These feelings and desires, as God gives them, are not evil in themselves. What is a person to do about these feelings and these desires? That is the question related to sanctification. You are to realize that the reason that God has given them to you, is in relation to the person you will marry. And if you are not married, or will not marry even for a long time yet, nevertheless you are to think about these feelings and these desire in terms of that future marriage and in terms of the God who gave them to you. What does he want you do with them? He wants you to abstain from any immorality which you might be tempted to, in relation to them. He wants you to reserve the sexual fulfillment you will find in them, for the time when He gives you the Biblical permission to use them. They are reserved for marriage, the marriage of one man and one woman in the bonds of holy matrimony as the wedding ceremony says. You are not going to be able to be totally free from these feelings and desires which God has entrusted to you, and so it is what you do with them and about them that this commandment is addressing.

When these feelings are pursued and developed so that we are trying to find sexual fulfillment in them before marriage or outside of marriage, the Bible terms it sexual immorality, unchastity, uncleanness, fornication, or adultery. The word there in the Greek is Porneia. We are to abstain from Porneia. The word encompasses the whole range of sexual sins that a person can fall into if they do not abstain. To abstain means not to participate in acting upon these sexual desires and feelings that we experience. We should know from this commandment that if we participate we will subvert or we will pervert what God has planned for us in marriage. This commandment contains within it many prohibitions; many sexual practices that we should not pursue or engage in. This would include masturbation, or self-stimulation sexually. It would include incest; pursuing a sexual relationship with a member of your immediate family or close relatives. It would include fornication; that is, pursuing a sexual relationship or many relationships before marriage or without being married. This would include couples that live together before marriage or who do not intend to marry. It would include homosexuality which is the pursuit of sexual pleasures with a person of the same sex. It would include bestiality; the pursuit of sexual fulfillment with an animal. It would include all of these things or any of them individually. The word

Porneia is the word from which we get our English word pornography. Pornography is sexually explicit pictures exposing the nakedness of a person. The sin here, is in pursuing sexual gratification through those pictures instead of reserving those desires and pursuits for the person whom you will marry.

Let us understand that within marriage, that God would have us to be delighted and satisfied sexually, by lovingly giving each other sexual pleasure. This is a wonderful and beautiful and a powerful gift of God, and God would not have it be abused. Turn to Proverbs Chapter 5, verse 15 with me. Here we see the beauty of God's design in marriage. "'Drink water from own cistern, and running water from your own well.'" "Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets?" "Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you." "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth, as a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love." "For why should you be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?" This is the beauty and the strength of marital love and the sexuality which God intends to be freely enjoyed in it, in a holy way. It is called, "drinking water from your own cistern." It is called fountains of refreshing water, and these "fountains" should be contained in the cistern of marriage and not flowing out in the streets to just anybody. When you find Biblical marital love you can rejoice in it, and take pleasure in it. The wife is described as a loving deer and a graceful doe in the sexual relationship, and her breast are to be given to her husband to satisfy him always. And then the question of questions is asked in verse 20, "For why should you be enraptured with an immoral woman and embraced in the arms of a seductress?" It is the insanity of a sinful heart. God would prevent it with all of his good commandments concerning adultery.

The seventh commandment of the ten commandments deals with sexual immorality under the title of adultery. Thou shall not commit adultery. Adultery is the sexual unfaithfulness of one or both of the partners in a marriage. It involves pursuing a sexual relationship with another person besides your husband or wife, and this is a sin. It is not limited to the sexual act itself alone; but it also applies to all the words, and looks and actions which may or do suggest to a person that you are not married to, that you would like to pursue a sexual relationship with them. This is why you can be committing the sin of adultery whether you are married or whether you are single. There is a sexual unfaithfulness that can take place before marriage which is adultery in that you are not saving yourself sexually for the person whom God would have you to marry. And you and I need to understand, even from an early age, that adultery is something that begins in the heart and mind of a person before it ever breaks out into acts of physical sexual compromise and sin. Turn with me to Matthew 5: 27. Here Jesus is speaking in His sermon on the mount to show the kind of righteousness that both He and the Father expect of His followers. It must go beyond abstaining from outward acts of sexual immorality to abstain from it in our hearts, and guarding ourselves from it

in our mind. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." You see, this is where sexual immorality begins. It begins with the desires of our heart that go against or beyond the commandment. You say to me, "Well if God gave me these hormones that lead to sexual desires then isn't God actually the One responsible for my being tempted to sin?" He made me this way. The answer is no. God gives us desires which are good when they are channeled in the right direction.

Turn with me to James Chapter 1, verse 13. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone." "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed." "Then, when desire (that is the sinful desire of lust) has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." So we see from this that the good sexual desires and thoughts of those desires being fulfilled in marriage, all of which God has given us, can easily be perverted by our sinful heart. Because of our not dealing with our sinful heart in terms of having faith in God, and seeing our need of Christ's grace to be able to abstain from these sinful lusts; we can easily find ourselves developing a whole lifestyle and pursuit of sexual sin; whether secretly or openly. When we are deceived into thinking that we need to go around God's holy bounding of our sexuality by disobedience to His commandments then grave consequences will follow. And we may not see these consequences right away. The Bible says abstain. The sinful heart of a person is easily led astray and can be enticed by these thoughts and lusts which say to the one who is being deceived, "Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." "But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of hell." (Proverbs 9: 17 and 18) This is not where the pleasure oriented youth wants to end up, but it is where he will end up unless he repents. So that is the commandment defined. It is the believer's sanctification. And to obey the command is to abstain from sexual immorality, those sexual lusts which wage war against the soul. 1 Peter 2: 11 says, "Beloved, I urge you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation." This leads us very naturally on to my 2nd point which is:

We find here - The great duty which is entrusted to every Christian in relation to this commandment. (Verses 4 and 5)

Paul says in verse 4, "...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God." What does Paul mean by this obscure terminology? What does it mean for a man or a woman to "possess their own vessel"? A vessel is often

spoken of in the scriptures as a jar of clay which contains water or wine or some other life-giving or life-strengthening substance. It could be any container in which precious substances are placed and kept. I believe that the term vessel here in this verse can only refer to a man's own body or his own wife. The wife is termed "the weaker vessel" by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3, verse 7. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel...." There, the word vessel refers to her bodily strength. So the word vessel could have been used by Paul and the Holy Spirit here in 1 Thessalonians 4, in such a way as to refer to both; the man's own body and the sexuality which God has entrusted to him; and also that he should know how to possess his own wife. Both are to be done "in sanctification and honor." A good passage of Scripture to reference here would be 1 Samuel 21: 3-5. David is fleeing from Saul and has fled for help to Ahimelech the high priest who is in the city of Nob. He wants Ahimelech to give him the showbread, the bread which had been consecrated on the altar, which is reserved for the priests after the fresh loaves are placed there. David says, "Now therefore, what have you on hand?" "Give me five loaves of bread in my hand, or whatever can be found." "And the priest answered David and said, 'There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread if the young men have at least kept themselves from women.'" "Then David answered the priest, and said to him, 'Truly women have been kept from us about three days since I came out.'" "And the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in effect common., even though it was consecrated in the vessel this day." You see, the priest was concerned with ceremonial cleanness related to David and men in relation to their sexuality. Had they been with their wives, sexually, recently, and were their vessels holy? David answers that they were ceremonially clean in accordance with the law. Therefore they could receive this bread.

Similarly, when we come to our duty, in relation to our sexuality, we find that it is "to possess our own vessel in sanctification and honor", not in a ceremonial way, but in a moral way. We are to learn to come to terms with our sexuality in the sight of God. We have all of these strong feelings and desires, but we learn by obedience to the teaching of God's word and instruction from our parents, how to have the control over them so that we abstain from sexual immorality when the flesh is begging to be satisfied. How does this come? It comes by the grace of Jesus Christ and from no other. We must come looking for help to our high priest, Jesus Christ. We must possess our vessel in sanctification and honor. In other words, we come to learn the when and the where of how this vessel of our sexuality should be used. We learn when to abstain and when it is appropriate to give ourselves. It is appropriate only in the context of marriage, but even in marriage we pray to God to teach us. And when the time is right, when marriage is our blessed state, then we are blessed by God and truly free in the use of His gift of sexuality to satisfy our partner and they to satisfy us. Even in marriage, sexuality is not to be pursued in the passion of lust, as those Gentiles who do not know God. It is that the Christian understands that his sexuality is expressed and possessed

within the greater framework and duty of his love to his wife. His love includes the sexual expression, but is actually much greater and broader than that physical relationship and intimacy. His love has the spiritual component and dynamic of Christ's love and the love of the Holy Spirit included in it. This love knows how to behave itself in an honorable, soul-satisfying, God honoring way. This is the kind of relationship that each Christian should strive to have with his wife, and the wife with her husband. Those who are single, and have the gift not to marry also know how to possess their vessel in sanctification and honor. As it says in 1 Corinthians 7: 32, "He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord--how he may please the Lord." The object in both cases, both single and married is to know how we ought to walk, and to please the Lord.