

1st THESSALONIANS

4:1-8

Introduction

The moral standards of Thessalonica were permissive, promiscuous, and pornographic. A married man might have a mistress and several concubines and still regularly visit prostitutes – all with the approval of his colleagues as well as his wife.

The pagan religions reflected this moral standard. Throughout the Graeco-Roman world the religious rites of the pagan temples involved the performance of sexual acts. The temples were funded by the activity of their so-called "priestesses" who were really prostitutes.

Permissive, promiscuous, and pornographic was the moral standard; pleasing self was the highest goal. The apostle Paul arrived and preached the Gospel. **Purity** was the Christian standard; **pleasing God** was the highest goal.

The Thessalonian believers were surrounded by immorality and subject to their own impulses. They were struggling against both society and self. Paul wrote these eight verses to provide the perspective they needed to overcome both society and self.

You are likewise surrounded by immorality and subject to your own impulses. **You** are likewise struggling against society and self. These same eight verses provide the perspective and the power **you** need to overcome both society and self.

The perspective is presented by two words: *Abound* and *abstain*. The power is provided by a Person – God the Holy Spirit.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Spirit-Checks From The Word Instruct You To Abound In Abstinence, and #2 Spirit-Control In The World Influences You To Abound In Abstinence.

#1 Spirit-Checks From The Word
Instruct You To Abound In Abstinence
(v1-2)

Two more preliminary comments are in order before we begin looking verse-by-verse:

1. We don't normally think of abstinence as something we abound in. We normally think of abstinence as a bummer; as something that hinders us. The Christian life is not a hindering, hampering hobble through Pleasure Island, wishing we could enjoy the things we used to enjoy. It is an abounding experience of life as it was meant to be lived in a fallen world that is headed for destruction. Those who promote permissive, promiscuous, pornographic behavior are headed for what the Bible calls perdition; the Christian is destined for paradise and wants to bring others with him.
2. The second comment I'd make is to point-out that these Thessalonians were in some ways worse off than we are. Don't get me wrong: Our society is equally immoral and perhaps much more so in that we have so many media to promote the images and ideas of immorality. But we at least can still remember a Christian moral standard that we have deviated from. *The Thessalonians had no previous high standard!* This was all new to them. If anything it would be more difficult for them to reject their standard than for us to return to ours.

With this in mind it is all the more remarkable that Paul presented purity as the standard and pleasing God as the highest goal. He understood that it would involve a struggle, but he was certain that a Christian would readily comply. And he was confident God had provided everything necessary to overcome both society and self.

Verses one through seven depend on verse eight where you read, "God... has also given us His Holy Spirit." Having the indwelling Holy Spirit is not an afterthought; it is the key thought. Paul will discuss God's *commands* and your *control*; neither are possible without the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Let's look at the verses. Verses one and two involve "commandments" they "received." We would say they involve God's Word.

1 Thessalonians 4:1 Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;

"Finally" does not mean *finally*. A better translation would be "and now." This begins a new section of the letter in which Paul deals with certain issues in the Church. One of them was immorality. When we get to verse nine we'll see that another was idleness – some of the believers were quitting their jobs to wait for the Rapture. After that he will discuss imminence – the imminent coming of Jesus to Rapture His Church from earth to heaven.

At the top of his list was abstinence in the face of their immoral society. He began by "urging" and "exhorting" them to "abound more and more." "Abound" is an important word. It means both *to advance* and *abundantly supplied*. "More and more" qualifies it even further. It was as if Paul was saying, "Go ahead advancing in your Christian life more and more through your abundant spiritual supply."

It doesn't sound limiting; it sounds liberating – and it is. I think it is fundamental that we decide once-and-for-all that the Christian life is a higher, better, life. We too often long for the lower-living we did in the world or that the world offers. God has something better for you; or, as we used to say, "God has a wonderful plan for your life."

Paul told them they had "*received something*", and that they now *revered Someone*. What they had "received" is in verse two,

1 Thessalonians 4:2 for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

They had received something - "commandments." Paul said they were given to them "through the Lord Jesus." In other words, they were directly from Jesus to the believers through the agency of the apostle. They were not suggestions the believers might want to adopt; they were not a new philosophy or religion. They were authoritative commandments. They were the very Word of God.

What were those commandments? Probably things like, "Get rid of your mistresses," "Quit sleeping with concubines," and "Don't visit the temple prostitutes." Or, to put it positively, I'm certain there were a lot of commandments about Christian marriage.

We don't have any modern-day apostles through whom Jesus gives us commandments. We have something far better – the completed Word of God. It, too, tells you "how you ought to walk." The word "ought" means *must*. "Walk" means your conduct in all areas of life. The Bible is not suggestive; it is authoritative, and it covers all areas of your life on earth. Follow its commands and you will abound.

They also revered Someone; you see that at the end of verse one where Paul said, "to please God." Too often we present this idea of pleasing God as a tremendous burden. We give people the impression God is looking down at them, shaking His head in discouragement with their failures. The One you are living to please died for you on the Cross at Calvary. He rose from the dead for you so you could live forever with Him. He's in heaven right now working on your mansion. In the mean time, while He's away, He has provided you everything you need for life and godliness. It should be a joy to live in a way that would please Him.

Why, then, do people have the impression that the Christian life is such a bummer? I think one missing element is the key from verse eight - the dependence upon the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. The commandments in God's Word are not simply a external laws we strive to keep in order to please God; they are an internal life we are enabled to experience and thereby please God.

Everyone who is a Christian has received both the Spirit of God and the Word of God. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God in order to instruct you in abundant living. We'll see in verses three through seven that abundant living involves abstinence from sexual immorality. The point here is that you are not alone in your struggle against society and self. God lives in you!

It only makes sense that if God the Holy Spirit is living in you that your life would radically change and that you would hear from Him, have a sense from Him, about what is right and what is pleasing to

God. We sometimes use in our Christian vocabulary the phrase, "I had a check in my spirit," to indicate a sense from God that something is not quite right. One author describes it as Christian instincts. You will have **Spirit-checks** as the Spirit of God instructs you from the Word of God. His instruction becomes instinctive and checks you.

You are surrounded by immorality and subject to your own impulses. You are struggling against society and self. But you're never alone! You have Spirit-checks from the Word that instruct you to abound in abstinence.

Are these checks sufficient for you to be under control in such a perverted society? Paul thought so. In the next several verses he said,

#2 Spirit-Control In The World Influences You To Abound In Abstinence (v3-8)

You are given the bottom-line right at the beginning:

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

People are always wondering about God's will for their lives. Your "sanctification" is His will for your life. "Sanctification" means to be *set apart* for God. It is a process that begins when you are saved and continues throughout your earthly life. Everyday you are to be more-and-more set apart for God in your character and in your conduct. As you are, you discover meaning and purpose for your life; you live your life as it was meant to be lived.

In order to be set apart for God in your character and conduct you must "abstain from sexual immorality." "Abstain" does not mean to moderate or reduce in frequency or anything like that. It means *refrain*; it means to desist, to quit.

You are to abstain from, to desist and quit, "sexual immorality." "Immorality" might be translated *fornication* in your Bible. It is the

Greek word *pornea* from which we get our English word, *pornography*.

There are all kinds of hair-splitting definitions of *pornea* and what is meant by sexual immorality. The biblical definition it is based upon the sanctity of marriage. God created marriage and gave it as a gift to mankind. Marriage is a covenant of companionship between one man and one woman for life; it is monogamous and heterosexual. Within marriage God gave sexual intimacy as a gift. It is for both *procreation* and *pleasure*. The pleasure is intensified over the course of your lifetime as you grow in satisfaction with your own husband or wife.

Christian marriage has gotten a bad rap. It is generally understood to be prudish and Puritanical. More people should read the Old Testament book, *The Song of Solomon* – especially the end of chapter four! There God gives His approval to the expression of physical lovemaking within marriage – which He describes in a metaphor as a garden of delights for the husband and wife to enter and enjoy. Within this garden there are wonderful pleasures to be experienced and shared. Anything and everything sexual outside of this beautiful garden of marriage **is** sexual immorality.

A correct understanding of marriage and of the pleasures of intimacy within marriage is foundational. But what about the struggle against both our immoral society and the impulses of sin and self? The remaining verses reveal your help.

In the world you have Spirit-control to influence you to abound in abstinence. I like to say "**Spirit-control**" rather than **self-control** because these are things you cannot accomplish apart from God's help.

The indwelling Holy Spirit influences you to exercise control over your own body. Three words summarize His influence: *Master...* *Maintain...* and *Mindful*.

By the influence of the indwelling Spirit you master your own body:

1 Thessalonians 4:4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

"Possess his own vessel" means *gain mastery* over your own physical *body*. The word "know" means having the knowledge and skill necessary to accomplish a desired goal (MacArthur). By the influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit you have the knowledge and skill to gain mastery over your physical body. First, He creates holy desires within you; then He instructs you from God's Word and calls to mind God's principles and promises in times of struggle with temptation. Your part is to decide whether you will yield to His influences or to your own impulses.

By the influence of the indwelling Spirit you maintain your own body:

1 Thessalonians 4:5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

The Jews had a high outward standard of morality based on God's Law. Anyone not a Jew was considered a Gentile. Gentiles had a very different standard; as we said, it was based on selfishness and satisfaction. Their standard was and is "the passion of lust."

"Passion" means overpowering urges; "lusts" refers to cravings and longings. Passion is the disease and lusts are the symptoms. The phrase indicates a surrender to your passions so that you become overwhelmed by them. We could put it this way: If you give-in to your lusts you will become a slave to your passions.

The important word in verse five is "not." The Spirit-controlled life is preferable, "not" the life of slavery to your fleshly passions.

This is where the idea of abounding in abstinence is so important. Christians are being subtly influenced by the world to believe that moderate immorality is not harmful. Without sounding prudish or Puritanical, let me just ask this question: Are the ideas and images in the media more or less permissive, promiscuous, and pornographic than they were just a few years ago? Of course they are worse. In many cases we have lowered our standards to accommodate them. We are still way more moral than the pagans; but we might be giving-way to lusts that will enslave us to our passions.

The word is "not." The Holy Spirit influences you to maintain your high standard, which is to *abstain*.

By the influence of the indwelling Spirit you are mindful of the bodies of others:

1 Thessalonians 4:6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.

Your Bible might use the word "transgress" instead of "take advantage of." The idea here is that you should never step over the biblical line into immorality because, when you do, your sin always takes advantage of someone else.

"Take advantage" is further explained by the word "defraud." "Defraud" means to selfishly and greedily take something for personal gain and personal pleasure at the expense of someone else. Whenever you seek to satisfy your passion of lust or gain sexual pleasure outside of the sanctity of marriage you defraud someone else. You rob them of their virginity; of their virtue... You destroy families... All for a moment's physical pleasure.

"The Lord is the avenger of all such." Jesus considered this subject of taking advantage of others so seriously that He once warned that it would be better for you to have a one-hundred pound millstone tied around your neck to drown you in the depth of the sea than to stumble someone else.

The Holy Spirit influences you to be mindful of others – especially in the area of sexual immorality. **All** permissive, promiscuous, pornographic sexual acts and images defraud others. It doesn't matter that the other people seem to be willing participants who have posed or who are prostituting themselves; you still defraud them.

Paul summarized his thoughts in verses seven and eight:

1 Thessalonians 4:7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.

If you are a Christian, God first "call[ed]" you to salvation. Radical and remarkable changes took place in your life as you received His Holy Spirit and were born-again. "Uncleanness," or *impurity*, was

overcome by His power and you began to walk in "holiness." You were set-apart by God and for God. Your life had purpose and direction for time and eternity. Immorality defeats your witness and effectiveness on earth; it will cost you at the Reward Seat of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:8 Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

The concepts and commandments about purity are not simply the words of a "man" like the apostle Paul. They are the very Word of God. If you "reject" biblical morality you are therefore rejecting God.

What does it mean to "reject... God?" The phrase is qualified by the words, "Who has also given us His Spirit." God supplies not only the desire to live a life of purity, but the power to accomplish it. His indwelling presence puts an end to the notion that you cannot resist sexual temptation. To go on living immorally is to insult the Giver and the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

God "**has** given us His Holy Spirit." Spirit-control is possible as you yield to His influence.

Conclusion

An illustration might be of some help. Greek mythology tells of the sirens. The sirens were beautiful creatures, part human, part bird, whose songs were so wonderful that anyone who heard them became enchanted. They lived on an island and would sing out to passing ships. The sailors who heard the siren's song would turn their ships toward the singing and die as they were dashed upon the rocks surrounding the island.

Ulysses wanted to hear their song and live. He had a plan. He ordered his men to bind him firmly to the mast of the ship, then plug their ears with wax. As they sailed by the island, Ulysses heard the siren's song. Driven nearly mad, he yelled-out for his men to turn the ship; but they could not hear him and, so, he heard the song and lived.

On another occasion, on another ship, was Orpheus. He was the greatest of all musicians. As the ship passed the island, the siren's sang-out. The sailors turned towards their song and certain destruction. Orpheus got out his flute and began to play. His song was more beautiful by far than that of the sirens. The sailors forgot their madness and returned to their course.

We still sometimes call immoral women "sirens." The world around us is like a constant siren's song. A lot of believers still want to hear it. Like Ulysses, they bind themselves to some mast through rules and regulations that are supposed to give them self-control.

Instead you ought to hear the song of your Savior. It is far more beautiful than that of the world. It is not binding; it is a blessing and it will keep you on your course.