

Whose We Are
Part 11: Identity and Purity
I Thessalonians 4.3-7 and selected verses

November 5, 2023

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Last week we explored the theme of authority. After the weightiness of last Sunday's message I thought we'd lighten things up a bit. So today we're going to talk about lust, sex, and the sexualization of our culture. Let's see if we can't flesh that out a bit.

We're in a sermon series on a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a church that he established in the port city of Thessalonica in northern Greece in about 50AD.

Last Sunday we discovered that Paul has a lot to say in this letter about the theme of identity. We talked last week about what he had to say about identity and authority. This week we'll explore what he has to say about identity, authority, and purity.

Let's go back just for a moment and review some of what we covered last week. We're just going to be walking through the first ten verses of chapter 4 in I Thessalonians this morning, so feel free to open your phone there or find a pew bible and turn there.

1 Thessalonians 4.1-2

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

Remember last week we said our **identity** is the answer to the question: what defines me? what makes me me?

For the world that lives around us, that doesn't put God in the picture, the answer that question is . . . me. My appearance, my feelings, my abilities, my preferences, my leanings. That's what makes me me.

For the follower of Christ, the starting point is different. What defines me, what makes me me, is not anything about me. What defines me is the God who created me. You can't understand my identity without him in the picture, because I belong to him. That's what defines me. I am his.

Then we talked about **authority**.

Our authority is the place you turn for the final answers to the questions you have. Your authority is whatever gives your life its shape and purpose, whoever gets the last word.

Again, for the people who live around us who don't have a place for God in their lives, the answer to the question of authority is themselves. Whatever other influences there may be in my life, when it comes down to it, I have the final say. I call the shots. I decide what's right and what's best.

But the follower of Christ, as Paul says in verse two, is submitted to *the authority of the Lord Jesus*. He's the one who has the last word.

And I think this is worth noticing. In verse one Paul says the instructions he gave them were about "how to live in order to please God." In verse two he says the instructions he gave them came with "the authority of our Lord Jesus." That means the living a life that pleases God and living a life under the authority of Jesus are one and the same.

Remember how the surrounding culture described Paul and his companions when they began to teach their message? The surrounding culture began to push back because . .

Acts 17.6-7

These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. . . .
They profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus.

Right there you have the whole book of I Thessalonians, and really the whole New Testament, in miniature:

give your allegiance to Jesus as king and he will turn your world upside down.

But if your life was already upside down when he got hold of it, if everything in your life was the wrong way around, and you were the king, and God was the subject, then when he turned it upside down, that means he really turned it right side up.

A life lived under the authority of Jesus is upside down according to the world around us. It's all wrong from their perspective. It's backwards. It's small minded. It's restrictive.

But it's right side up from God's perspective. It's exactly how he intended things to be from the start.

The one who created me defines me. I belong to him. And he knows the best way for me to live my life.

I have given my allegiance to Jesus as King. I belong to Him. So He has the last word in my life.

As the psalmist says:

Psalm 119.71

You made me; you created me.
Now give me the sense to follow your commands.

That's the way God intends for every part of our lives to work: our relationships, our work, our family life, the way we use our money, and so on.

But following Paul's lead in his letter to the Thessalonians, today we ask: How does God intend for our identity and his authority to play out when it comes to our sexual desires and preferences?

You don't need me to tell you that we live in a sexualized culture with a remarkable amount of license when it comes to how sexual desires play out.

It may come as a surprise to learn that Thessalonica was every bit as bad, and maybe even worse – although they didn't have to deal with the added complications of social media and artificial intelligence.

First, there was a huge *preoccupation* with sex in Thessalonica.

There were dozens of religions represented in the city, each worshiping different gods and goddesses. Many of them focused on sex.

Aphrodite, the goddess of sex and fertility, was worshiped by having sex with temple prostitutes. Her popularity is obvious from how many household goddesses have been found in the local cemetery.

Temple prostitution was also an important part of worship in the cult of Dionysus, Osiris and Isis, Cabirus, and Priapas.

And as part of their worship life, worshipers of Aphrodite, Cabirus, and Dionysus all paraded through the city carrying or wearing phalluses made of leather, and singing erotic hymns in celebration of sex, the sex organs, and the gods and goddesses of sex.

But not only was there sexual preoccupation. There was sexual *profligacy*. Almost every sort of sexual activity was considered acceptable in ancient Thessalonica.

The cults of Dionysus, Aphrodite, Osiris and Isis, Cabirus, and Priapas all promoted sexual freedom.

According to Cicero, it was socially acceptable for young men to have sex before marriage in Thessalonica,

We're also told that prostitution was common, as was having a mistresses. It was also considered acceptable for slave owners to use their slaves, male or female, for sexual pleasure.

And homosexual sex, including sex between a man and underage males, was common and considered acceptable as well.

Given how sexualized the culture was, and how much license there was to give expression to sexual desire, Paul takes the time to spell out for the new believers in Thessalonica what it would look like to live as God's people under God's authority when it comes to their sexual desires.

1 Thessalonians 4.3-6

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

He starts in verse 3 by saying "it is God's will that."

Let's not race past that. You remember in verse 1 Paul says "we instructed you how to live in order to please God." Here he picks that theme back up.

Paul knew that in the Hebrew Scriptures, the phrase "the will of God" and "the pleasure of God" were used interchangeably.

You've been living a life that pleases God in other parts of your life. Let's talk about how to do that when it comes to the sexual dimension of your life.

So think about this. I think this is fascinating. Paul begins a section on sex by talking about *God's* pleasure.

Most sexual expression is focused on the individual's pleasure. For the Christian, our first concern is with God's pleasure, with what his desires are.

According to Paul, there are four related dimensions to God's desire for how we handle our sexual desires.

First, in verse 3, Paul says:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified.

The word sanctify means "to make holy."

Holiness is a key idea for Paul in this letter. He uses the word “holy” eight times in five chapters.

As we said a few weeks ago, the first idea behind this word is about being moral. It is about belonging to God. It means set apart. And there are two parts to that.

A holy person is set apart as one who *belongs* to God.

And a holy person is set apart as one who *resembles* God, who is marked by personal holiness.

Being holy means we refuse to pattern our lives after the world around us, and we insist on patterning our lives after Jesus instead.

Remember in **I Thessalonians 1.6** Paul commends the Thessalonians because they “became imitators of the Lord.”

Think of the ways Jesus honored the men and women God placed around him: loving them, showing them affection, but always seeing them with reference to what pleased the Father rather than what would please himself.

Second, also in verse 3, Paul says

It is God’s will . . . that you should avoid sexual immorality;

Brently shared with me a definition of sexual immorality that perfectly captures the heart of its meaning. Sexual immorality is any way you seek sexual gratification outside of marriage, and marriage as God defines it is always between a man and a woman.

God is not against sexual gratification. He invented sex, he made it enjoyable, and he gave it to us as a gift . . . within marriage.

And because it is so sacred within a marriage, God is against sex that happens outside of the context he intended it for. And part of honoring God’s authority is believing that God knows what’s best for us.

Third, in verses 4 and 5, Paul says,

It is God’s will . . . 4 that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;

Several things to notice here.

First, Paul sets up a contrast. He says that those who know God and have placed themselves under his loving rule learn how to master their desires and control their bodies in a way that is holy and honorable.

Holy, as we've already said, means set apart as one who *belongs* to God, and set apart as one who *resembles* God.

Honorable means revering God and respecting the men and women that God places around us.

He says, on the other hand, those who don't know God, those who are their own masters, are controlled by their desires rather than the other way around.

Three things that may be on your mind at this point.

One is that some of you have Bibles that tell you that an alternative translation of this verse says "learn to acquire a wife" instead of "learn to control your body." While it's true that that's a way the words could be interpreted, it's clear that's not what Paul is saying. He doesn't believe that men are incapable of controlling their sexual desire, and he doesn't believe women exist only to satisfy a husband's desire.

Here's a second thing that might be coming to mind. One of the things we hear often from those who want have a place for God in their lives but who don't want to set aside their desires or preferences is that God would never give us a desire and then tell us it wasn't his will to fulfill that desire.

But think how silly that is. I have desires that I have to say no to *all the time*. I'd like to stay up till two in the morning reading every night. I'd like to see if my car could get up to 120 miles an hour on the highway. I'd like to eat three helpings of desert every night. I'd like to give in to my exasperation and give a little bumper bump to the dozens of Left Lane Louies who seem to love to drive forty three miles an hour in the left lanes of the Indiana interstate. I'd like to skip work and go spend a day in Chicago, or a week in London, or a summer in New Zealand.

I could go on and on. Desires and preferences are utterly unreliable indicators of how we should live our lives.

And God is not unloving or inconsistent if he calls us to live in ways that don't give free rein to our desires or preferences.

Something matters more to us than our pleasure. *His* pleasure.

I know hundreds of men and women in this church family who are married and who, though they may be sexually attracted to others outside their marriage, are faithful to keep their husband or wife as the one object of their physical desire.

I know dozens of men and women in this church family who are single and who, though they may be sexually attracted to others, are honoring the limits that God has established on their sexual gratification.

I know several individuals in this church family whose physical attraction is more to others of the same sex than it is to the opposite sex. Two men specifically come to mind, both of whom I feel like I'm blessed to know pretty well. One is happily married, and has children, and is living a life of amazing joy and faithfulness within God's boundaries in that way. Another chose to remain single, and celibate, and is courageously honoring God by acknowledging his limits in that way.

Because they don't know God, nonChristians, in obedience to their desires and preferences, and to please themselves, do what their bodies tell them.

Because they do know him, Christians, in obedience to God, and to please him, tell their bodies what to do.

Here's another thing you might be thinking about. Christians hear often: You Christians are so prudish and narrow minded and judgmental and hateful when it comes to sexuality. Which is based on the assumption that our sexual mores are based on *our* desires and preferences. That we're living the sort of lives that our desires are telling us to live.

Actually, no. Our sexual convictions are not a matter of our preference or our desire. And there isn't one of us who is a follower of Jesus who thinks we are free to do whatever our desires or preferences tell us to do.

The decisions we make in the sexual realm are a response to the king who created us and redeemed us and ruled over us. This is what he asks, and as he is the king to whom we've given our allegiance, as he is our final authority, what he says goes for us.

And here's the fourth way we can please God in our sexual expression.

In verse 6 Paul says

It is God's will . . . that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

We "wrong" a brother or sister when we cross a line with them, when we allow a sexual dimension to enter into a family relationship.

And we "take advantage" of a brother or sister when we turn the relationship on its head, and instead of seeking to honor the other and put their needs first, we seek to fulfill our desires through them.

I was struck by this line from Wallace Stegner's novel *The Angle of Repose*, in which the narrator, talking about how a surgeon had an affair with a patient, describes the subtle way a relationship can flip around, and touch can go from a way of showing love to a way of gratifying desire, and turned from selfless to selfish ends.

Hands laid on . . . shoulders in a gesture of comfort that lied like a thief, that took, not gave, that wanted, not offered. (562)

Mistreating a brother or sister, using them for our own gratification, is serious business for God. That leads to the next section.

1 Thessalonians 4.6-8

The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

Paul warns the Thessalonians in the second half of verse 6

The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before.

There is such beautiful power in these words, because they literally say that God will avenge our sin as an advocate. This isn't saying that God is harsh and unforgiving. It is saying he is sternly protective of those who are wronged.

Our society likes to paint sex as a pleasure with no victims. Let people do what they want in the privacy of their own bedrooms, they say. They're not hurting anyone.

They couldn't be more wrong. There are more deeply wounded hearts from sexual mistreatment than perhaps any other sort of wrong.

This past week Sharon and I were in a store and began a conversation with a sales person there. Within a few minutes he was telling us his story of being abused by a leader when he was a boy scout. When he was in his twenties he came to Christ and has experienced considerable healing, but there were still tears in his eyes as he described something that happened to him fifty years ago, and the ripples of that experience in all his relationships since.

But God is the advocate and the defender of the victim of sexual mistreatment.

In his wonderful book *A Gentle Answer*, Scott Sauls describes the avenging, advocating heart of God on behalf of those who have been wronged when he says,

The prophetic voice comes from a righteous, Holy-Spirit-filled anger that causes Christ's ambassadors to rise up in the name of love and say, "No more!" (xix)

What no one else saw or knows about, he sees and cares about. God sees what was done to us, and by his spirit he can heal the victim of sexual mistreatment and abuse.

As it says in Psalm 34.18

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

And if we are the ones who have wronged someone else, but this doesn't mean that our sexual sin can't be forgiven. It can. If we put our trust in Jesus and look to him for forgiveness, then we can be freed of the guilt and shame of our wrongdoing.

As it says in I John 1.9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Is there sexual mistreatment in your life for which you need healing?
Is there sexual sin in your life for which you need forgiveness?

If your answer to either of those questions is yes, I urge you to be in touch with us so we can help you get the counsel and spiritual encouragement you need.

In verses 7 and 8 Paul circles back and restates earlier themes.
God calls us to live holy lives, lives that are distinctive from the surrounding world.

7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

And when we reject God's design for our sexual expression, we aren't just breaking human rules, we are rejecting divine authority – the authority of the very one who has planted his living spirit within us, and who is at work in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure. (Philippians 2.13)

8 Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, when we give in, when we give our lives over to God, when we surrender to his loving rule, than we set that Spirit loose in us, and open ourselves to his bringing about inside of us a change we are incapable of bringing about in ourselves.

In the end, that is our only hope in this area of our lives: for God to transform our lust into love, and our weakness into strength.

CS Lewis, in his imaginative book *The Great Divorce*, conjectures what it could be like when human beings are brought face to face with the transforming power and glory of God at the close of the age.

In one of the most poignant moments in the book, a man appears who has something on his shoulder. As he gets closer the narrator sees what it is.

What sat on his shoulder was a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience, "Shut up, I tell you!" he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. [Soon the man] ceased snarling and presently began to smile.

The reptile, as you come to realize, represents this man's sexual desire and lusts.

An angel approaches the man.

Would you like me to make him quiet?

The man hems, haws, waffles, agrees, then backpedals. Finally he gives in.

I know it will kill me.

It won't. But supposing it did?

You're right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.

In the next moment the angel grabs the lizard, breaks its back, and throws it to the ground.

Then, in an instant, the man is transformed into a glorious new man: glowing, powerful, free. But the narrator is distracted from watching the transformation take place.

What distracted me was the fact that at the same moment something seemed to be happening to the Lizard. At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. . . .

Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes. What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold. It was smooth and shining, rippled with swells of flesh and muscle, whinnying and stamping with its hoofs. At each stamp the land shook and the trees [vibrated].

The new-made man turned and clapped the horse's neck. It nosed his bright body. Horse and master breathed each into the other's nostrils.

In joyous haste, the young man leaped upon the horse's back. Turning in his seat he waved a farewell, then nudged the stallions with his heels. They were off before I well knew what was happening. There was riding if you like! (98-103)

That sets us up well for Paul's closing thought – which is really the thought he's been driving toward all along.

1 Thessalonians 4.9-10

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more,

And now we come, practically speaking, to the heart of Paul's sexual ethics.

This word Paul uses here for "love for one another" is the Greek word *philadelphia*, which means loving affection for your brothers and sisters. And the word for "loving each other" is *agape*, which, as you know, always means sacrificial love, love that puts the other person first at cost to yourself.

This is the third time in nine verses that Paul makes a point to remind his fellow followers of Jesus that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. When God is our father, we are all part of the same church family, and each member of the body of Christ is my sister or my brother.

It's not a coincidence that Paul repeats this idea so often in this section on sex.

It turns out that the antidote to lust is love.

When we consciously think of each other as family, as siblings – you are my sister, you are my brother – it is so much harder to diminish each other into something less than human, into objects of our gratification.

The way to sexual purity is not through negation. Trying not to lust is ultimately a fruitless exercise, and it often makes things worse.

The way to sexual purity is through brotherly and sisterly affection.

Desire the best for the person you are with as you would for your sister or brother.

See them as a whole person and not just as a body, just as you would your sister or brother.

And if you fall prey to temptation and look at an image on the screen, let your first thought be – this is someone's daughter, this is someone's sister. How would I treat this person if she were my sister?

When it comes to sex, our world says we should be free to do whatever we want to.

Do you want the freedom to do whatever you want? Great! God wants us to have that freedom too.

Here's how. In his sermon on I John 4, Augustine writes this:

I give you this one short command: love, and do what you will. . . .

Let the root of love be in you: nothing can spring from it but good.
(from Sermon 110 on I John 4.4-12)

At the end of his letter to the Thessalonians Paul gives one last word of encouragement in this regard. When you see each other, how should you act?

He writes:

I Thessalonians 5.26

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

Family Photo



Paul wants us to see each other as family members. And to relate to one another with a holy affection.

According to Alan Kreider, in his study of the early church, this holy kiss, which came to be known as the kiss of peace, took place just after the pastoral prayer and just before the church shared communion together. Men kissed men, women kissed women.

In Greco-Roman society, there was one place where people kissed, outside of romantic kisses. In the family. Christians were a new family of brothers and sisters. It expressed their affection for one another and gave expression to their unity. Sometimes they failed one another. The kiss each time they met was a commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation, to working things out in the family of faith.

Paul calls us as sisters and brothers to be open in our fondness for one another, free in our enjoyment of each another, but with holy hearts, hearts that give, not take, hearts that honor, not use, hearts shaped not by our desire but by the other person's need, seeking their best. Hearts of love. May God make it so.

Closing Song: More Like Jesus

Here at Your feet my desires and dreams, I lay down
Oh Lord, change me like only You can

Benediction

Taken from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12:

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.
May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others grow and overflow.

With holy affection, in a way that honors them, enjoys them, desires their best, without in any way using them to meet your own needs

You can tell from who's missing in the picture that I pulled this out of my family file from several years back.

What you see is affection, enjoyment of one another, play, affection, freedom

Open and loving affection for beloved family members that honor them and honor God – that gives, not takes.

We are family. We'll come back to that in two weeks.

Flash family photo the week after next

1. we belong to him, he is the final authority 4.1-2
2. we don't belong to the world, the way we live will be distinctive 5.5-6
3. we are called to live lives that reflect his authority, that he is king 4.2
4. so we live not moral lives but yielded lives, we are trying to be submitted, not to be good
5. God doesn't just tells us the negative, he invites us into the positive
6. our moral standard is to become like Jesus
 - Accept, love, forgive, face persecution, as Jesus did
 - I Jn 2.6

Rather than diminishing each other, rather than using each other, we see each other as brothers and sisters and love each other

The sexual climate in Thessalonica

The sexual climate today

The reason porn is wrong is because it violates love of God and others

Same reason sex outside of marriage is wrong

Same reason gender shifting is wrong, and homosexual sex is wrong

A sex life lived under the authority of God means it is seen from his perspective and lived out within his boundaries

We don't take decisions out of God's hands and put them in our own

Gender, limits to sexual expression, etc.

5.5 children of the light and of the day (children)

We belong to the day 5.8

Theme of separation

1.9, 4.5, 7, 12, 12, 5.5

And belonging

1.4, 2.12, 5.5

Purity

May he strengthen your hearts to make you blameless and holy in his presence 3.13

God's will that you should

be sanctified 4.2

and avoid sexual immorality 4.3

learn to control your body 4.4

in holy and honorable way 4.4

not in passionate lust like the pagans who don't know God 4.5

Don't take advantage of brother or sister 4.6

God did not call us to be impure but to lead holy lives 4.7

If you reject this instruction you reject God 4.8

May God himself sanctify you 5.23

Your whole being, mind and body blameless – he will do it 5.24

Conformity (Holiness)

We were holy, righteous, blameless 2.10

May he strengthen your hearts to make you blameless and holy in his presence 3.13

May your whole spirit be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord 5.23

Test everything. Hold onto the good. Avoid every kind of evil. 5.21-22

Theme of separation

1.9

4.5

4.7

4.12

4.13

5.5

5.22 avoid every kind of evil

And belonging

1.4

2.12

5.5

Not like

Not like the pagans who don't know God 4.5

Not like others who are asleep and belong to the night 5.5-8

Like

Imitators of us 1.6

You know how holy and blameless we were 2.10

Imitators of Christ 1.6

Imitators of God's churches 2.14

Now others are imitating you, you are a model/example to others 1.7

Rule versus rules