Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

A recent survey by the Pew Research organization revealed that more than half of those who identified as Christians think that casual sex, which is sex between consenting adults who are not in a committed relationship, is fine. And the numbers of self-identifying Christians who thought that sex within a committed relationship *that is not marriage* is fine was even higher.

And we all know what happened to Israel Folau when he quoted what the Bible says about homosexuality. And more and more churches around the world today are adopting the position that God is OK with homosexuality.

And then there is the problem of pornography, which, according to experts, is at pandemic proportions, not only out there, but also in here. And we could also throw into the pot the misuse of sex, even within marriage, when it is used selfishly instead of selflessly.

But we can look at all of this from the other side of the mirror also. Sex is a wonderful, delightful gift of God. It was obviously given for the purpose of procreation, but it is clear from places in the Bible, like Song of Songs, that it is meant to be enjoyable and satisfying and marriage-relationship enhancing. So, we could ask, why is it an area where there is so much potential for dysfunction, misuse, and abuse? Why is so much space in the Bible devoted to warnings about sexual immorality? And putting it in a more personal way: in a recent online question and answer session about the Christian view of sexuality and gender identity, the first question was: Why are we so negatively tempted by sexual desire if sexuality is God given and purposeful?

Well, let’s consider these sorts of matters as we turn our attention to this passage in 1 Thessalonians 4.

In terms of the context, in **chapter 3:6**, you will see that Timothy had delivered a report to Paul about the situation in Thessalonica. And the opening words of chapter 4 reveal that sexual immorality was still a big problem in the church there. **Verse 2** reveals that when Paul and his companions had been in Thessalonica, they had given the Thessalonians “instructions” about sexual immorality, because they had been converted from a sexually immoral culture. But we see in **verse 1** that although they had made some progress in this, there was still room for growth.

So, right of the bat, we see that God wants His people to grow in sanctification or holy living or godly obedience. As **verse 3** says: “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification.*” And **verse** 7 says that “*God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness*.” And **verse 1** adds that when we believers try and live according to His commands, this pleases God.

So, we have every reason to want to know God’s will regarding sexual purity. We also live in a sexually immoral culture, and we should be eager to increasingly live according to God’s commands in this and every area of life. So, may the Lord convict us where conviction is needed, and instruct us where instruction is needed, and provide us with hope and encouragement where hope and encouragement are needed.

So, in our text, **Our Holy God Calls Believers to a Life of Sexual Holiness**. And Paul lays this out by declaring **what God forbids** and **what God requires**.

1. So, firstly then, let’s look at **what God forbids**. And we see this introduced with the command of **verse 3**: “*That you abstain from sexual immorality*.” In other words, as a follower of Christ, if it is any form of sexual immorality, have nothing to do with it!
   1. And this begs an obvious and very important question, doesn’t it: What *is* sexual immorality? Who gets to decide what is immoral and what is moral? Or what is impure and what is pure? It wasn’t that long ago that most everyone viewed homosexuality as unnatural. And no one had even heard of transgenderism. And people commonly spoke of couples who were not married but living and sleeping together as ‘living in sin.’ But we have seen changes in legislation and changes in society’s attitudes. So, can something be sexually immoral one day but not the next because **the government** legalizes it?
      1. Well, the first part of verse 3 mentions “*the will of God*.” And verse 2 talks about the instructions that Paul gave the Thessalonians “*through the Lord Jesus*.” And look at verse 5: What is the reason why the Gentiles are sexually immoral? They “*do not know God*.” So, the answer to the question: Who gets to decide what is sexually immoral is? God. We do not look for answers about what is sexually immoral from the world, we look to the Bible. We look to the Word of the one who Created us, to discover His unchanging standard of morality.
      2. And this is exactly what the Bible says: Listen to **Romans 12:2**: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*.” So, our goal is not to behave and think and talk like the world, but to behave and think and talk according to the commands of God, or, to put it another way, to become more and more like Jesus. And this includes the area of sexual purity.
   2. As we said earlier, these Thessalonians had been converted from a sexually immoral culture. The phrase in **verse 5**, “*passion of lust*,” suggests that very little was out of bounds in those times; people gave in to any and every lustful urge that they had. But if you look also at **verse 6**, where it says, let “*no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter*,” we can infer that church members had previously engaged in sexual activity with the wives and daughters of other church members, and that this sexual attraction and activity was still a problem in the church. And Paul was saying, This has to stop!
   3. But that was **not the only sexual immorality in view**. The Greek word that Paul uses is a broad and inclusive term that takes in the whole range of sexual aberrations. So, the key point is that the Christian life is to be marked by a radical restraint and purity in the sexual realm. So, let’s get down to brass tacks – what are things does God define as sexual immorality?
      1. A general definition – any sexual activity outside of marriage.
      2. More specifically, sex *before* marriage and adultery is forbidden. And a husband and wife may not involve anyone else in their sexual relationship. So, no polyamoury or polygamy or orgies.
      3. And sexual activity involving a man and a man or a woman and a woman is forbidden. And because of the times we live in and what I said earlier about more and more churches now saying that God has no problem with same-sex activity, I want you to hear what the Bible says about homosexuality so that you can see that God clearly forbids same-sex sex.
         1. **Genesis 19** – Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot hosted two angels. And it is clear that they appeared in the form of men, because during the night, the men of Sodom came to Lot’s house and said, “*Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may have sex with them*.” And the angels said to Lot and his family, Leave this city because “*we are about to destroy [it], because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it*.” And the Lord rained down fire and brimstone and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.
            1. Now, those who are trying to defend homosexuality point to a verse in **Ezekiel 16**, which describes the sin of Sodom as “*pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy*.” And they say, See! It doesn’t even mention homosexuality! But the very next verse in Ezekiel says that the people of Sodom “*were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it*.”
            2. And in **Jude 1:7** it says, “*Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire*.”
            3. Some-sex sex was most *definitely* one of the reasons why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.
         2. And we read **Leviticus 20:13** earlier. **Leviticus 18:22** says the same thing: “*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination*.”
         3. **Romans 1:26-27** says this of unbelieving societies, “*For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error*.”
            1. So, there same-sex sex is described as unnatural and a sign of God’s judgment on a society that has rejected Him.
         4. **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** says, “*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God*.”
            1. Now, the catch-cry of today is “born this way.” I cannot help this; it is who I am. But having given this list of sins, **1 Corinthians 6:11** continues, “*And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*.” So, there were Corinthian believers who once practiced homosexuality, or who were drunks or thieves, but now were not. In Christ, sin can be left behind.
            2. And although the world refuses to accept that such a thing is possible, you will find many testimonies of Christians, like Christopher Yuan and Rosaria Butterfield and Rachel Gilson, who once were homosexual/lesbian but now are not, on places like YouTube.
         5. **1 Timothy 1:9-10**, “*The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine*.”
         6. So, the Bible is very plain: God forbids same-sex sex. It is an unnatural abomination.
      4. And similarly, the Bible is clear that there is to be no bestiality, no paedophilia, no incest, and no prostitution.
      5. And there is to be no looking at pornography. No masturbation or self-pleasure. No sexting.
      6. Ephesians 5:4 even forbids dirty jokes.
      7. The Catechism says, “God condemns *all* unchastity. We should therefore thoroughly detest it and, married or single, live decent and chaste lives.”
   4. And brothers and sisters, we have every motivation to “*abstain from sexual immorality*.”
      1. From **verse 1**, when we strive to obey God, it *really* *and truly* pleases Him!
      2. From **verse 3**, we see that sexual immorality is contrary to God’s will.
      3. But look also at **verses 6**: “*because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you*.” In Old Testament Israel, a family avenger was allowed to deliver justice on the sexual offender. But Paul tells New Testament believers that the Lord is our avenger. He sees what is done in secret and He will deliver justice on behalf of those who are sinned against.
      4. And in **verse 8**: “*Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you*.” This is not just Paul’s opinion, which we are free to accept or reject; this is the command of God!
      5. But alongside all of these other motivations, Paul introduced this command in verse 1 with, “*We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus*,” and in verse 2 he refers to “*the instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus*.” At the centre of this command is the fact that Jesus died on the cross and rose again for the forgiveness of all our sins, including those against the 7th Commandment. Earlier we all said, “I am not my own, but belong, body and soul … to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.” Your body belongs to your Saviour; it is to be used for His service, according to His commands, for the glory of God. And He “fully paid for all your sins and set you free from the tyranny of the devil.” So, looking to Him, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can abstain from sexual immorality.
2. And we learn more about how we do this this as we turn our attention, secondly, and more briefly, to **what God requires**. And we see this in **verse 4**: “…*that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour*.”
   1. And the first thing we have to look at is **a translation issue**, which you will see in the marginal note attached to this verse. The literal translation of the Greek of the last part of this verse is ‘*How to possess his own vessel*.’ And the Greek word translated as ‘his own body’ or ‘vessel’ is also translated as “*wife*” in **1 Peter 3:7**, for example. And that is why your ESV marginal note says that this phrase could also be translated as “*How to take a wife for himself*.” The NIV marginal note says it could either be “*each of you should learn to live with his own wife; or learn to acquire a wife.”*
      1. And let me very quickly add that both women *and men* are referred to in Scriptures as vessels. It is in no way a derogatory term.
      2. But the key point is that there are **two possibilities** **here**: Paul is either saying that instead of sexual immorality, we are to be committed to sexual self-control or he is saying instead of sexual immorality, we are to understand that the right place for enjoying sexual intimacy is within marriage.
         1. So, what are the rules for Bible study?
            1. Rule number 1 – **Look at the** **context**. And we said earlier that **verses 5 and 6** are a warning against sexual relations outside of marriage. So that would support the idea that verse 4 is about marriage being the right place for sexual intimacy to be enjoyed interpretation.
            2. Rule number 2 – **Let the plain explain the less plain**. And in **1 Corinthians 7:2**, where Paul is dealing with the same subject, he very plainly says, “*But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband*.” So that verse would also support the idea that verse 4 is about marriage being the right place for sexual intimacy to be enjoyed interpretation.
   2. But congregation, in many ways, we don’t have to choose between the two because when you take these words with what other Bible passages teach about sex, both options essentially say the same thing. God’s expectation of every one of us is to pursue self-control in all areas of life, including sex, even if we never marry. We are not to be like the world that follows the “*passion of lust*” and does what it wants with whomever or whatever it wants. But we were created with sexual desire. And that, in and of itself, is not a *bad* thing but a *good* thing! And this is not the only purpose of marriage, but as part of living in a fallen world, marriage is God’s remedy for sexual immorality. We can enjoy the sexual desires that God has given us within marriage.
      1. You cannot read Song of Songs and fail to hear how hungrily and delightfully this bride and groom express their sexuality and celebrate their sexual relationship. You know the passages that you giggled at when they were read around the table or in church! They delight in each other’s bodies!
      2. A modern English Bible version expresses **1 Corinthians 7:3** like this: “*The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's need*s.” So, the Bible recognizes and celebrates our sexual desires. And let me just point out here that it does this *for both husband and wife*! In fact, Paul goes on, in the next verse, to say, “*The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does*.” Did you catch that? Husband, you have authority over your wife’s body, and she has authority over your body!
      3. And this is why I mentioned the misuse of sex, even within marriage, at the beginning of the sermon. Part of God’s design for marriage is that it is a remedy for sexual immorality. And that will be strengthened as he makes the goal of their intimacy her needs and she makes the goal of their intimacy his needs. That is God’s design for marriage.

* 1. So, as we draw to a close, one implication, a declaration, and then the cross of Christ!
     1. So, first, an **implication**. And I realize there are all sorts of complexities and realities to this matter, but let me ask you this: In light of what we have seen, do you think that the trend in the world to put off even considering marriage until late 20’s or early 30’s has decreased sexual immorality or increased it? It has increased it. And this is not to say that marrying at a younger age eliminates sexual immorality or is free of its own challenges; but, overall, the trend to delaying marriage does not come from the Bible. Basic biology and what the Bible holds before us about marriage should lead us to conclude that we ought not to imitate the world and swallow the world’s view that delaying marriage is a good thing.
     2. And secondly, a **declaration**. And you have heard me mention this a few times in recent months. When you discuss these topics with people, you will often hear them ask: *Why* does God forbid sex outside of marriage? *Why* does He forbid homosexuality? *What is wrong* if three people want to be together? If they agree to this, no one gets hurt and it is their business. And we might be able to come up with a survey or some statistics or reasons, which they will answer with their surveys, statistics, and reasons. So, a much better response is this declaration: We do not need to understand the reasons for God’s laws, we just need to trust that He is a good God and that His laws are good and that they are for our good. Do you see how that changes the whole discussion? The focus now is not the law but the Lawgiver. And I learned this from Rachel Gilson, who converted to Christianity from atheism and left lesbianism. She could not see what was so bad about lesbianism. But in the end, she chose to trust that God is good, and His law is good and it is for our good. So let this be our declaration too.
     3. And this is why we end with **the cross of Christ**. I expect that probably all of us will look back at our lives, especially when we were young, and have a sense of shame about our sexual immorality. Well, let me encourage you with these words of the Psalmist from **Psalm 25:4**, “*Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD*.” And the Psalmist could pray that as he looked forward in faith to Messiah. For Jesus came “to save His people from their sins,” we are told in **Matthew 1:21**. And if you are sitting there, right now, with a sense of guilt, **1 John 1:9** says, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.” When Jesus came to earth, you will remember the time when the Pharisees brought to Him **a woman who had been caught in the very act explicitly forbidden in the 7th Commandment – adultery**. And in response to the Pharisees’ question about her sin being worthy of stoning, Jesus said, “*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her*.” And with guilty consciences, John tells us that one by one they turned and left. But you know, there was one person there that day who was worthy of throwing the first stone. There was one person there who was without sin. Jesus. He was pure in heart. He always kept the 7th commandment. But He did not throw a stone, did He. He did tell her to leave her life of sin. And that is the message of **1 Thessalonians 4:3-8**: “*Avoid sexual immorality*.” But Jesus also went to the cross to secure forgiveness for her sins and for ours. And so, as one commentator so beautifully expresses it, “From Mt Sinai He says, ‘You shall not commit adultery!’ But from Mt Calvary He says: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!’ And to all who put their trust in Him He says: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’” Amen.