White as snow

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Genesis 39:6b-18; Thessalonians 4:3-8

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 155, 101, 51b, 469

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD41 Q&A109)

Theme: The sexual purity of God’s people is part of His will for them.

Proposition: Sexual immorality is hugely damaging, but God provides the way of deliverance.

**Introduction**

The ermine (short-tailed weasel or stoat) lives in the forests of Northern Europe and Asia. Its snow-white winter fur coat is sought after by hunters. Historically the animal’s pelt was used to make robes for royalty. More importantly, for the purpose of this illustration, the ermine’s white coat provides excellent camouflage in the snowy winter landscape of the north.

Therefore, the wise ermine protects his or her coat from anything that would dirty it. Hunters take advantage of the ermine’s strong desire for a clean hide. They don’t use a snare to catch this stoat in winter, but instead find his home in the cleft of a rock or the hollow in an old tree. Having smeared the entrance of the ermine’s home with grime and filth they then set dogs loose to find and chase the ermine. The frightened animal flees towards his home, but will not enter because of the filthy grime. So he is trapped by the dogs with a clean hide outside the shelter of his home. The ermine values his purity of his coat which is white as snow.

As an implication of the 7th commandment “*You shall not commit adultery*” (Ex 20:14), the Heidelberg Catechism states: *“We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both* ***to be kept clean and holy****”* (HCLD41 A109).

Brothers and sisters, like the white coated ermine, we are to value and maintain our own purity. This 21st century western world is a cesspool of sexual fallout from a society awash with the contraceptive pill, pornography, abortion and the normalisation of pre-marital, extra-marital and same gender sexual activity. How can we keep our bodies and souls clean and holy – especially from the impurity of sexual immorality?

We find the answer in our text from 1 Thess 4:3-8 under two headings in this sermon:

1. Destruction from sexual immorality
2. Deliverance from sexual immorality
3. **Destruction from sexual immorality**

The World Health Organisation currently advises ‘maintaining social distancing’ to reduce the risk of contracting the Covid-19 virus. This means ‘*maintaining at least a 1-metre distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing*’. The Greek word translated ‘abstain’ in our text means to put a distance between yourself and a source of danger for your own spiritual safety. v3 *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification:that you abstain from sexual immorality”.* God’s will for us is to maintain a distance between ourselves and sexual immorality as part of our sanctification.

Sanctification is the ongoing process of increasingly dying to sin and becoming more and more like Christ, the perfect man, in character. As we progress in sanctification we become more and like God Himself who is pure and holy. Sexual immorality is impurity and is therefore against God’s will for His people who are called by Him to be “holy as I am holy” (Lev 11:44 also Eph 1:4; 1 Peter 1:15-16). God’s will is for His children to be made holy, set apart, sanctified.

The Greek word translated ‘sexual immorality’ in our text is the word ‘pornea’ from which we get the English word ‘pornography’. Pornea refers to sexual activity outside of marriage and includes not only pre-marital and extramarital sex, but also homosexuality and other distortions of God’s created order (Romans 1:24-27). Sexual immorality is like filth on the white winter coat of the ermine.

Now dirt and muck has its place; think of fertile soil with plenty of compost in the garden. However that same dirt, and rich compost inside the house on the lounge carpet is completely out of place. So it is with sexual activity which within the marriage between one man and one woman is clean and pure, but which is dirty and impure outside the marriage union between husband and wife. (Song of Solomon even describes physical intimacy within marriage in garden terms: “*cluster of henna blossoms, an apple tree, pomegranate halves, a locked garden with choicest fruits*”).

Physical relations between a man and his wife are pleasing to God because they fulfil His perfect design for marriage: ***“****Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous”* (Heb 13:4). Sexual activity in the right place is clean and holy.

Sexual immorality is by no means a new phenomenon of our age, as Scripture verifies. For example, the wicked lust of the men of Sodom (Genesis 19) and the adultery of King David with Uriah’s wife. Sexual immorality was rampant in the city where the Thessalonians, to whom Paul writes the letter from which our text is taken, lived. One historian has noted that: “*Greek cities like Thessalonica were wide open to all kinds of sexual looseness, including immorality associated with their pagan idol worship. Pagan religions did not demand sexual purity of their devotees, and their so-called gods and goddesses were themselves grossly immoral. These so-called gods were half human, half god, and as immoral as the hearts of the vain imaginings of the men who hatched them and gave them a license to act according to their lewd desires. There were even priestesses (little more than "religious" prostitutes) in the pagan temples who were to help the men who came to "worship" the immoral idols.”*

It is not therefore surprising that sexual immorality was a major problem for the church in Thessalonica, as it was in Corinth and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Back there and then maintaining sexual purity was not easy.

Just as sexual immorality was a problem in the Greco- Roman world so it is today. Sexual purity seen by many/most as outdated/irrelevant/perhaps even unattainable. Sexual activity outside marriage is deemed to be ok as long as it is ‘safe’ and consensual. The secular workplace is often an ‘open market’ for sexual liaisons. Cell phone apps. like Tinder facilitate ‘easy’ casual ‘hook-ups’. Sexual immorality is regularly portrayed in the movies, on T.V. and the Internet, but without the consequences being shown: guilt/shame/broken relationships, fractured families and separation from God.

These destructive aspects of sexual immorality are revealed in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians. Notice that the emphasis in our text is on preventing sin rather than rebuking the sinner. (It’s always more effective to have a fence at top of a dangerous cliff, rather than ambulance at the bottom).

As we’ve seen God’s perfect plan and purpose for us all is plain and clear: v3 *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification:that you abstain from sexual immorality”.* Sexual immorality breaks the seventh commandment. The destruction which results from sexual immorality is identified in this and the verses which follow:

1. It is against the revealed will of God and brings His judgement for He is ‘*an avenger in all these things*’ (v6). There is a principle of consequences which applies in life, Galatians 6:7-8a expresses it this way: “*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption*”. The ‘temporal’ judgement of God (that which can be experienced in this life) against the immoral is expressed in Romans 1:24 in these words: “*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves*”. Sexual immorality is destructive to the lives of those who sin in this way.
2. To have uncontrolled lust is to be like those: “*who do not know God*” (v5). For the Christian who falls into the sin of sexual immorality and is unrepentant there is a distancing in the relationship with our Heavenly Father. David expresses it this way in Psalm 32:3-4 **“***For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried upas by the heat of summer*”. The sin of sexual immorality by believers grieves the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (v8) Sexual immorality is destructive to a relationship with God.
3. Sexual immorality is also destructive to those in relationship with the sinner. In adultery an offending husband wrongs his wife and an offending wife her husband. The person with whom the adultery takes place is also damaged. This is summed up in the phrase ‘*transgress and wrong his brother*’ (v6). Viewing pornography is thought by some to be a ‘victimless’ sin, but the user damages him or herself – ‘*the sexually immoral person sins against his own body*’ (1 Cor 6:18). Also, behind the images are real people in the ‘porn industry’ who often suffer physical, emotional, relational and spiritual pain as a result of pretending to portray pleasurable sexual activity which is not in reality what it seems. Sexual immorality damages people.
4. Sexual immorality damages our spiritual health by impacting our sanctification. When we sin in this way, and in others, we do not “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). Instead we tend to regress and decline in spiritual vitality. We lose the joy of our salvation (Psalm 51:12).

Paul had a deep heartfelt love for the Thessalonians, amongst whom he, Silvanus and Timothy had been ‘*gentle’ ‘being affectionately desirous of you, being ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but our own selves, because you had become very deer to us*” (1:8). Out of love for these dear believers Paul writes about the hugely destructive effects of sexual immorality about which he had already in person ‘*told them beforehand and solemnly warned them*’ (v6).

Today, as God speaks through His word and as the Holy Spirit convicts hearts, we too are solemnly warned of the destructive effects of sexual immorality, not so that we come under God’s final avenging judgement when Christ returns, but so that we may find deliverance from this sin now. This brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Deliverance from sexual immorality**

The World Health Organisation and others have advised that one of the best ways to significantly reduce the risk of being infected with Covid-19 is to avoid touching your face with your hands. It sounds simple, but it’s very hard for most of us to do. It requires a high degree of self-control. Apparently, on average people touch their faces more than 20 times per hour; that’s a frequency of more than once every 3 minutes!

Changing any habit is difficult. Here are some suggestions on how to stop touching your face: Start being mindful when you do touch your face, catching yourself when — and, preferably, before — you do it; If you catch yourself before touching your face, consider folding your hands or doing something else with them; Got an itch? Try to ignore it. If that’s bothersome, wash your hands, then scratch it, then wash your hands again; Perhaps consider wearing gloves. The latest food safety gloves can also be used on smartphone screens, and gloves might make you more conscious about touching your face; don’t get discouraged if it seems hard to learn how to not touch your face!

Clearly, the Apostle Paul is not writing to the Thessalonians about avoiding face-touching with your hands, but about abstaining from sexual immorality. It is God’s will for us, brothers and sisters in Christ, to abstain from sexual immorality by knowing ‘*how to control our own bodies in holiness and honour*’. Self-control – a gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23) – is part of God’s gracious deliverance method from sexual immorality. Our text does not give practical instructions as to how to exercise this self-control, but here are some suggestions (many of which many of us will already be doing): avoid reading racy novels, watching T.V./DVDs /internet content which has sexual content. Employ accountability to help: e.g. computers in public areas, an accountability partner to whom you can confess sins and weaknesses.

Plan for ‘hedges’ to protect you from temptation: Be cautious about being alone with someone of a different gender behind a closed door or in a car. Be cautious about being alone with a personal computer in a private place. Remove any suggestive pictures from home e.g. junk mail images ***“****I will set no worthless thing before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not fasten its grip on me”* (Psalm 101:3).Avoid chat rooms, dating sites, and anyone who talks to you inappropriately about any sexual matter. To abstain from sexual immorality requires self-control in order to develop good patterns of behaviour which become healthy habits.

Here’s another way of hunting: not white-coated ermine, but wolves. First take some blood and pour it into a small bowl and then stick a sharp knife in the blood. Freeze the contents of the bowl then remove the lump of frozen blood and the knife. Now firmly wedge the handle of the knife on the outside of your cabin in the snow in a location where hungry wolves are known to prowl. Now wait. As the blood begins to melt, the wolf will smell it and come. As he starts to lick the frozen ball of blood his tongue will be cut by the blade of the knife but he will not realise this. The blood will continue to flow into his mouth in ever increasing quantities as his tongue is lacerated by the sharp blade. In his hungry frenzy he will keep licking that knife until he bleeds to death. If wolf had learnt to beware of this type of danger, he would never take that first lick.

Similarly once our sexual passions have been aroused, then illicit desire is fully formed, it is almost always too late. James describes it this way: “*But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death*” (James 1:14-15). So like a wise wolf who will not lick a ball of frozen blood, we need to be aware of the dangers of sexual immorality so that we don’t take that first step. This is part of knowing how to control our bodies in holiness and honour. Remember God’s word to Cain… “*sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it”* (Gen 4:7b).

Part of knowing how to control our body can be having a plan for action if we are tempted in circumstances we couldn’t see coming, or couldn’t avoid. Think of Joseph in Potiphar’s house when his master’s wife said, ‘lie with me’. He knew the danger and ran before he allowed his purity to be dirtied. A wise pastor once said you’ve heard about “safety in Numbers” well there’s ‘safety in Exodus’!

Paul offers that advice to the younger man Timothy: “*Now flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart”* (2 Tim 2:22). Paul writes to the Corinthians: **1 Cor 6:18** *“Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body”.* Then later in the same letter: “*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it*” (1 Cor 10:13).

But what about the person who, like a wolf with a mouth filled with his own blood has already lost their purity? Is there any deliverance from the sin of sexual immorality if we do not control our own bodies and do not flee - instead stumbling and falling? The glorious gospel answer is YES! The Lord who is an avenger of the destructive sin of sexual immorality and who is coming in glory to sit on his throne of judgement (Matt 25:31) is also the Lord who forgives.

If you have repented of the sin of sexual immorality (or any other sin) and you trust in Christ for forgiveness, then you should carry no guilt or shame. If your sin has affected others (which sexual sin generally does) then there is a need to go to them also and seek their forgiveness. If you have not as yet repented of your sin, then you must do so!

Deliverance from sexual immorality is possible in Christ. God gives His Holy Spirit so that through the power of the Word of God, He may convict many concerning sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8). Are you someone today who knows that you are guilty of sexual immorality?

Brothers and sisters, He has promised to wash us clean so that in Christ we will be perfectly clean and holy. God revealed the gospel through His prophet Isaiah long ago: "*Come now, let us reasontogether, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be* ***as white as snow****; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool*” (Isaiah 1:18).

The message of the gospel is that there is forgiveness in Christ from all sin, including sin against the seventh commandment so that we can then go and continue the battle against our old nature knowing that *God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.* (1 Thess 4:7).

AMEN