

Pleasing God With Your Body (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

Matthew Williams

Some people enjoy making decisions. Pick a situation. You love weighing the pros and cons, evaluating the various factors involved, and choosing the best course of action. You get a certain charge, a certain thrill, in checking off decisions one after the other, whether they concern your personal life, your family life, or your work life.

Some people hate making decisions. Pick a situation. You really wish someone else would just tell you what to do. Making decisions stresses you out. Do I take this class or that class? Do I buy this shirt or that shirt? Do I take this job or that job? You tend to put off decisions as long as possible because you're convinced you will probably get it wrong and live to regret the choice.

As a pastor, people often come to me for counsel with decisions. The conversation usually starts like this, "Pastor, I don't know what God wants me to do. What do you think his will is for me in this situation?" I love that question because it's a good question. Asked with the right motives, it's a humble question.

Sometimes God's answer (or perceived lack thereof) can frustrate us. There's no chapter and verse in the Bible that tells you exactly which college you should attend, which job you should take, or the name of the person you should marry. From major decisions to mundane moments, there are many areas of life where God's revealed will, or what God tells us to do or not do, is not explicitly clear. We have to do the hard work of identifying the relevant biblical principles and asking the Holy Spirit to help us apply them in the details of our situation.

But there are many areas of life where God's revealed will is crystal clear. It's not a gray area. What our Creator King has commanded us to do or not do is spelled out in black and white for all people, at all times, and in all situations. It's not flexible or negotiable. There's no room for faithful Christians to disagree. Like the runway lights showing a plane exactly where to land on a dark night, the Bible tells us exactly where the path of spiritual blessing and safety lies. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 is one of those places.

In this area of life, the explicit instruction the Lord gave the Thessalonians through the Apostle Paul in the 1st century is the same instruction he gives to every one of us today. Cultures change. Our God does not. Look at v. 3, "For this is the will of

God..." It's not a mystery. It's not a gray area. It's crystal clear. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification (or your holiness): that you abstain from sexual immorality..." In many ways, this is a very simple message to understand. Pleasing God means pursuing holiness, especially in our sexuality. But that is an exceedingly difficult message to apply because we live in a world that couldn't be more confused about who God is, what holiness is, let alone what's right and wrong when it comes to our sexuality. So we need to slow down and think carefully.

1) PLEASING GOD MEANS PURSUING HOLINESS (verses 1-3a)

When Paul and his co-workers say, "Finally, then, brothers," they are not concluding the letter. They are marking a transition in the letter. They're shifting from defending their ministry among the Thessalonians into a series of instructions and exhortations for the church. V.1, "We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus..."

As the primary author, Paul's not requesting a favor from them as his friends. He's not saying, "You better listen to me because I'm the one who led you to faith in Christ." He addresses them as those who are "in the Lord Jesus" as a man who is himself "in the Lord Jesus." In other words, he doesn't begin with what they need to do. He begins with who they are.

Friend, if you are a Christian, if you have turned away from living for yourself and turned toward trusting and obeying Jesus, then God has given you a new identity in Christ. You are not who you once were. Every human being who has ever lived falls into one of two categories, one of two spheres of existence. You are either in the kingdom of this world, trying to satisfy your soul with the pleasures of this life, or you are in the kingdom of God, fighting to satisfy your soul with the joy of knowing Jesus.

The only way to become part of the kingdom of God is to be in found in Christ, to be spiritually united to him through repentance and faith. A Christian is someone who doesn't just like Jesus or imitate Jesus. A Christian is someone who abides in Jesus, who finds rest for their soul in Jesus, and who enjoys sweet fellowship in covenant relationship with him. John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Why do I belabor this point? Because Christianity isn't a set of external behaviors or a moral code. It's a new life in Jesus that comes with a new identity through

membership in a new kingdom. Paul isn't asking the Thessalonians to become someone they're presently not. He's urging them to live or walk out the kind of life that is in keeping with who they already are. So what does this new life "in the Lord Jesus" consist of? What does it mean to "live out" our new identity in Christ? Look back at verse 1. It means living "to please God."

Friends, the gospel, the good news about Jesus, tells us that we can never earn God's love or acceptance through our good works. We only receive God's forgiveness and love as a gift of grace, because of what Jesus has done for us at the cross. And the same grace, the same undeserved favor, that makes us right with God, also frees and empowers us to live in a manner that is pleasing to God – not to earn his love, but because we've already received his love and delight to love him in return.

Have you ever had a friend or family member who was hard to please? A relationship where you felt like no matter what you did, that person always found a reason to be offended or unhappy with you? Figuring out how to please someone like that feels like one part mystery and two parts futility. Pleasing your Heavenly Father, Christian, is not like that. He is not hard to please and what we must do to please him isn't a mystery. He has clearly and plainly revealed what is pleasing to him in the pages of his word.

Notice how Paul refers in verse 1 to what the Thessalonians "received" from him and in verse 2 to "the instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus." What kind of instruction was that? It was the same instruction he's about to give them in writing. The same instruction we hold in our hands today. The little phrase, "through the Lord Jesus," at the end of verse 2 is SO important. It's a reminder that what Paul's about to say, the reminder he's about to give, isn't something we should receive and obey because of Paul's authority. It's something we must receive and obey because Paul speaks with the authority of King Jesus Himself.

Remember that, friend, whenever you read the Bible or listen to the Word preached. Verse 8, "Whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God..." The instructions in the Bible about how to please the Lord, 1 Thessalonians 4 included, isn't Paul's idea, or the church's idea, or your parents' think or what I think. It's what God has said. We're dealing here with the very words of God himself.

In these verses God Himself is telling you how to please him – not just once or twice, but "more and more." I love how Paul commends the Thessalonians in verse

2. "Guys, you are already walking in a manner that is pleasing to God. Know that. Receive that. Rejoice in that. Right now, through your life, you are bringing pleasure to the heart of your Father in Heaven. Now don't stop. Keep learning, keep growing, keep fighting to please him more and more."

What does that look like? The Lord tells us in verse 3. He tells us exactly how to please him. "For this is the will of God...your sanctification." In case you're counting, that's a 14-letter word, but the meaning isn't complicated. Being sanctified simply means to become more and more holy. In fact, a more literal translation of v. 3 might be, "For this is the will of God (this is what is pleasing to God)...your holiness."

Being sanctified or holy isn't about being better than other people. It's about becoming more like God. It's about bringing every area of our life in alignment with his character and his ways. It's about imitating the One in whose image we were created. Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." Mind you, God isn't holy because He comports with some standard of holiness beyond Himself. He IS the standard. He is perfect in all His ways.

Whatever behavior reflects His glorious perfection is holy. Whatever denies or hides His glorious perfection is unholy. If you want to please the Lord, my friend, there is one thing you must do. You must be holy – increasingly like Him in every area of life. It's not a status we achieve. It's a direction we run and keep on running until we get home to heaven. Nowhere is that more important than the area of life to which Paul immediately turns. Point #1 - Pleasing God means pursuing holiness...

2) PURSUING HOLINESS MEANS HONORING GOD WITH OUR SEXUALITY (verses 3b-8)

Verse 3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." Abstaining from something means what? To avoid contact with it. To keep away from it. So what must we abstain from if we are to please the Lord more and more? We must abstain from any sexual activity that is not in keeping with God's normative, creative design for our bodies.

Genesis 2:22–25, "And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold

fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

The foundation of biblical morality, what makes something right or wrong, isn't a personal construct. It isn't found by looking within ourselves as if whatever we desire or feel like doing is good. Nor is it a social construct. It isn't found by looking at the people around us as if whatever two adults consent to do is good. Biblical morality is a divine construct. What is in keeping with God's ways and decrees as revealed through creation and Holy Scripture is good. What is not in keeping with God's ways and decrees is evil.

So what does Genesis 2 teach us is sexually moral and immoral? God created sex for one biological man and one biological woman to enjoy exclusively in the covenant of marriage. Any sexual activity outside of that covenant relationship is wrong – no exceptions, no gradations, no “unless you really love each other” or know you'll eventually get married.

There's nothing fuzzy about the line between what is sexually moral and what is sexually immoral. It's not hard to know how to please God with our sexuality. However, the work of actually pleasing him, of abstaining from what is immoral is exceedingly difficult. We live in a fallen world. Our desires, including our sexual desires, have been corrupted by sin. God knows that. So he equips us in verses 4-8 with four practices that will help us honor God with our sexuality.

As we walk through these, I want you to know something. I'm fighting with you. Getting married doesn't end the battle. Being a pastor doesn't remove the temptation. Men and women alike, we're in this together. So how do we abstain from sexual immorality?

PRACTICE #1: SELF-CONTROL

Verse 4, “...That each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God...”

We do well to linger on this practice because it is completely counter-cultural. What does the world around us say? If it feels good, it must be good. If it's what your body wants to do then you have a right to do it as long as no one else gets hurt. What does God say? Don't be ruled by your physical desires. Rule over them.

Control them. Restrain them in light of what is holy and honorable in the sight of God.

Why can't we just go with the flow? Because our physical bodies, like every other part of us, have been corrupted by sin. That doesn't mean every physical desire is bad. It does mean we need God's Word to distinguish sinful desires from holy desires, and sinful actions from holy actions, regardless of our perceived sexual orientation. To the degree our sexual desires and actions align with God's creative design, they are holy and good. To the degree they are not, they are unholy and sinful. And we please God by exercising self-control in all of them.

Here's the key question each one of us must ask – "What do I need to do so I can honor and with my body instead of being controlled by my body?" It might mean refusing to linger in bed or in the shower. It might mean refusing to watch movies, read books, or listen to music will awaken an appetite for what God says is forbidden. It might mean refusing to be alone with your girlfriend or boyfriend in their apartment or bedroom even if other couples think you're "weird."

By the way, knowing how to "control" your own body applies just as much to sex in the context of biblical marriage. I have been involved in some grievous situations where a professing Christian insists that their spouse has a biblical obligation to do sexually whatever they want them to do sexually because they're married.

Brothers and sisters, that's a tragic wickedness in the sight of God. Paul doesn't say in verse 4 that single people need self-control, but if you're married, anything goes. The point of verse 4 is that whether we're single or married we need to exercise control over our sexual desires so we can live in a way that is holy and honorable instead of being enslaved to the passions of our flesh. Abstaining from sexual immorality means practicing self-control.

PRACTICE #2: JUSTICE

Look at verse 6. "That no one transgress and wrong his brother..." Friends, in many cases, when we sin sexually, we're not just sinning against the Lord. We're sinning against another person, which is all the more grievous when that person is a fellow Christian. What does the world say? As long as you have consent and as long as no one gets hurt, you're fine. Go for it. What does God say? A man or woman doesn't have to feel like you're violating them in order for you to violate them.

Whenever we involve another person in sexual immorality we are sinning against them, regardless of whether they agree with our actions or are even aware of our actions. "But if she didn't want me to look at her that way she shouldn't have put her picture up on the internet." Brother, it doesn't matter. You're sinning against her, even if she never knows your name. You're involving her in what God has forbidden.

The word for "wronging" your brother or sister in verse 6 is a strong word. It means to take advantage of someone, to exploit, defraud, or cheat them. It means you're committing an act of injustice, failing to honor and respect them as God would have you. The Lord commands us to practice justice, which means refusing to use another person sexually – whether they want it or not – in an unholy way that doesn't please the Lord. Abstaining from sexual immorality means practicing justice.

PRACTICE #3: FEAR

Friend, if you are toying right now with what God has forbidden. If you are not fighting to exercise self-control and practicing injustice, you should be frightened. Why? Verse 6, because "the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you." Are you taking advantage of the weak? Are you running toward sexual immorality instead of fighting to abstain? God sees. God knows. And God will repay you accordingly.

What do we tell ourselves? It's not like I'm a bad person. I'm not hurting anyone. We love each other. What's the big deal? If God didn't want me to satisfy my sexual desires He shouldn't have given them to me in the first place. So there. The terrifying reality is that when Jesus returns, what is sexually "normal" in our culture, the adultery we justify in our movies and celebrate in our books because "he was a jerk" or "she deserved better", will incur the wrath and judgment of God.

It doesn't matter how many other people are doing it. What matters is what God has said about it. They will not judge you for what you did with your body. God will. Colossians 3:5-6, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming."

And if you have fallen into sexual sin and the Lord graciously convicts you of the guilt of your sin before the Day of Judgment, flee to Christ. Don't promise Him you'll

do better. Don't try to clean yourself up. Bring your guilt, your regret, your sin and sorrow to Jesus and ask Him to forgive you. Ask Him to cleanse you. There is no sexual sin too great, too dark, too shameful, for the blood of Jesus to cleanse. 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," (sexual sin included!).

But don't wait. Don't presume. The gospel isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card. The gospel is a run-to-Jesus-and-find-mercy invitation. The stakes couldn't be higher, friends. If we're going to abstain from sexual immorality, we need to practice the fear of the Lord.

PRACTICE #4: SUBMISSION

We need to remember that holiness isn't what pleases God in the sense that God has a whole list of things that please Him and holiness is one of many. So, you know, if sexual holiness really isn't your thing, you can find plenty of other ways to please Him. That's a lie, my friend. Holiness IS the only thing that is pleasing to God. It's the whole reason He calls us into a saving relationship with himself. Verse 7, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness."

None of us come to God on our own. We are dead in our trespasses and sins. So what does God do? He calls us. He calls everyone in a general sense. Isaiah 45:22, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!" In his great mercy, He also calls his chosen people in an effectual sense, working and moving in our hearts in such a way that we find ourselves irresistibly drawn to freely place our faith in Jesus and follow Him.

John 10:3-4, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice."

Why does Jesus do that? Why does he effectually call us to Himself? Because his call brings to fruition the sanctifying work he died to accomplish. Titus 2:14, "...[Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." Holiness isn't an optional track for super-Christians. It's the end goal of God's saving work in every Christian.



We abstain from sexual immorality by choosing to submit to God's call to holiness in our lives. But that's not the only sense in which submission is required. There's another sense that Paul briefly mentions at the end of verse 8 that couldn't be more important. God knows we're powerless to answer His call – not just the first time we come to Christ – but every day of our lives. Every day He calls us to holiness and every day we feel our lingering, sinful desires pulling us away from Him.

So what does God do? He gives his Holy Spirit to us. If you're a Christian, He literally takes up spiritual residence inside of us. He fulfills in each one of our hearts the new covenant promise He made back in Ezekiel 36:26-27, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

In the battle to abstain from sexual immorality and walk in sexual purity, it's the Holy Spirit who empowers us when we're weak, empowers us when we're stumbling, empowers us when we feel stuck in the same habits of sexual sin, if we're willing to submit to Him.

Why should we submit to him? Because the power of sin is no match for the power of God! You're not alone in the battle, Christian. And if you cry out to him for help, the Holy Spirit will fill you, strengthen you, and enable you to abstain from what you feel like you cannot resist.

CONCLUSION

God created us to know the joy of pleasing him. God saved us so we could experience the joy of pleasing him. What we must do in order to please the Lord isn't a mystery. It's not a gray area. It's crystal clear in black and white. Pleasing God means pursuing holiness, especially in our sexuality.

The decision before each of us is not *what* is pleasing to God. It's whether we're *willing* to please Him. And so Jesus instructs us to do the very same thing He told His disciples to do the night before He died. Matthew 26:41, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Take some time to do that individually right now. Time to confess our sin to the Lord. Time to ask him where we need to practice self-control, justice, fear, and



submission. Time to ask Him to empower us to please Him by pursuing holiness in our sexuality.