Blessings to you and all your family!

Well, this all took longer than expected, but I’m ready try giving sermons again.

My surgery ended up being on December 21 and I got to come home on December 25; that was my Christmas present. They replaced the aortic valve, 3 cm of aorta, and did a single bypass. My recovery is going extremely well and I’m currently doing cardiac rehab; that will last into May.

I want to thank everybody for their prayers. God is gracious to hear and answer the prayers of His people. He has been very good to me in the success of the surgery and in the healing process. Please praise Him on my behalf. I would appreciate continued prayers for healing, but even more for His guidance as I go back to preparing sermons and for the church; both for the spiritual growth of this body of Christ and for His care of so many in this church who are dealing with very difficult things in their lives.

I appreciate all the work Will Harvey did filling in the pulpit. He did a wonderful job and truly seeks the Lord’s will and guidance. Also, thanks to Scott and Joe, who have sacrificed a lot of their time to run the worship service, teach Sunday school, have Bible Study, and just keep the church running. (By the way, in Wednesday night Bible Study, we are just starting the book of Revelation. Feel free to join!)

I humbly ask your prayers for Connie. Many of you may know this but in the first part of January we found out that the cancer has come back. It has shown up in her liver. She is currently on an oral chemo. The doctor says they can’t cure it but they can hold it at bay. Connie is doing all the doctors tell her but we know that she is in the Lord’s hands and there is no better place to be. We are praying that the Lord will do what the doctors can’t and remove the cancer.

Thank you all again for your prayers and continued support of the church. The winter weather is rough, COVID-19 is an aggravation, the world seems to be going downhill; but our God reigns and He will bring us through to salvation!

In Christ’s love

John

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2-21-21

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Up to this point in Paul’s letter, he has been reassuring the Thessalonian church of how much he cares for them and how deeply he desires to visit them. He has talked about his own behavior while he was among them as testimony to his character; that he was not there to take advantage of them. Paul mentions the Gospel he preached, which includes Jesus Christ rising from the dead, and how those in the church turned away from idols in order to follow the living God.

At this point in Paul’s letter, he brings up Christian behavior; he talks about the way Christians ought to be living their lives. It may be that Timothy had brought back questions from the church or perhaps he had observed some members who were engaging in this kind of behavior. It is important to note that right in verse 1, Paul states that he taught the new Christians how they should behave in order to please God. So, Paul not only preached the Gospel, he impressed upon them how they ought to live their lives. We call this morality or ethics.

Let me talk about ethics for a few moments. We must be very careful with that word. We tend to think of ethics as meaning good things and right behavior. Where we have to be careful is that ethics never exist by themselves; they are always attached to a certain way of thinking or a certain worldview. So, what one person may consider ethical, another might not. When someone talks about ethics, we must understand where they are coming from instead of assuming that they are simply talking about something good.

Let me give some examples. An extreme one might be a tribe of people who are cannibalistic. To them, it is completely ethical to eat their enemies. In some of the Scandinavian countries, the good of society is greater than individual life. Therefore, it is ethical for them to euthanize very sick or disabled children even without the consent or knowledge of the parents. Here in this country the laws of the land have declared such things as abortion and homosexuality as normal and ethical. These all basically come from what we might call a secular worldview.

Each of us here have, or ought to have, a Christian worldview. As Christians, our ethics are based on what the Bible tells us. The Bible tells us that we are each created in the image of God; and so, each human life is sacred. The Bible also tells us things we are to do and things we are not to do. As Paul stated in verse 2, these behaviors are given by the authority of the Lord Jesus; they are not something made up by men.

There may be some objections here. Following rules sounds like legalism. It is obvious from Jesus’ dealings with the Pharisees that legalism is destructive and something God is not interested in. We also know from the Bible that we have Christian liberty. In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes, “*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery*.” The slavery spoken of here is trying to follow the law of Moses in order to win salvation or God’s favor. This certainly speaks against spending our lives trapped by trying to follow a bunch of rules; even if they are rules given by God.

Also, the Bible teaches that we are not saved by following rules or simply by being good. We cannot earn our salvation. Instead, as we are told in Ephesians 2:8, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith*”. If we are saved by unearned favor from God, then following commands, even commands in the Bible, don’t get us any closer to heaven.

These are true and important verses in the Bible; they are God breathed; they are not to be taken lightly or set aside. So, with these verses, how can we talk about proper Christian behavior? The answer lies in taking these verses in the context of the whole Bible. Remember that the same Paul who wrote of avoiding slavery to the law and that we are saved by grace alone, also wrote the verses we are currently studying regarding immoral sexual behavior. This same Paul wrote in other letters of sinful behavior that would keep people from salvation and that Christians should have no part of.

As Christians, we are called to live our lives in accordance with what is in the Bible. We don’t live this way to submit to a yoke of slavery or to try to earn our salvation. The most beautiful reason for living according to these standards in given by Jesus Himself in John 14:15*. If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*. What more reason does a Christian need? When we love another person, we will go out of our way to do things that please them. As we have more and more understanding of what Jesus has done for us, our love for Him grows. So, we follow the commands of the Bible not because it’s something we have to do, they become what we want to do.

What does Paul mean by “sexual immortality”? It is any kind of sexual intercourse outside of God’s design. And God’s design is for sexual intercourse to be between a man and a woman who are married to each other. This marriage relationship was established in Genesis 1 and reenforced in Genesis 2. That this is the proper relationship is maintained throughout the Bible. This is not some arbitrary rule that God made up. The marriage relationship and the intimacy experienced between these two people corelates to the relationship between God and His people.

In verse 6, Paul is speaking of adultery; a specific sexual sin and one that obviously damages the marriage relationships that God has ordained. Recalling what Jesus said during His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:27-28,

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

By considering what Jesus said, we know that pornography use would be considered sexual immorality.

In Thessalonica, they worshiped several goddesses who represented sex and fertility. These worship services included consorting with temple prostitutes. The cult prostitutes were also constantly throughout the city and available. In this culture, this was considered normal and ethical. The Gentile members of the church would have come out of this lifestyle; or perhaps, were having trouble coming out of this lifestyle.

It is important to realize that Paul came into Thessalonica and began by preaching the Gospel; not by trying to change their ethics. Part of the Gospel presentation is that we are trapped, enslaved by sin, and that through Jesus Christ we can be freed from this slavery and live lives pleasing to God. The first step is for someone to accept the Gospel; then begins discipling and teaching Christian ethics.

Today’s world is only slightly different from Paul’s in respect to secular ethics. We may not worship a deity related to sex, but sex itself has become an idol and is worshiped by many. Our culture accepts and even encourages all manner of sexual promiscuity. We are bombarded daily by these views. It is difficult to find a movie or TV show that doesn’t have people jumping into bed with each other. Social media glorifies all forms of sex while anyone who presents a Christian view is ridiculed. I’m not telling you anything you don’t know; but it becomes hard to blame our young people who engage in sexual behavior and choose against marriage. They are simply acting in the way the culture has formed them.

In this world, especially with our children and grandchildren, we must follow the example of Paul: We share the Gospel. Once a person accepts Christ, the Holy Spirit will work within them so that they are able to accept a Christian worldview and Christian ethics. Once a person accepts Christ, they can be discipled and live lives that are pleasing to God. It is a waste of time to try to convince someone with a secular outlook to live according to Christian values.

If you are in the position of discipling a new Christian, or even working with someone who has been a Christian for a while but struggling to deal with these moral ideas, it is important to remember how strong sexual desire is and how deeply imbedded the cultural ideas of sex are. We must treat people with love and patience and respect; be willing to listen to their thoughts without condemnation. At the same time, we cannot bend the truth. The best thing to do is simply point out what the Bible says; the Holy Spirit will work on their hearts.

Let’s consider why a Christian would want to live in a sexually pure manner; in fact, live a life that is pure in all areas. I’ve already mentioned an important one: It is how we show Jesus that we love Him. In His love for us He left the glory of heaven and became a man. This is not something He had to do or needed to do for Himself; God does not need us for His happiness or for anything else. Leaving heaven and accepting all the suffering He did was for our good. Human-beings are the ones who turned away from God even though He is their creator. It would have been much easier for Him to simply get rid of us. But looking at what Christ was willing to do shows how much He loves us; really, it’s incomprehensible. What else can we do but devote our lives to Him in return?

Paul brings up a couple other reasons for living a pure life. In verse 7 he says, “*For God has not called us for impurity, but in sanctification*.” Sanctification is a life-long process we begin when we become a Christian. The whole idea is that we become more and more like Jesus. This process will not be complete until we finally see Jesus for the first time, but it is best for us to work toward sanctification during our lifetime. The actual work and change within us is done by the Holy Spirit; but we also have the responsibility to cooperate with Him. Part of that cooperation is to accept the commands of Christ and struggle against temptation.

Notice that Paul says that God calls us. That is part of His love for us; our fallen nature is not to look for the God of the Bible, but to try to be our own god. We want to create our own destiny; we want to be masters of our own universe. This was the basis of the original sin in the Garden of Eden. Many people work this way their whole lives; they never achieve this goal. The Christian is the one who accepts that call from God through Jesus Christ.

In Luke 14:25-33, Jesus gives a stern warning to those who want to be His followers. Basically, He tells us to count the cost. Salvation is easy, believe on Jesus Christ; but there is a lot that comes with it. As Paul tells us, we are called to sanctification. Really, the cost to be a Christian is high, it is our lives. But the return on the cost is higher than we can imagine. And in giving up our lives to sanctification, even here on earth we are given true life; life that we will never lose.

God calls us to be holy people. To be holy is to be set apart. We are to be set apart from the world; we are to be different from the way the secular culture tells us to be. Why does God want us to be holy? As we are told in 1 Peter 1:16, God has said, “*You shall be holy, for I am holy*.” Holiness is one of the attributes of God. It is a part of who He is; it makes up His essence. We often think about God’s attribute of love; that He is love. But He has many attributes; there is no single thing that can describe who He is.

God is holy. He is completely apart from sin. He will not accept it; if He did, He would cease to be who He is. That is why it was so important for Jesus to atone for our sins; it is the only way God will accept us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can be holy. Granted, we might not be very good at it; but God will never give up on us once we are His; once we are a Christian.

Human-beings are stubborn creatures, even when we become Christians. We will still try to resist God’s pull toward sanctification. So, in verse 8, Paul gives the Thessalonians, and us, a gentile reminder. If we cling to sexual immorality, we are not rejecting some rule a person has made up; we are rejecting God. We are rejecting the good and loving God who has sealed us with His Holy Spirit. We are resisting the Holy Spirit who has condescended to live within us as a constant helper, companion, and guide.

One more very important thing to keep in mind when dealing with all kinds of immorality: forgiveness. When we realize our sinful nature and that we can never stand before God in our own righteousness, our acceptance of Christ is our only hope. When we believe on Jesus, all our sins are forgiven because He took the punishment; all our guilt is washed away by the blood He shed; we are covered in His righteousness and so, we can stand before God. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done, there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But we must never take the work of Christ on the cross for granted.

Prayer

Thank You Lord God, for ordaining marriage and the family, even from the beginning of creation. It is a beautiful example of the relationship You desire to have with us. Indeed, the relationship we can have, but only through Jesus.

Lord Jesus, beautify and sanctify we who are the church, the bride of Christ. Prepare us for the glorious eternity you have planned for us. May Your Holy Spirit bring us to love Your law, to love Your commands. May our hearts find joy in obedience to Your commands.

Thank You for the forgiveness and salvation that are offered through Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit, keep us from thinking lightly of Christ’s work on the cross. Bring more to bear on us what our Saviour went through on our behalf. May we always have a sense of awe and gratitude for His sacrifice.

We pray in Jesus’ name

Amen