

## **BIBLICAL STANDARDS CONCERNING SEX**

**Pastor Andrew B. Pigott**

**Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey**

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### **Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8**

One day I passed by a public bulletin board where people had posted certain things that they were selling. In the middle of the board, someone had posted a piece of paper with the word "sex" printed in large, bold type. That piece of paper immediately caught my attention. Underneath the word "sex" were written these words, "Now that I have your attention, you might be interested in buying the following items." And then there was a list of things that were being sold.

Some people have said that nothing attracts a person's attention more than the subject of sex does. And if that is true, then none of you should be falling asleep during this sermon, because sex is the subject of our Scripture reading today.

I want to first notice with you why the apostle Paul wanted to write to the Thessalonian church about this subject.

When we read the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians, it is easy to see that the apostle Paul had a strong feeling of concern for the spiritual welfare of the Thessalonian Christians. Above all, he wanted them to live holy lives. 1 Thessalonians 3:13 expresses that desire. There the apostle says, "May He strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." Then, in chapter 4, the apostle Paul immediately starts talking about sexual conduct. For Paul, holiness included proper sexual conduct.

But why did the Thessalonian Christians have a need to be told this? Was this new teaching for them? No, it was not. 1 Thessalonians 4:1 says, "Finally, Brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God." And verse 2 says, "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." And in the last part of verse 6 we read these words referring to sexual misconduct: "The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you." From these verses, it is clear that the apostle was not trying to present the Thessalonian Christians with new teaching. They already knew about these things.

So what was he trying to do? Had he received reports that they were misbehaving? Was he trying to discipline them? Again, the answer seems to be no. Verse 1 of chapter four says, "...we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living." In other words, "you are doing what we told you to do." There is no evidence that there was sexual misconduct among the Thessalonian Christians.

I believe that the reason Paul wanted to write on the subject of sexual conduct was because he knew that these Christians lived in an environment where they faced strong temptations in this area every day of their lives.

Paul had been to Thessalonica. He was aware of the moral conditions that were present there and in other Roman cities. He knew that unmarried people engaged in sexual activity without restraint. People did marry, but unfaithfulness in marriage was very common. Wives would be treated severely if they were caught in adultery, but a husband could have as many mistresses as he could afford. And prostitution was very common. Archaeological diggings have discovered elaborate brothels with all kinds of lewd pictures on the walls. Prostitutes for hire roamed the streets. There were both male and female prostitutes, because in Greek cities homosexuality was quite common. In some places sexual practices were included in the rituals of worship to pagan gods. Strabo, the Roman historian, declares that as many as 1,000 prostitutes were kept at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth.

Paul was in Corinth when he wrote this letter to the Thessalonian Christians. I believe that he was extremely aware of the environment around him and the strong influence it would have on the church. He knew how difficult it would be for even the strongest Christians to resist sexual temptation when there was so much around them to arouse their sexual desires. I believe that Paul wrote on this subject, because he knew the pressures of society were a constant threat to the Christians, and especially to the young Christians. In order to counter all the pressures, Paul wanted to remind them of the Biblical standards concerning sexual conduct.

My purpose for preaching this sermon today is the same. I do not think that what I say will be new to most of you. I think that all of us have probably heard these standards at one time or another. And I am not preaching this sermon because I have heard that there is presently some kind of sexual misconduct taking place in this congregation. If there is, then I am unaware of it, because no one has told me.

But I am preaching this sermon, because I am aware of the tremendous amount of pressure that we all receive to view the Biblical standards for sexual conduct as being something of the past, something that only abnormal people try to keep. I am aware of the amount of pornography that we are exposed to in this society. The sex industry is a big business that penetrates deep into our society. According to an article written in U.S. News and World Report, the sex industry's largest prophet now comes from videos rented out to people to watch in the privacy of their own homes. According to that article, the sex industry has never taken in more prophets than it is presently taking in today. Through the cable networks, and the internet, and video rental stores, the private citizen now has easy access to hard core pornographic programming, and it will only get worse. And then there are all the advertisements. In almost every form of media and advertising, our minds are blasted with images and thoughts that arouse our emotions and tempt us to forget the Biblical standards. The latest fashions in clothing are also designed to arouse our emotions. In our society it is common for husbands and wives to spend more time at their places of employment than they spend with one another, and this also increases temptation to have improper relationships with people that we are not married to. It is because we are tempted so severely that we have to be constantly reminded of the Biblical standards, and that is why I am preaching this sermon.

Let's look at what our Scripture reading has to say about the Biblical standards for sexual conduct. Verse 3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality." So the main principal is that Christians should not be involved in any kind of sexual behavior that is immoral. So what is immoral sexual behavior?

In verse 4 and 5 we can see what Paul considered to be immoral sexual behavior. It is behavior that is not under control. Or we could say that it is behavior that is controlled by "passionate lust" like the behavior of the heathen that do not know God. Immoral sexual behavior is driven by the philosophy that says, "if it feels good, then it must be OK." It seems to me that I have heard that statement sung in more than one popular song.

So, if immoral behavior is behavior that is controlled by passionate lust, like the behavior of the heathen, then what is moral behavior? The heathen did not know God. They did not have the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, they allowed their feelings to determine what their behavior should be. But the Jews and the early Christians had the Holy Scriptures. They were taught to use God's Word to determine what their behavior should be. In verse 3 Paul said, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." When people use standards from God's Word to control their sexual conduct, then their conduct is moral conduct.

When I was receiving basic training in the Marine Corps, most of the men in my platoon enjoyed spending their weekends going to the city to party. Some would spend their time with prostitutes. Most of these men lived by the philosophy that if it feels good, then it must be OK. Those who were training us knew what was going on. From time to time, they would warn us of the danger of contracting a dangerous venereal disease. They encouraged us to be careful. But no one told us that having sex outside of marriage was wrong. You can't say something is wrong just because it is dangerous. You can't say that having sex outside of marriage is wrong, because you might get pregnant or you might contract a disease like AIDS or you might get hurt. All those are good reasons to control our sexual conduct, but those reasons are not enough to make a person believe that it is wrong to have sex outside of marriage. There must be a higher reason.

For the apostle Paul, the higher reason was God's Word. Paul did not try to convince the Thessalonian Christians to have good sexual conduct so that they wouldn't get sick or have a child out of wedlock. The reason he told them to have good sexual conduct was because it was God's will for them to do so. They were to use Biblical standards to control their behavior. They were to use the Holy Scriptures to determine what was right and what was wrong.

So what do the Holy Scriptures say about sexual conduct? When Paul was in Thessalonica, he would have used the Old Testament law to teach these Christians. We also have the New Testament to help us. What do the Old and New Testaments say about proper sexual conduct?

First, no sex for people who are not yet married. This standard is a difficult one to keep, especially in our culture where people tend to wait until they are in their late 20's or early thirties to get married. People become capable of having sexual activity and begin

experiencing certain desires long before they get married. It is hard for the normal person to control such desires for such a long period of time. But the Bible is clear on this point. 1 Corinthians 7:2 says, "But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." In other words, if a person engages in sexual intercourse without being married, then that person has engaged in immoral conduct. So 1 Corinthians 7:2 tells us that people should get married rather than engaging in immorality. According to Deuteronomy 22, in Old Testament times if a girl was married and then it was discovered that she had been involved in sexual activity before marriage, she could be stoned to death. If a boy and a girl were caught participating in sex before marriage by mutual consent, they were not stoned to death. But that kind of activity was not condoned. The Bible teaches "no sex for people who are not yet married." So people who are single must be man enough or woman enough to say no and abstain from sexual activity.

I don't want you to think I am saying that a desire to have sex before marriage is a sin. If you are strongly attracted to another person, then it is natural to experience a real hunger to be physically close to that person and even to have sexual intercourse with that person. These desires, these longings, are not sinful. Many young people feel ashamed because they have a desire to "go all the way" with their girlfriend or boyfriend before they are married. Those passions are not sinful. God put them into our nature.

But we must not give into these passions until we are officially married. And that is not easy to do. It takes a lot of discipline for two people to control themselves so they don't go too far.

In the past, some people would advise that two people should not hold hands before they are engaged and they should not kiss before they are married. I will not give you that advise, because the Bible does not say that. But the Bible does make it clear that sexual intercourse before marriage is wrong and common sense plus the experiences of many people tell us that one thing leads to another; and that the further you go, the harder it is to stop. Holding hands leads to embracing and embracing leads to kissing and so on. At each step the feeling and desire increases. When two people let this process go on until they have gone as far as they can go without actually having intercourse and they are still months or even years away from getting married, then they will face some big problems. One of two things will happen. They will either get into trouble from the desires that they can no longer control, or they will become emotionally frustrated. And their frustration will cause them to argue and be irritated with one another.

The Biblical standard is that sex before marriage is immoral and to live according to this standard requires a lot of restraint, so let us encourage and pray for those among us who are not yet married in a world which tells them that its OK to do what your feelings tell you to do.

The second Biblical standard that I would like to mention is no sex with anyone else except husband or wife after marriage. One of the Ten Commandments is "You shall not commit adultery." In Bible times, people who were caught in adultery were stoned. In Genesis 39

we read that Joseph would have nothing to do with Potiphar's wife. He said, "I cannot do this wickedness and sin against God." 1 Corinthians 6:15 forbids having sex with prostitutes. There we read these words, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!" There is no question that the Bible forbids sex with anyone else except husband and wife after marriage.

Of course there is nothing wrong with sexual activity between a man and a woman who are married. Within a marriage relationship, sex should be seen as beautiful and something which would enhance a relationship. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 says, "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." There is no limit to sexual activity in marriage, but the Bible teaches there is no way that sex of any kind outside of marriage can be OK. Any person who becomes involved with a person other than her own husband or his own wife is severely condemned by Scripture.

And then I feel the need to mention yet another standard. And that is that no homosexual activity is allowed by Scripture on any grounds. Leviticus 18:22 specifically forbids having sex with someone of the same sex. Leviticus 20:13 makes the judgment for this kind of activity to be death. And the New Testament clearly teaches that homosexual behavior is immoral.

A young woman once asked me if Christians should love and accept homosexuals. Of course, the answer to that question is yes. We are to love them, as we would love anyone else. But, at the same time, we must not accept their sinful activity as being OK.

While living in Taiwan, I listened to a talk show on the radio and was surprised to discover that there are many young people in Taiwan who consider themselves to be homosexual. But the reason they think they are homosexual is not because they have engaged in sexual activity with someone from the same sex; rather, it is because they have had feelings of attraction toward someone of the same sex. Some junior high boys were wondering if they were homosexual because they enjoyed playing with other boys more than they enjoyed playing with girls.

It is a tragedy that people are being convinced that homosexuality is a part of their genetic make-up just because they prefer being around people of the same sex. And what is even more tragic is that these people who are so convinced receive counseling from certain people that goes something like this: Since you are gay, you might as well learn how to behave like a gay person. You might as well learn how to engage in sexual activity with those of the same sex.

I think we need to be careful when we give people counsel. It is not a sin to enjoy being around people of the same sex more than enjoying being around people of the opposite sex.

Let me take the argument even a step further. Many people wonder if they are homosexual, because they have experienced warm feelings of attraction towards someone of the same sex. I don't think that we should counsel those people by telling them that they are homosexual just because they have had such feelings. Nor do I think that we should tell them that they have committed the sin of homosexuality just because they have had such feelings.

When a certain man who is married feels momentary attraction toward a woman to whom he is not married, or when a certain woman who is married feels momentary attraction toward a man to whom she is not married, it is wrong to conclude that the man or woman in question has committed the sin of adultery.

In the same way, having momentary feelings of attraction towards someone of the same sex is not a sin. These momentary attractions do not become sin unless a person thinks about them and encourages them and acts according to them. A homosexual tendency is not a sin unless a person welcomes the thoughts, allows them to dominate his thinking, and then acts upon them.

According to the Holy Scriptures, it is a sin for a person to satisfy his sexual desires with someone of the same sex. According to the Holy Scriptures, it is also a sin to engage in sexual intercourse prior to marriage. And, according to the Holy Scriptures, after marriage, it is a sin to have sex with someone other than your own husband or your own wife.

I know that for many of you, these things that I am sharing are not new. You may have already received this teaching in the past. But you, like me, need to constantly be reminded, because we live in a society that constantly urges us to forget.

If you have already violated any of these standards and allowed your feelings to take control of your behavior, then the final word is for you. It is a word of hope, and you need to hear it. It is the message that the blood of Jesus can release you from your guilt and help you to have new start.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins. There is no better time than now to ask Jesus to forgive you and become your Savior and Lord. If you are having struggles in any of these areas that I have mentioned, please know that Jesus wants to help you. Come to him today.

If you have never asked Jesus to be your Savior, then follow along with me as I pray this prayer: *Dear Lord, I know that I have sinned, and I want to ask you to forgive me. I also want to ask you to give me the strength I need to overcome temptation and live a life of victory. Please cleanse me and make me pure. Come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*