

## **REASONS BEHIND THE STANDARDS**

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**Scripture Reading: Hebrews 13:4, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8**

Last week I spoke on the subject of the Biblical standards concerning sex. This week I would like to continue this discussion by speaking on the reasons behind the standards.

I will first ask that we direct our attention to the same passage of scripture we studied last week, that is 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7. Let me read that passage to you again.

In this passage of scripture the apostle Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians that they should avoid sexual immorality. He told them that they should not allow their passions to control their behavior. He reminded them that they had already received instruction concerning proper sexual conduct, and we assume the instruction that they received was from the Old Testament Scripture. So, instead of allowing their passions to control their behavior, they were to allow their behavior to be controlled by God's Word.

Last week I stated that the reason Paul wrote on this subject was because the Thessalonian Christians lived in a society where they were constantly being tempted to forget the Biblical standards concerning sexual conduct. And I also suggested that, when it comes to sexual temptation, I believe our present day society is not much different than the society in which the Thessalonian Christians lived. In some ways, I believe our exposure to sexual temptation is even greater than the temptation these early Christians faced. Therefore, we, too, need to be constantly reminded of the Biblical standards for sexual conduct. Without this reminder, it is easy for our animal passions to take control of our minds and our behavior.

In our study last week, we looked at three Biblical standards. First, no sex for the yet unmarried. Of course, when I say "no sex" I specifically mean "no sexual intercourse". This is a very hard standard to keep especially for those who have strong feelings of love for one another but still have a long time to wait before they are married. But, regardless of how strong the feelings are, the Bible teaches no sex for people who are not yet married. The second standard that we noticed was no sex outside of marriage for those who are married. The Bible condemns both adultery and having sex with prostitutes. The Biblical standard is that a husband must be completely faithful to his wife and a wife must be completely faithful to her husband. And then the third standard we looked at had to do with homosexual activity. We saw that the Bible makes it very clear that sexual activity with someone of the same sex is immoral. Homosexual feelings are not a sin, but these kind of attractions should never be nourished and encouraged so that they actually lead to sexual activity with someone from the same sex.

Those were the standards that we talked about last week. But I don't want to stop at that point, because there are some very good reasons why God gives us such standards. Today I would like to discuss those reasons.

However, before I discuss reasons behind the standards given by the Bible, I must attempt to clear up what might be a misunderstanding in the minds of some people. After listening to the message I preached last week, some people might conclude that any and all sexual conduct is OK, so long that it does not violate the three standards I mentioned. At one time in my life, I believed that to be true. However, today I no longer believe it to be true. As far as sexual conduct is concerned, I believe it is possible to sin without actually violating one of the three standards I mentioned last week. In fact, it is possible to sin with our minds without actually engaging in sexual activity. In Matthew 5:28 Jesus said, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." That verse clearly tells us that, even though a certain person never engages in conduct that is sexually immoral, it is still possible for that person to sin with his mind.

Knowing that it is possible to sin without actually having sexual intercourse outside of a marriage relationship or without actually gratifying sexual desires with someone of the same sex raises a question in our minds; namely, at what point does our sexual conduct or thinking become a sin? Some of the counselors in our youth ministry are trying to address this question, and I would like to offer you some words of advice taken from my own experience in counseling young people about this subject.

First of all, an activity that might be sin for one person might not be a sin for another person. We tend to think that it is not a sin for people who are not married to hold hands or kiss or embrace, but many people think that anything beyond that is a sin or will certainly lead to sin. However, for some people, even holding hands or kissing could be considered a sin or an activity that will certainly lead to sin.

Rivers with waterfalls and strong rapids are dangerous places to swim, because when we jump into or wade into a place where the current is stronger than our ability to swim away from the current, then we will be swept away. If the waterfall represents the three standards that I mentioned last week, then at what point in the river is it safe to swim? Remember that the river not only represents your conduct, but it also represents your mind. And, for that reason, we are all in the river. Even though some here in this room have never engaged in sexual activity of any kind, we all have been engaged with our minds. Our environment and our hormones leave us no option. So we are all in the river.

Now one of you might be at one point in the river and feel that everything is fine, but if another person would enter at that point, they would be swept away. In our counseling, we should not try to draw the same line for every person.

This leads me to a second point. When counseling young people about their love affairs, avoid encouraging them to do something that they are not doing in order to enhance their relationship. I was very shy when I was in high school. I felt awkward and clumsy around people of the opposite sex. Some of my best friends encouraged me to just go ahead and kiss the girl I was with if I really liked her. But in our counseling, we really should avoid giving this kind of advise to another person, because we really don't know for sure what may lead to sin in that person's life. It grieves me to hear that teachers and counselors in our public schools actually encourage students to engage in masturbation as a means of

finding sexual relief. If you are counseling young people, you should avoid telling them what they should do.

It is OK to advise another person what they should not to do. In fact, I think youth counselors have a responsibility to talk to young people about what they should not do. However, when we advise people what not to do, it is best to do it one-on-one or, at most, in a small group with people of the same sex. And, if at all possible, we really should tell the parents the advice we have given lest our advice and their advice do not agree. It takes time to understand the situation of any given individual in order to give wise advice.

I have had young people come to me with great guilt, because they have been told that it is a sin to masturbate. They come to me heavy-laden with guilt, because they engage in masturbation; but they do it not as a pre-meditated act, rather as a sub-conscious activity that happens while they are sleeping. For some of these people, the guilt is so great that they feel they have lost their salvation.

It really requires time to know the person you are counseling before you can give advice that will really help. I do not think it wrong for men and women to discuss the topic of sex together; however, when we are trying to tell people where to draw the line, we really need to know the specific circumstances in a person's life before we can give proper advice.

That is why I think it is best to talk to people one-on-one or, at the most, in a small group with people of the same sex.

In public schools, students are now required to view R-rated films and listen to teachers give advice that contradicts what the Bible teaches. Advice is given to large groups of students without a proper understanding of each individual's ability to resist temptation. It's like telling everyone to swim at the same spot in a river that has a waterfall downstream. Topics that I never knew existed as a teenager, such as the topic of oral sex, are now discussed openly. For me to go into detail describing all these activities from the pulpit would not be edifying, and yet some of you need a counselor who will talk to you and give you the kind of individual advice you need. Once a counselor gets to know you well, he or she might want to advise you to avoid kissing or embracing, especially if your parents have given you the same advice.

The last word of advice I would like to give to those who are engaged in counseling is this: Avoid hypocrisy and double standards. When it comes to advising people what not to do, perhaps everybody in this room is guilty of hypocrisy. In most American churches we preach against pornography, because we believe it leads people to sin with their minds and can easily lead people to sinful behavior. Therefore, we say that looking at magazines with pictures of people without clothing or opening up pornographic web sites on the internet are definitely off limits. However, when it comes to viewing R-rated movies or watching television programs that leave little to the imagination, that seems to be OK.

I have never seen the movie Titanic all the way through. When it first came out in Taiwan, I did go to see the movie, but Janiene and I walked out of the movie as soon as it became

obvious that we were going to be exposed to scenes that are pornographic in nature. Shortly afterwards we moved to a large Chinese church in Los Angeles. There, one of the youth counselors shared with me how he had seen the movie more than ten times. I am sure that counselor would have advised the young people in the church never to read a Playboy magazine. However, it seems to me that viewing nudity and sex scenes in the context of a motion picture can also easily lead a person to sin with their mind.

The standards concerning sex that the Bible gives are three: No sex before marriage. No sex with anyone other than your marriage partner after marriage, and no sexual activity with someone of the same sex. In addition to these three standards, you will have to set your own standards that will help you to control both your behavior and your mind so that what starts out as a temptation will not become something that you dwell upon because you enjoy dwelling upon it. It is when we take the temptation and begin to dwell upon it and enjoy it—at that point—sin takes root and will eventually express itself in conduct.

Don't tell yourself that "anything is OK so long as I avoid having sexual intercourse with my partner." Admit that there is a point in the river where the current is stronger than your ability to swim away from it. Find out where that point is and stay away from it. Come up with an additional standard for yourself, and discipline yourself to live within the boundaries of that standard. And then do one other thing. Consider the reasons behind having such standards lest you become too legalistic.

I now draw your attention to this important subject. There are reasons for the restrictions mentioned in the Bible and there are reasons for the restrictions we should place upon ourselves, and it is extremely important that we understand these reasons for having such restrictions.

Some people think that God wants to take all the fun out of life, and that is why He gives us so many restrictions. But this is not reasonable thinking. The Bible teaches that God wants to enhance our lives. The restrictions are meant to make our lives more meaningful. The standards are not meant to destroy happiness, but to increase happiness.

I enjoy playing sports. But I have learned that the best way to enjoy a certain sport is to play by the rules. As soon as people start cheating and breaking the rules, the game is no longer fun to play.

I also enjoy gardening. But I have learned that a lot of pruning and weeding and fertilizing are needed to produce a good garden. Certain rules must be followed if a gardener hopes to produce a good crop. The garden must be controlled.

And the same thing is true with our bodies. When we are able to use God's standards to control our sexual activity, then we will actually be more fulfilled in the end. And, if we choose not to abide by these rules, then life will become less meaningful and less fulfilling.

So with that in mind, let's take a look at two specific reasons why we should obey God's rules. The first reason is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:6. That verse says, "...and that in this

matter (that is the matter of sexual conduct) no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him." In other words, immoral sexual activity brings harm to other people.

The act of adultery is a good example to illustrate this point. If a man enters into a sexual relationship with someone other than his wife, what he is actually doing is taking his body that he has given to his wife in marriage so that it belongs to her and then giving it to someone else. So what he is actually doing is stealing from his wife. And if he enters into a sexual relationship with another man's wife, he is actually stealing from that man. And it is wrong to cheat and steal from another person. It's wrong, because it hurts the person who is being cheated.

And there are many other kinds of examples of how people get hurt when they do not follow the Biblical standards for sexual conduct. AIDS, and other venereal infections occur. Unwanted pregnancies happen and this results in many young women seeking abortions. So the hurt goes on and on.

But people are not only hurt physically, they are hurt emotionally. Illicit sex causes scars of guilt and shame that often last for a lifetime. Some people say that the reason why we feel guilty is because people (like Christians) have told us that such activity is wrong. If we could only do away with Christianity, then we could also do away with the feelings of guilt. But this kind of thinking is wrong. Even people who live in places where they have not been exposed to Christianity also have feelings of guilt when they violate God's rules for sexual conduct. So when we participate with someone in this kind of sin, we are placing guilt upon that person which may last for the rest of that person's life. We are harming them emotionally.

And, probably worse than anything else, when we are involved in illicit sex, we harm people spiritually. When we give into our animal passions, even once, will do damage to our own ability to control ourselves in the future. We are actually damaging our own ability to respond to truth. We are hurting ourselves spiritually. And we are also doing spiritual harm to others as well. When we participate in illicit sexual activity, we actually are working to destroy the moral fiber of another person's life.

A taxi driver once asked me why it was wrong to have a sexual relationship with someone outside of marriage. He said, "As long as you don't hurt anyone, it should be OK." But one has to be very naive or very deceived to believe that having sex outside of marriage will not harm another person.

If you are ever tempted to have sex outside of marriage, remember that true love always seeks what is best for another person. True love does not want to do something that harm another person. Don't ever let your feelings of affection for another person deceive you. Remember that sex outside of marriage always does harm and that God does not want us to bring harm to other people.

So the first reason why we need to obey God's rules is that we will harm ourselves and other people if we don't. The second reason is to protect the sanctity of marriage. In 1

Thessalonians 4:4, we read that one reason we should avoid sexual immorality is "that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable." There is a translation difficulty here, because the word that is translated here as "body" is translated other places as "wife". 1 Peter 3:7, for example uses the same Greek word to refer to wives. I know I must rely on the opinion of other scholars, but I am personally convinced that verse 4 is saying that one reason we should avoid sexual immorality is in order for a man to learn how to live with his own wife in a way that is holy and honorable. 1 Thessalonians 4:4, then, is stressing the sanctity of marriage.

The Bible places a lot of emphasis on the sanctity of marriage. In Genesis 1:24 we read these words, "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created Him; male and female He created them." Then, in Genesis 2:24 we read, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The fascinating thing is that Jesus brought these two verses of Scripture together to give us God's definition for a marriage. In Mark 10:7-8 we can see the logic clearly. God's image is represented in its most complete and perfect way through the marriage union. This is why the marriage union is sacred.

In the Old Testament the marriage was encouraged, honored, and protected by various laws given by God to His people. In the New Testament there is also a lot of emphasis placed on the sanctity of marriage. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned that it was wrong for men to encourage thoughts of lust toward another woman to whom they were not married. Jesus condemned divorce, except in the cases where the sanctity of marriage was already broken by an act of adultery. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." And Ephesians 5 compares the marriage union to the union between Christ and the church.

Truly, the New Testament views the marriage union as something very special and very important and very sacred. This does not mean that people who are not married are not special. The Bible also makes it clear that some have a special gift and calling to remain single. And people with such a calling should feel honored and encouraged.

However, the marriage union must be seen as the most sacred relationship between two people. It is meant to bind two people together in the deepest way physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The marriage union is very sacred, and sexual activity in marriage plays a very important role in enforcing this union.

First of all, it is the ultimate form of the physical expression of love between a man and a woman. I personally believe that God intended a husband and a wife to express their feelings of affection for each other in this way.

But besides the physical role which sex plays in marriage, there is also a spiritual role. The sexual union between a man and a woman should symbolize the truth that is recorded in

Genesis; that is, two people becoming one in order to reflect the image of God.

And then, intercourse in marriage, should also help bring a husband and wife into a deeper knowledge of one another. In some translations of the Old Testament, the word "to know" is often used to describe a sexual union between a husband and wife. Over the years, the sexual union between a husband and wife should help the couple grow in mutual understanding and sympathy and help them in their ability to communicate with each other. This activity really should help them to know one another.

I know that, for some couples, their sexual relations do not strengthen their marriage as they should. In fact, for some couples, there are real conflicts and even threats to their marriage because of their inability to adjust in this area. Such problems require special counseling.

But, overall, the sexual union between a husband and wife should strengthen and enhance their marriage union.

So to use sex outside of marriage destroys this precious and beautiful purpose. Sex cannot be an expression of a deep love for a mate when it is done with someone who is not your mate. Sex cannot represent the spiritual reason why God brings two people together when it is shared outside of the marriage and carried on in secret with intentions to deceive. And when sex is taken outside of marriage, it creates such a high level of mistrust between a husband and wife that it makes it almost impossible for them to communicate and know one another like they should. Sex outside of marriage clearly destroys the sanctity of marriage.

So these are the reasons why God has made the rules He has: First, to preserve the sacred institute of marriage; and second, to keep from harming other people. Sex is designed to enhance and satisfy and glorify marriage. It is not intended to corrupt and ruin through use outside of marriage.

I have to end with the same thought that I ended with last week. Perhaps all of us have done things in the past that we now regret. And there may be damage done that cannot be undone. But we must know that perfect forgiveness is available in Christ. Jesus can remake our damaged lives and even use our mistakes of the past to help people in the present. And our Savior wants to give us power every day to overcome the temptations that surround us. If we are only willing to yield our lives to Him, we will find the grace that we need to do what is right.

But we must not look at this matter lightly. Referring to sexual immorality, 1 Thessalonians 4:6 says, "The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already old you and warned you." Even though most sexual sins are committed in private, God will not allow us to do harm to other people and destroy the sanctity of marriage and then allow us to get away with it. Forgiveness is there for those who truly repent. But punishment is certain for those who are not sincere in their desire to repent and trust in God's grace to live a life that is pure.

I sometimes feel a bit embarrassed when I prepare a sermon like this one and the one I preached last week. I want to believe that none of us, including myself, really need to hear this kind of message, because we are already keeping God's standards in this area. But I have lived long enough to know that even the strongest people can fall in this area. In fact, it's when we think we are the strongest that we are most likely to fall. That is why we need to be reminded of these truths.

May God protect and preserve us in a generation that ignores God's standards and does not understand the reasons for the standards. May God help us to keep holy and to help others pursue a life of holiness.