

Pure Sex

Readings: Jeremiah 3:1-5; 1Thessalonians 4:1-8; Matthew 5:27-30

Do we really have to talk about sex? As we come to the seventh commandment, "Do not commit adultery", we can perhaps think of many reasons to not have this sermon.

We may think that the church has a bit of a hang up about sex and seems much more concerned with sins of the bedroom than the boardroom, homosexuality than hypocrisy, gender issues than justice issues. For some this seems like the really important commandment and to have a sermon on biblical sexual morality may reinforce such a view.

It may be difficult for some because they are well aware of their failures, of their sins and such a sermon will only bring up the pain. For others the difficulty will be because they have been sinned against. Still others may think this just has no relevance for me in my stage of life.

Yet there are good reasons for reminding ourselves of what the Bible teaches about appropriate sexual behaviour. Firstly, while most Christians are aware of what the Bible teaches many have great difficulty living it out. In 1988 a poll in *Leadership* in the US poll found that 23% of pastors said that they had done something sexually inappropriate whilst in full time ministry, 12% confessing to having sexual intercourse with someone other than their spouse. For general church goers the figure was double. We need to be reminded of what the Bible teaches.

Secondly, and more importantly the Bible does teach about sexual matters. The letters of Paul have numerous calls to sexual purity in the decadent sexual environment of the first century; it was obviously a problem then as well as now. In 1Thessalonians Paul reminds his readers of what he taught them about sexuality when he was with them. He was only there for 3 weeks before being forced to leave yet in that short time he taught them about these issues. He obviously thought it was worth teaching about. We need to remember that whilst this commandment is not the first we cannot pretend there are only 9 commandments.

We will follow what Paul teaches in 1Thessalonians 4 to help us consider what the Bible teaches about sexual behaviour and why and how we should keep this commandment.

INSTRUCTIONS THROUGH THE LORD JESUS (V2)

As Paul reminds his readers of what he has taught them in person he expressly reminds them that his teaching comes with the authority of Jesus. These are no man made mandates, religious rules, they comes from Christ himself. If we take him as Lord then we will want to do what he says. He has the right to rule over all parts of our lives, he is Lord of our sexuality.

What was it that Paul taught? He does not fully explain but not doubt it would have been what the Bible teaches about sex.

The Bible on Sex

Sex is Good

The Bible's consistent view is that sex is a good, wonderful, God given thing. It was God who made us male and female and it was he who said go forth and multiply with obvious implications. It was God who brought Eve to Adam and they take little time getting to the one flesh part.

The Bible includes hearty instructions to enjoy sexual pleasures it even includes some risqué erotic poetry, which can be almost embarrassingly frank at, such as Song of Songs (which I surprised that give the nature of crass Christian commercialism has not been rereleased as 50 Shades of Solomon). In the Bible, despite the reputation of the Church, sex is a good and wonderful God given pleasure.

Sex is for marriage, a blessing of a covenant

However there is a proper and improper context for this activity. From the beginning of the Bible to the end the appropriate place for sexual activity is within the covenant bounds of marriage. It is this that rules out adultery as well as fornication, intercourse before marriage, as

well as homosexual acts. Our society might not feel uncomfortable about such teaching, see it as limiting, puritan, old fashioned but it is the clear witness of God's word. Sex is for marriage.

The Bible though is particularly strong against adultery, that is, breaking marriage bonds, taking someone else's partner. Why would that be, why is adultery singled out in the 10 commandments and not any other of a possible list of sexual sins? I would suggest it is linked to the idea of covenant. Marriage is a covenant, an agreement to be joined together for life, adultery breaks that covenant. Adulterers are covenant breakers.

The 10 commandments form part of a covenant that God is entering into with the people of Israel. By including this command not only is God giving them his instructions in the sexual arena he is telling them not to be covenant breakers. Given this link it is no surprise that the prophets of Israel often liken Israel's failure to keep the covenant to adultery (i.e. Jeremiah 3:1ff)

The command then not only places limits on sexual activity but more deeply challenges us as to what kind of people we are. Do we keep our promises, our covenants, our relationships of trust? On both of these grounds this command is a serious challenge to our contemporary society which both rejects the notion of sexual limitations but more importantly it rejects the idea of being a covenant keeper. Life is about maximising pleasures for the self. Relationships move from "commitments" to "opportunities for personal growth and fulfilment". If a better relationship comes along which offers more for the self it should be pursued. This commandment calls us to think deeply about how we view life, it is calling for us "to make a deep decision, not simply about sex, but about the meaning and purpose of human life." (Lewis Smedes)

Jesus teaching in relation to divorce in Matthew 5 backs this up. This is one of Jesus most difficult sayings but at heart he is saying you cannot use legal declarations to cover the unfaithful nature of our hearts.¹ The wedding ring is a reminder of a promise that should not be broken and we need to keep reminding ourselves of such things any way we can, perhaps with a set of marital cufflinks as well!

HOW TO KEEP THE COMMAND

Aim to Please God (v1)

We need to consider how we are to keep this commandment. Temptations may come and if we are not properly prepared we may fall. Goethe wrote "Have pity on the man who tries to work out his principles in times of crisis."

All too often the response has been to formulate rules to limit behaviour, working out how far you can go before you have gone too far. The sort of "if you haven't got one don't touch it", "If you can't drive don't start the engine" variety. The problem is while this is good advice to the single person it may not help in the heat of the moment. Lines will be crossed and so another line in the sand is quickly drawn but the tide is already pulling you out.

Paul's approach is different, rather than a negative approach of focusing on what not to do he positively encourages us to seek to please God. He encouraged his readers to do this while he was with them (2:11-12) and now he wants to remind them that they will continue to please God. I want to encourage you to have this same mind set: seek to please God in all areas of life but particularly our sexuality. Is that the way you think about such matters?

Paul then goes on to give a whole bunch of other good reasons to live pure and holy lives that will please God.

The Will of God (v3)

If we are to please God we will want to do his will, and his will is that we be sanctified and avoid evil.

Sanctified

It is important that we remember God's will is our sanctification especially when there has been failure. Paul wrote to the Christians in licentious Corinth that despite their past "... you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) Sanctification is not something that comes from our own purity, it comes through the cleansing and forgiveness that we have in Jesus.

¹ This passage can cause pain to those who have been through the trauma of divorce, especially unwillingly. There is much more than can and should be said and please do speak with me if this impacts you. However it is important to note that Jesus is talking about "divorce to remarriage" not simply "divorce", that is divorcing A to marry B, which he is simply pointing out is legalized adultery.

There is forgiveness. We can think of biblical examples: of David and his adultery that he is assured by God of his forgiveness; the woman of "ill repute" who washes Jesus' feet knowing that she has been forgiven (Luke 7:36-50); and the woman caught in adultery who is not condemned but encouraged to go and sin no more. (John 8:1-11). If you have sinned in this area and you hear the voice of the tempter that "you are not good enough", "you are a sinner", "you are a failure before God", he is only telling the truth that is true of us all. But if you have turned to Christ whatever you have done you need to hear that you have been forgiven, washed clean, now go and sin no more. As none of us are without sin none of us have the right to throw stones.

To avoid evil

God's will is also to avoid evil. Biblically we can look at the Proverbs which are full of calls to avoid adulterous situations. The story of Joseph in Genesis shows the example of fleeing the seducer. Jesus radicalises this by saying that if eye or hand cause you to sin get rid of them, and that it is not enough to avoid inappropriate sexual acts but we have work on our hearts and minds. Biblical scholar Howard Marshall put it rather more calmly "where things are evil the Christian attitude is one of abstention and not of moderation."

Notice the active view of the eye in the above passage, we tend to view the eye as passive, just receiving images, but Jesus understands that our eyes can be active. Now there are times when you cannot help but see and give thanks for the beauty of God's creation. But often we may want to let the view dwell linger longer, get a better angle, and play over the view in our mind. As I have said in a previous sermon there is a big difference when faced with beauty between "Whew", and "Woooah". We are to be radical with ourselves in dealing with such behaviour.

There will be places, websites perhaps even people that we should keep away from. The will of God is to avoid sexual immorality.

Holy and Honourable Self Control v4.

Paul then goes on to explain how we do this. Unfortunately he comes out with a very difficult verse. Literally it says "each of you should learn to acquire his own vessel in holiness and honour." Is he talking about self control as in our translation or finding release in marriage? I will take a middle ground and say that this verse means learning to express your sexuality in holiness and honour with that which is legitimately yours. Whether this be your own body or your spouse the command is the same, treat this vessel with honour and holiness.

The Bible certainly encourages a healthy sex life within marriage as a bulwark against sexual temptation. (Proverbs 5:15-20, 1Corinthians 7:1-5) As my father once said to me, "If you are well fed at home you are far less likely to eat take away." Married couples are to be treating each other sexually in a compassionate and caring way. That is honourable and holy.

But for both marrieds and singles this will mean practicing self control. Bill Clinton admitted that there was no rational explanation for his adulterous behaviour. "I did something for the worst possible reason. Just because I could, I think that's just about the most morally indefensible reason anybody could have for doing anything." Yet this is the cause of much immorality, people do it because they can and practice no self control. Which leads us to our next point.

For the Church (v5)

Paul now says that by living this way we will show ourselves different from those around who don't know God. Nothing hurts the Church like sexual scandal. It brings justified charges of hypocrisy from those outside the church and damages their view of God. For the sake of the church and the knowledge of God we must be different.

Wronging a Brother (v6a)

Paul then speaks of the effect of sexual sin on others. Sexual sin can never be in a vacuum it will always affect others. In adultery we abuse our own spouse, the other's spouse. In fornication we abuse our prospective spouses. Inside the church the effects of sexual sin are devastating as relationships of trust and respect are torn asunder. Sadly too many of us know the pain which this causes.

Judgement of God (v6b)

Still in v6 Paul reminds his readers that God will punish such sin and we all know that this may not be kept for the day of judgement as people live with the consequences of their actions

now through disease, loss of job, broken relationships or broken homes. But we should not lose the knowledge that God will judge. There may be some comfort here for those who have been sinned against. God will judge, he knows your pain. But there is also a warning to those who are facing temptation for often I have found that sexual sin often seems go hand in hand with self deception. "We are in love, it is a beautiful thing, our circumstances are different." God will judge.

God's call to purity. v7

Paul also reminds us that we are called by God to be pure v7. I used to find this a great comfort when I was single and looking like I was set for a long innings. Not all are called to be married but we are all called to be pure and those that Lord calls he also equips.

The gift of the Holy Spirit v8

For God ... has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to lead to sanctified lives, and so by rejecting this command we reject God. Sadly many of us will have seen how sex and lust have led people away from the faith and God.

CONCLUSION

So Paul has built up layer upon layer a compelling defence for a sexually pure life, based on the desire to live a life that pleases God. You may have noticed that in a remarkable break from tradition this was an 9 point sermon. The points were that we should be sexually pure for

1. the command of the Lord
2. to please God
3. the will of God to be sanctified and abstain from evil
4. the honourable use of our vessel (body/ spouse)
5. the sake of the Church
6. our neighbour's sake
7. the judgement of the Lord
8. the call of God
9. The sake of the Holy Spirit

It is worth keeping a note of these 9 points in your bible or your wallet so that at times of loneliness or other times when you are likely to be tempted you can remind yourself and so stay out of dangerous territory.

But if you find yourself in such a situation try and remember all 9 reasons for remaining sexually pure, and once you have done this the moment probably will have passed (particularly if the other person involved asks what you are doing!). There points are a comprehensive defence against Satan's insistent whisper of "Oh go on it doesn't matter." It does matter, 9 times over. Above all remember to seek to please the Lord.

But I believe that Paul is concerned that not only should we be equipped for the fight with these 9 points but also that this is not a battle that we should face alone. This section is addressed to the whole church in plural terms. It is not surprising that this section is followed by encouragement to brotherly love and in three places in this final section of the letter he encourages the believers to encourage each other. If all of this has seemed irrelevant to you, you can still play your part to those for whom this is a massive struggle and trial.

Do we encourage our fellow Christians in their struggles in this area, have we made ourselves accountable to someone in this area. We need to be supported and encouraged to be sexually pure as much as the Thessalonians did in the promiscuous Graeco-Roman World. One way that we can support one another is by prayer so I would like to end in prayer.

Dear Father, your desire is for us to live lives that are pleasing to you, yet we continue live to please ourselves. Lord give us the desire to please you and give us the courage to encourage each other as we struggle with sexual temptations. Forgive us when we fall, and give us your Spirit so that the actions of our bodies, the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts may be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.