

Holy Living

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning again. I'm going to start the sermon this morning by reading actually from Psalm chapter 2. The first few verses. Listen to what Psalm 2 says about our world.
- And it was a prophecy about what was going to happen in the world. It says this, Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain, and the kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and His Anointed One?
- Let's tear off their chains and throw their ropes off us. The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord ridicules them. So, you see Psalm 2. The first, Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are kind of the foundational psalms for the rest of the book.
- And Psalm 2 gives us a picture of the world saying, let's break away from what God wants. Well, do you know what that looks like in the world today?
- It looks like this. These are pictures from the Pride Month celebrations that have just happened in the month of June. Where a month where it's set aside, where the world literally celebrates how far it's broken free from God's created design for sex.
- [1 : 1 5] That's what Pride Month is. It looks happy and fun and innocent and tolerant and accepting. But that's what's happening. Let's be real about this.
- Let's talk about what this actually is. This is Psalm 2 in action. This is celebration of how far the world has broken free of God's constraints, His bonds.
- Exactly what Psalm 2 said. Now, when we turn to the New Testament, when we read Paul's letters, we discover that Paul writes a lot about sex.
- It's almost, you'd be forgiven for thinking he's obsessed with the topic. But why? Why in these letters to the first Christians does Paul, not only in Thessalonians here, but in all of his moral instructions in his other letters, he mentions sexuality?
- Why does he talk about it so much? Well, the reason is, and the reason why it's a big topic in the Bible, is that sex has always been the first and most obvious way people express their rebellion against God.
- [2 : 2 5] When we misuse our bodies in ways that God doesn't want us to. It's the easiest way. We don't have to go out of our homes to do it. And it's a way that our sin inside us, our desire to break free from God's design, can come out most easily.
- And therefore, what that means, if sex is the way that people can first and most easily express their rebellion against God, what that means is that the right use of sex is the most obvious way for Christians to show that we're different to the world and that we're set apart to be the people of God.
- And that's Paul's point in these moral instructions he gives to these new Christians in the Thessalonian church. And the first of his moral, ethical instructions is about sexuality.
- And so that's what we're going to look at this morning, the idea of sanctification in sex. Sanctification in sex and what Paul teaches about it. Okay, so let's read from chapter 4, verse 3 to 8.

Listen to what he says. For this is God's will, your sanctification, that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions like the Gentiles who don't know God.

[3 : 53] This means one must not transgress or take advantage of a brother or a sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses. As we also previously told and warned you, for God has not called us to impurity, but to live in holiness.

Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God who gives you his Holy Spirit. For this is God's will, your sanctification.

Write that down on your fridge or in your Bible notes. Underline it, verse 3. This is God's will, your sanctification. It's a very important truth, because unlike a lot of modern Christianity today, Paul took seriously how the Thessalonians actually lived.

He didn't just call them to believe a certain set of propositions, but he called them to behave in a particular way.

That's the important thing about this letter, is that when he came and brought them the gospel, and he says, we've taught you these things before, you must do these things more and more, his gospel was calling people to live in a particular way, to behave in a particular way.

[5 : 05] And the point of salvation, he's writing here, the point of God saving you, is not for you just to come to church and sing songs about how you've been saved from your sins.

The point of you being saved is to actually stop sinning, right? Not just to sing about God's mercy and then go out and carry on living the way you've always lived. That's not the point. The point of salvation, God's will for you, is your sanctification, being made holy, putting off sin.

That is the purpose, and it's always been the purpose of God's covenant people. When God brings humans into a covenant with himself, he does that so that they can change, so that he can change them, so that he can make them different to the rest of this fallen world.

So, Alan read earlier for us some of the laws from Leviticus, and you can read, there's pages and pages and pages of these laws, and some of them sound so foreign and strange to us, but that's the point.

They have to be foreign because the point of the laws to Israel in Leviticus and Exodus and those books is to make them different from everyone else, the surrounding pagan nations.

[6 : 14] That was the point of all those old laws that you read in the Old Testament. And there were some very strange ones, but every single one was a way of separating Israel and keeping them separate from the rest of the world.

Well, here Paul is explaining that a major way that Christians are separated and set apart from the world is in how they view and use sex.

Look at verse 3 to 5 again. That you keep away from sexual immorality, you, Christians, God's new covenant people.

Verse 4, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with the lustful passions like the Gentiles who don't know God.

See, the correct use of sex is what is going to set us apart from the world. It's how you control your body demonstrates that you are one of God's people.

[7 : 18] That's what he's saying here. Now, that verse, each one of you knows how to control his own body, verse 4, has been quite notoriously difficult for the translators to translate.

Maybe your Bible version has a different translation or a footnote, which offers a different translation. It could be translated that you control your own body, or it could be translated that you acquire your own spouse.

And translators are a little bit still in disagreement as to which one of those two translations it is. But it's very possible that Paul could have meant both of those things, that he could deliberately have used words that could refer to you controlling your own body, or acquiring your own spouse, because both of those things were things that definitely weren't done in the surrounding culture of Thessalonica.

In the Greco-Roman world, the culture was very different to what Paul's saying here is completely counter-cultural. So just to give you a little bit of a picture of the culture of the day, in the first century Greco-Roman world, parties would consist of wild orgies, where there would be a lot of sex happening.

Going to the temple, the pagan temples, part of going to the temple and doing the sacrifices would be to hang out with the temple prostitutes. They came part and parcel with the religion.

[8 : 49] That was certainly one way to get men coming to temple. And then, married men would, it would be totally acceptable for married men in this age to have multiple sexual partners.

So they would have their wife, who would be the legitimate bearer of their heirs, of their children, but they would also have a few concubines on the side, and then on the weekend they would go spend time with the temple prostitutes.

And that was normal, and it was acceptable. Now we look back and go, that was pretty shocking. But 2,000 years later, is society that different?

I don't think so. In fact, one of the, if not the most popular, comedy sitcom in the 21st century is, Friends.

Great show, isn't it? It's a funny show. It's a really well produced show. Chandler's a funny guy. But, this and many other shows like it, if you watch on TV, what it does is it subtly, not so subtly actually, quite openly, glorifies and celebrates having multiple sexual partners, doesn't it?

[10 : 05] And we've got to be aware of the world's view of sex, and how different it is from what Paul is calling us to. I'm not saying we shouldn't watch shows like this. If we didn't watch things that promoted the world's view, we would just be, like we would never see anything.

We would have to keep our eyes closed all the time. But when we do see this view on this attitude on sex portrayed on popular media, and in music, and we hear it, and it's normal, and it's acceptable, we've got to be aware as God's people, that these promote the world's use of sex.

They do not tell us what God designed sex for. That is very different to how the world sees sex. We can't see these things as the norm, because they're not the norm according to God.

It looks fun and innocent. It really does. And shows like this make it look fun and innocent, but it's what the Bible calls sexual immorality. Look there, in verse 3.

This is God's will, your sanctification, that you keep away from sexual immorality. Sexual immorality is the Greek word pornea, from which the word porn, pornography comes from.

[11 : 23] But that word doesn't only refer to pornography. That word pornea refers to any use of sex outside of what God designed it for.

Any use of your sexuality, your sexual organs outside of what God designed. And what God designed sex for is within a committed, God-ordained marriage.

That is its purpose. That's what he made it for. He made sex to be something shared between a commitment in a husband and wife relationship, and a way of bearing children, and enjoying your spouse.

And that is its purpose, to strengthen and solidify a God-ordained marriage. Sex outside of that purpose is misusing it.

It's like, imagine, imagine I took this microphone, and I decided that I want to use it as a drumstick. I take it and I use it on my drum set.

[12 : 23] Right? Now, that's a misuse of something that's very delicate and made for a particular purpose. And the result of that, if I start banging this on my drum kit, not only will it be ultimately unsatisfying, because it's quite bendy, it's not going to be very good, that's not its purpose, but it's going to damage it.

Right? It's going to be damaging to its ultimate purpose. And in the same way, when we misuse sex outside of God's design, it does the same thing. It's ultimately unfulfilling and unsatisfying, but also it damages its real purpose.

And it's more harmful than we think. It's more harmful. The misuse of sex is more harmful than the world definitely gives it credit for. And we see that in what Paul says here.

Look at verse 6. He says, this means we must not transgress against or take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner. We must not wrong a brother or sister in how we use our sexuality.

What he's saying here is that the misuse of sex will inevitably harm someone else, even when you don't think it does. You know, the excuse we often hear, or even from Christians, the excuse for sexual immorality, use of sex outside of God's design, is, and you've heard this before, well, as long as it's consensual and it doesn't hurt anyone, surely it's okay?

[13 : 51] Well, Paul's saying here, it does hurt someone, even if you don't realize it. Obviously, adultery harms the spouse and children and breaks a family.

But, even sex before marriage harms your future spouse and the other person's future spouse in their marriage. even just fantasizing in your mind harms you more than you know and it harms your relationships with other people because it makes you see them as sexual objects.

It's very harmful to misuse this very powerful and good thing that God has given us, our sexuality. But the moment we misuse that, its power starts to corrupt and break down relationships.

That's the first reason that we need to take this seriously as Christians and not be all Victorian and not think about sex and not talk about sex. Maybe even now, you're uncomfortable with the amount of times I've used the word sex in this sermon.

That's not what you expect from a pastor wearing a dog collar. But, it's a good and godly and beautiful thing. And so, we've got to uphold the right use of it, not just not talk about it and let the world go wild without us actually teaching what God's right purpose for sex is and glorifying it as it should be.

[15 : 17] But, if that's not reason enough that it's harmful when you misuse it, Paul gives another reason in the second half of verse 6. Look what he says. Because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses as we also previously told and warned you.

And so, just as we can't use the excuse, oh, well, you know, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, it's fine, it's all consensual. We also can't use the excuse, well, what I do in private is my business. What Paul's saying here is, no, it's not.

What you do with the body God gave you is his business and God designed you intricately and he designed your sexuality and so he takes very seriously when you misuse it and he sees even if no one else does.

And that's why Christians can't adopt the world's norms for sex. Verse 5. That each of you, sorry, that's verse 4.

Verse 5. Not with lustful passions like the Gentiles who don't know God. He uses the word Gentiles there deliberately because the Gentiles are defined in the Old Testament as all those who weren't in God's covenant.

[16 : 30] All the non-covenant people. All those who did not know God who were outside of relationship with God. And in the same way Paul's saying you are covenant people.

You have a special relationship with God. You know God. You know his expectations. You know what he made you for. And so you can't follow and take as normal the views of those who are outside of the covenant and those who do not know God and are not trying to please him.

I mean it's crazy to take as standard the behavior of people who are not even trying to please God. Isn't it? It's like I don't know if you've ever run a marathon or a half marathon but in running races you'll have a pace setter.

Right? There'll be a person whose job it is to set the pace if you want to finish the marathon at a particular time and they'll have a flag and you can see them and you can follow them and as long as you're with them you'll know that you're going to finish the race in the right time.

And so you look for this pace setter and in life it's the same way. Inevitably in order to know how to behave or how to think or how to speak we look around and we look at pace setters we look at other things at other people as examples of what's acceptable.

[17 : 55] But looking around at the world to see what's acceptable about sex is like following a pace setter in a race who's not even heading for the finish line who's not even in the race.

That's how crazy it is to set what we think about sex based on what the world tells us. But it's really hard to do that because we're exposed on a daily basis to the world's view of sex far more I think we watch TV and listen to radio far more than we read our Bible if you just look at the amount of time and so actually we're exposed to the world's view of sexuality much more than God's view.

And so to please God Paul is saying here we've got to make an effort to change how we view and see and we must abstain from all sexual immorality.

Now if you've been a Christian for a while you'll know this and you'll go yes of course of course I abstain from sexual immorality I'm quite good I'm quite holy in my sexuality.

But look what Paul says in verse one about all of these ethical instructions he's giving and it's a phrase he uses over and over again at the end of verse one he says as you receive instruction from us how you should live to please God so they already knew what the standards were as you are doing they're already doing it he says do this more and more and he says it multiple times in this passage whatever you're doing whatever you know is right learn to do it more learn to do it better however far you've come in your sexual purity you can do better that's what he's saying in your thoughts in what you watch on the internet in how you speak you can there is always room for improvement in your sexual purity and so do so more and more because sanctification in this area as with every other area is a process and so that's the first thing he teaches us here is sanctification in sex and how important it is that

[20 : 21] Christians have and live out sexual purity against and in contrast to the world around us and that will be seen it will be noticed and they won't like it as we can see in the computable and others that's exactly the point of the computable actually it's trying to make us conform to the world's pace in sex it's trying to make it's trying to force us to follow the wrong pace setter who's not even in the race are we going to let it do that that's the first area Paul addresses but the second area he goes on now to address another area that Christians are to be distinct from the world in and that is in genuine Christian love in the way Christians love now one of the first accusations against Christians who portray a godly view of sexual immorality as opposed to the world's view of sex one of the first accusations against them will be oh you're so anti love you're so loveless and intolerant

Paul's saying here actually nothing is further from the truth in fact he says Christians should be the world leaders in love because they have access to something that the world doesn't have look at verse nine about brotherly love you don't need me to write to you because you yourselves are taught by God to love one another they're taught by God to love you know what that's like being taught by God how to love it's like taking tennis coaching from Roger Roger Federer because God is the source of love he is the best lover and so that is the best way to learn how to love rightly and properly and we see in the gospel what love truly is godly love divine love is love that comes in the form of

Jesus Christ and for a bunch of people who firstly don't think they need him and secondly want to kill him he gives his own life to save them and give them something they don't deserve out of mercy and totally undeserved love that that is love that is how love is displayed by God that is how God proves that he is the universe's greatest lover by loving in a way that is just so foreign to the world listen to John chapter 13 Jesus says these words I give you a new command love one another just as I have loved you you are also now to love one another by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another so what

Jesus is saying here is this new divine love that I'm about to show you by dying on the cross for you that is a love that only you can do and you have a responsibility as Christians to show to the world that merciful undeserved kind of love Christians are far from anti love Christians are the world leaders in love we should be because we have been loved by God now we might be good at standing out from society due to our sexual ethics but let me ask you a very important question how much do we stand out by the way we love how much do we stand out from the world and how conspicuous are Christians in the way we love how do we love each other differently from how the world loves so much so that it stands out and that people know that we are Christ's disciples well think think about the world's way of love most of the world's love with a few exceptions like a mother's love for their child is by and large self centered it's

I love this person because they do something for me or they give me a certain feeling or they make me feel a certain way they benefit and treated in the world and often it's it's a put on type of love it's a oh yeah I love being with you tonight I'm so glad you could come around we must do this again sometime hey yeah thanks hugs all right bye bye close the door what a bore let's not do that again you know the world's love is it's one thing on the surface and one very different thing in the inside and so it's easy to learn to love how the world loves but to love in a gospel way a love that is undeserved a love that shows grace and compassion and that is genuine that is not different on the surface from what it is behind closed doors that kind of love that's a work of

[26 : 04] God that's something we need to be taught by God how to do but and that's also something we need to do better more and more look again at verse 10 verse 10 of 1 Thessalonians 4 in fact you are doing this toward all the brothers and sisters in the entire region of Macedonia great the Thessalonians were already doing that they'd already been taught by God how to love but look what he says next but we encourage you brothers and sisters do this more and more however far you've come in expressing divine love to those around you you can do better you can do that more and more and when we do when we work on these two areas in particular because these are the two areas Paul focuses on he's writing the

Thessalonians he's got to choose you know there's only so much space he's got to write on the scroll he's got to choose what ethical instructions am I going to give these young Christians what are the things they've got to work on first and foremost he chooses sex and love and as we work on these two areas ourselves and our thinking and actions and looking for ways that we can improve and get better at our sexual purity and replacing that more and more with genuine Christian love well then the more we will please God and the more we will make it obvious to the world that we belong to him let's pray Lord we do thank you for the apostle Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians and how wow how relevant they are today even though they were written 2000 years ago we realize how much we need to hear these things in a world that is so far is running in the complete opposite direction for what you call us to and created us to help us

Lord to stand out from this world in how we love and in our sexual purity and help us not to be ashamed to stand out even when the world doesn't want us to stand out and Lord in our private personal lives would you help us each as your people to seek to please you thank you Lord that we can please you that we can make you happy by how we live and we pray that you would help us to do this more and more in Jesus name Amen for or you you you you you