

## 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 (DHT)

So, finally brothers, we ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received from us about the manner you should walk and please God—as you now walk—abound all the more. For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God—your holiness: you must abstain from sexual-immorality. Each of you must know how to control his vessel in holiness and honor, not in lustful passion, as the Gentiles who don’t know God; in this matter do not transgress or take advantage of a brother, because the Lord is an avenger concerning all this, as we also foretold and warned you. For God has not called us to impurity but to holiness. Thus, any who reject this do not set aside man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

### Introduction

As believers our bodies are literally—not metaphorically—temples of God’s presence. Being a temple is part of our identity—we *are* temples. Our bodies have significance, and yet our bodies remain a source of sin.<sup>1</sup> It is worldly to say our true selves are trapped in this body-prison. It is also worldly to say all desires of our bodies are inherently good. The source of inherent good is neither in our soul nor in our body, but in God. It is God who is good, not us. The root of all sin is the desire to be God; this was the basis of the first temptation—that Adam and Eve would be like God. The reason we want to be God is because we know the source of all good is God and naturally, nobody wants to admit they’re a sinner; we all want to believe *we* are good, and the only way to assure that is if *we* are God, but we’re not. “Desires for things God has forbidden are a reflection of how sin has distorted me, not how God has made me.”<sup>2</sup> The desires of our bodies are not the definition of good. In addition to our hearts, our bodies need changing as well. We read in Rom. 8 that our *bodies* eagerly await the age to come when even our *bodies* will be transformed into what they were created to be.

Now, this is not the case of our hearts being changed now and our bodies being changed later—no, both body and soul experience the immediate and ongoing transformation of the Gospel that reaches its fullness in the age to come. When Paul commands us to glorify God with our bodies, this is not something we wait to do in the age to come; it is something we do now. So

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<sup>1</sup> Please see my message, “What Makes a Temple a Temple?” for more.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Allberry, via Twitter – May 20, 2022. This quote also appears in his book *Is God Anti-Gay* (The Good Book Company, 2015); however, I have no page number because I pulled the quote from Twitter, not the book.

while there is a future change that will happen to our bodies, the immediate and ongoing change that comes to our bodies as Christians is in how we use them. This change occurs as we walk with the Holy Spirit whom God has given to us as our Helper by engaging in bodily activities God has blessed and abstaining from bodily activities God has forbidden.

### **The Jerusalem Council and Sexual-Immorality**

While all sins are equally damnable before God, the NT nevertheless emphasizes the need for God’s people to flee all types of sexual-immorality. Picking on sexual-immorality is not an apostolic pet-project; there is a reason the apostles focus on sexual-immorality, and much of it stems from Acts 15. The Book of Acts portrays the rapid growth of the early church in connection to the initial and continuous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There was a radical unity among the early converts to Christianity. Thousands converted. The church almost exclusively grew by means of Jews coming to know Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah.

But then a shift occurred. With the Eunuch of Ethiopia and Cornelius the Centurion, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was extended also to the Gentiles. Peter had an apocalyptic vision in which he was shown that Gentiles would be included into the People of God through Jesus Messiah.<sup>3</sup> This caused great distress for some Jewish Christians. Some legalists told Gentiles they had to get circumcised if they wanted to join the movement; Gentiles needed to convert by their outward works of obeying Moses *before* they could believe in Jesus Messiah.

This issue facing the early church was right at the heart of the Gospel. As this Jewish movement expanded into the Gentile world, the question they needed to address was “What must I do to be saved?” So the first Church Council in history assembled with James, the brother of Jesus, as the head. In addition to the Pharisees, the Council also heard from Paul, Barnabas and Peter who told of their experiences with the Gentiles. Peter concluded his remarks by saying: *We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will* (vs. 11).

Then James resolved the debate by ruling in agreement with Peter that all are saved by grace alone. James’ ruling was not based on personal experience, but on God’s Word, namely Amos 9, Isa. 45, and Gen. 12, which clearly articulate God’s plan for the Gentile world to join the Jewish nation at Zion to worship him alone. And yet, James does not say as a result of

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<sup>3</sup> Some may question my characterization of “apocalyptic.” However, there is an otherworldly element to the vision, it is a *vision*, and the Greek word *apokaluptos* simply means “to reveal.”

salvation-by-grace-alone that works have no place in the life of a believer. Rather, instead of works of obedience being the *root* of salvation, James says that works of obedience are the *fruit* of salvation. Later in his own epistle he writes that faith without works is dead. Just as he ruled at the Jerusalem Council, faith comes first. Or as Martin Luther famously put it: “We are saved by faith alone; but the faith that saves is never alone.”<sup>4</sup> While it was James who stated the ruling at the Jerusalem Council, it was unanimously declared by the Council to be the decision of the Holy Spirit, not the decision of James. The Holy Spirit’s decision was that Gentiles did not need to get circumcised to be saved, but *after* putting their faith in Jesus they were expected to obey the Holy Spirit by abstaining from blood sacrifice, idolatry, and sexual-immorality, because these three *pollute* the holiness of the body-temples of believers.

So the Council wrote a letter to all Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, that salvation is by grace alone, that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish, but Gentiles did need to make holiness their lifestyle. In the Council’s letter, the early church placed the expectation of holiness on *all* Christians and they called these three abstentions “requirements.” This may sound to some like legalism, and it would be if these were *prerequisites* to salvation; but rather they are necessary *responses* to salvation, and so commanding these three requirements among those who claim to be saved is not legalism; it is rather about protecting the holiness of one’s body-temple.

When we trace these three required abstentions throughout the NT, we actually find *all three* are points of emphasis to which the NT writers constantly return. So it is not that sexual-immorality is a pet-project the apostles love to condemn, but rather that eating blood, crafting or worshipping idols, *and* sexual-immorality are particularly condemned. These three are constantly condemned because the unanimous decision of the early church under the guidance and approval of the Holy Spirit determined these requirements of utmost necessity for *all* Christians, because blood sacrifice, idolatry, and sexual-immorality *pollute* the holiness of all believers.

### **God’s Will: Your Sexual Sanctification**

By a show of hands, how many of you are aware that Calvinists and Arminians have some disagreements? There is intense debate between these two groups and the debate is on weighty matters of theology. If Calvinists and Arminians *agree* with one another about the meaning of a passage, the interpretation warrants our attention. In Ephesians 1:3-5, Paul writes

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<sup>4</sup> I do not have a citation for this relatively famous quote.

this: Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Messiah, who has blessed us in Messiah with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as *he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him*. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Messiah, according to the purpose of his will.

This passage is a focal point in the debate between Calvinists and Arminians as to the extent of God’s role in *choosing* us; this is not light-hearted disagreement. Calvinists would say nobody is able to believe unless he or she is first chosen by God. Arminians would say that God looked down the corridors of time and saw who would choose him and so his choice of them is in response to what we eventually do on our own. This morning is not the time to parse the meaning of Ephesians 1 or the debate, but I bring it up because among many disagreements about these specific verses, Calvinists and Arminians agree about something from this passage. In eternity past, God determined that his people would be holy. Whether people become God’s people because they chose him or because he chose us is beside the point that *all* who are God’s people have been predestined to a life of holiness. Without a doubt, God’s will for your life is your holiness. Calvinism and Arminianism are in agreement that if you are a believer in the resurrection of Jesus then God’s destiny for your life is your individual holiness; this destiny for your life was unequivocally established before the foundation of the world.

In our passage, Paul writes that the will of God is our holiness. But Paul does not stop there; he goes right into sexuality. This is the will of God, your holiness: *that you abstain from sexual-immorality*. In this passage, we are confronted with the clear command of Scripture to be sexually-holy. To separate sexuality from holiness is a non-sequitur. Sexual-holiness is not a suggestion or something to try when it’s convenient. Sexual-holiness is a command; a never-ending *requirement* for all who claim to be a Christian; marriage does not end the command for you to be sexually holy; divorce or the death of a spouse does not absolve a Christian from sexual-holiness. The lifestyle of sexual-holiness is difficult, especially in our present culture. If you are a follower of Jesus, then in eternity past, God predestined you to holiness, with your *sexual-holiness* squarely in view. Any pastor, preacher, teacher, theologian, Bible-college professor, or parent who tells you your sexual-holiness is irrelevant to your life is nothing other than a false teacher who you must avoid. There is simply no wiggle room on the lifelong essentiality of sexual-holiness for all Christians.

This is where the “purity” movement of the 90s got off-track. Although well-intentioned, purity culture equated sexual-holiness with virginity, but these are not the same thing. Moreover, purity culture was fixated only on pre-marriage life, as if once you’re married purity no longer matters.<sup>5</sup> But sexual-holiness never ends, and God has given every Christian two lifestyle options: the holiness of marriage or the holiness of celibacy. Both of these options have their benefits as Gospel-illustrations and both come with a set of challenges. Marriage illustrates the Gospel in a husband sacrificially loving his wife as Jesus loves the church and a wife respectfully submitting as the church submits to Jesus; celibacy illustrates the Gospel in a person devoting themselves to God as Jesus devoted himself to the Father. The obvious challenge to marriage is the loss of autonomy—or at least perceived autonomy; the obvious challenge for celibacy is resolving loneliness. These are not impossible challenges, but they must be acknowledged so they can be appropriately addressed. Some of you have experienced the intimacy of marriage but are no longer married; God’s command for you to live sexually-holy has not changed; even if the way you live that out has.

### **Synod, “Unchastity,” and Repentance**

Our denomination has been through a season of debate about sexuality. Denomination after denomination has fallen to the tide of culture in affirming as God-honoring sexual behaviors God has clearly condemned. The committee was tasked with examining the confessional element of the theology we have long-believed. The debate at Synod centered on Heidelberg Q&A 108, which is in your bulletin, and which we will confess together later in the service. What is meant by the word “unchastity”? Synod declared a confessional-level interpretation of the word “unchastity” in Heidelberg Q&A 108. Does the seventh commandment

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<sup>5</sup> ILLUSTRATION: I have two friends. Christian-Friend-A had sex with over two dozen people but after becoming a Christian tried to put an end to his promiscuity and it took some time, but he eventually stopped watching pornography, stopped engaging in casual hookups, and has since gotten married to a Christian woman. Christian-Friend-B has never had sex but watches pornography two or three times a week, not as bad as many of his friends. If sexual-holiness is defined by virginity, then Friend-B is smooth-sailing meanwhile Friend-A is now stuck in an endless cycle of guilt over sins for which Jesus’ death already paid. But sexual-holiness is not equated with virginity. Sexual-holiness is about what you’re doing today, and I think it’s clear that the walk of Christian-Friend-A is one that has taken the pursuit of sexual-holiness seriously. His pursuit of sexual-holiness did not end at marriage. Before he was married, pursuing sexual-holiness meant abstaining from sexual behavior with his then-girlfriend, even though he really wanted to. After he got married, pursuing sexual-holiness means having sex with his wife and enjoying her body, which now belongs to him and giving her his body, which now belongs to her. Sexual-holiness is a command for all Christians that never ends. Despite your past, sexual-holiness is something you can decide today; start afresh today without delay.

“You shall not commit adultery” apply only to those who are married? In other words, as an unmarried man, am *I* even able to violate this commandment? The answer is yes. Jesus quoted the seventh commandment and elevated it by saying that anyone who has looked with lust at another person has already broken this command, married or not. Thus, Heidelberg Q&A 108 has a confessional-level interpretation by defining the word “unchastity” as including seven things: adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, polyamory, pornography, homosexual-sex, and sexual violence within or outside of covenantal marriage between one man and one woman.

These are the sexual behaviors we *confessionally-declare* to be sinful. So what does that mean for those of you who have ever committed adultery, or those of you who have ever engaged in premarital-sex, or extra-marital sex whether by a hidden affair or by an open-polyamorous arrangement, or for those of you who have ever viewed or produced pornography, or for those of you who have ever engaged in homosexual-sex, or for those of you who have ever sexually-violated another person, whether that be your spouse or not? If these are sins from your past, if you have confessed them to God, and if you have stopped engaging in those behaviors, then you need not feel further guilt or shame for these things. *Your past is a place of reference, not a place of residence.* But what if these are not things from your past? If these sins are currently in your life, then you need to repent. 1 John tells us if we say we have no sin we are liars but it also says Christians do not make a practice of sinning. As we grow in our faith, we ought to sin less, but yet we *do* continue to sin. When we do we must repent; the true Christian will be grieved at their sin; one of the marks of a Christian is an attitude of repentance. We must repent, because persistent, unrepentant sin threatens the genuineness of one’s saving faith.<sup>6</sup>

### **Repentance and Self-Control**

What does it mean to repent? There are two different, though connected, aspects to repentance. The first type of repentance is a change of mind and the second is a change of direction. The first aspect of repentance—to change your mind—is to see God as he really is, to see yourself as you are really are and as God sees you, and to see your neighbor and the world around you as your neighbor and the world truly are; to value and cherish the things God values and cherishes, such as the dignity of human life at all stages, ages, and races. When we change

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<sup>6</sup> The nuance of “persistent, unrepentant sin” also reflects our denomination’s teaching reading adultery as grounds for divorce, which was utilized as a basis of consistency with all sexual-sins. In other words, a one-time mess-up does not authorize someone to divorce their spouse, as painful as that may be.

our mind about who God really is and who we really are, we are able to see our sin as it really is, namely an affront against the absolute holiness of God. But repentance is not just feeling sorry about your sin, especially if that sorrow is so weak or nominal that we head right back to the same sin again tomorrow. In addition to an internal sorrow, repentance also includes a change of direction. What direction is your life headed?

In the HB, we read of a character named Lot who was rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah. How did Lot get there? When Abraham and Lot split up, Lot picked the plot of land that looked most appealing (Gen. 13:10). Lot went in that direction, and then settled in the cities surrounding Sodom (vs. 12). Then Abraham rescued Lot because a war broke out between some kings and we are told that Lot moved from the cities surrounding Sodom into the city of Sodom itself (14:12). After Abraham rescued Lot, he went back to the security of Sodom (vs. 16). Then when the angels came to judge Sodom, we are told Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom, which means Lot was a leader in the city (19:1), and you know the rest of the story. How did Lot get so entrenched in this sinful city? Lot got closer and closer, flirting with sin one step at a time.

In Judges we read of a man named Samson who walked 25 miles to engage in sexual-immorality. 25 miles! Google estimates 25 miles to take about 132,000 steps. Each step got him closer and closer to sin. He had 132,000 opportunities to turn around; to make a 180 from what he knew God prohibited toward the holiness he knew God called him. What are you inching your way toward; self-justifying your behavior because you haven't yet technically reached the point of sin? Every step toward sin is an opportunity to turn around; to repent from the sinful direction you're headed and instead walk in the inconvenient and difficult direction of holiness instead. God has promised us in 1 Cor. 10:13 that *no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.* The way of escaping temptation is equated with enduring through temptation; God does not make temptation flee from you; rather, God provides the endurance *for you* to flee from temptation. If you're walking toward sin, whether it's right in front of you, a few thousand steps in front of you, or a few weeks in front of you—you need to recognize that what you're walking toward is sin and you need to turn around!

Our passage tells us the primary focus of the change-of-direction is by controlling our bodies with holiness and honor in a way that is different from those who are not Christian. If

your sexual-behavior looks just like an unbeliever, then who are you representing to the world? In our culture, casual sex is so regular—living with a significant other prior to marriage is so normal—that to abstain from sexual activity communicates that you’re a weak person; you must be so unfulfilled. Someone I know who recently got engaged recently told me, “You wouldn’t buy a car without test-driving it first, right?” Or in other words, sex is a commodity that exists for *me* and is something I can trade in for something newer when the polish on the current model wears off. This is the world’s treatment of the body and sexuality. The Greek-word *time*, rendered by ESV as “honor” is the same word Paul uses elsewhere when he says you were bought with a *price*. Since our bodies were bought at a cost of great value so also should we treat our bodies as having that great value. The value of our bodies is the value of Jesus’ shed blood on the cross. By treating our bodies as inherently valuable, we approach our bodies and sexuality distinct from the world.

We must engage in self-control. Self-control is difficult. If self-control were easy it wouldn’t be a spiritual discipline and we wouldn’t need to be commanded to do it. The fact we are commanded to do it is evidence God recognizes its difficulty for us. This means self-control is not something that just falls into our laps; we must work on it. Jonathan Edwards says it like this: “A true and faithful Christian does not make holy living an accidental thing. It is his great concern. As the business of the soldier is to fight, so the business of the Christian is to be like Christ.”<sup>7</sup> We practice self-control by being honest about our desires rather than suppressing them or hiding them. We practice self-control by confessing those real desires to God and to trusted Christians who can affirm the sinfulness of those desires, remind us of the finished work of Jesus for us, pray for us, and hold us accountable. Knowing what sorts of things set us off, we practice self-control by placing boundaries on ourselves to protect our holiness. Doing these things treats our bodies with the honorable value that Messiah’s blood paid for.

Practicing self-control does not just protect our own holiness; it also protects our fellow believers. Paul commands us to practice self-control rather than “lustful passions,” the same words he uses in his explanation of sinful-sexuality in Romans 1. Paul explains the meaning of “lustful passion” in verse six. These lustful passions involve transgressing and wronging our fellow believers in a sexual way. In our passage, Paul tells us that when we engage in sexual-immorality, we sin against our holy God and we sin against our fellow believers, for collectively

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<sup>7</sup> Much like the Luther quote above, this is a rather famous quote. I have no specific citation.



we are all one body; one body, Paul writes to the Corinthians, being built up into one collective temple of God (1 Cor. 3). Paul warns us against taking sexual-advantage of another believer. More so than any Marvel character, God is an avenger who will not leave the *unrepentant* unpunished.<sup>8</sup> Practicing self-control with our bodies not only honors our bodies, but it is one way we express our love for God *and* our love for our neighbor.

### **Conclusion – An Ultimatum: Accept this or Reject God**

Ever cognizant of future generations that may want to interpret his words as culturally-restricted, Paul solidifies the *permanence* of this requirement of sexual-holiness for Christians. Paul writes that it is God, not Paul, who calls us to holiness; if anyone rejects this call to holiness, specifically sexual-holiness, they are not rejecting Paul but God himself. This is why the gift of the Holy Spirit is so important! Without the Spirit, obeying the command of holiness is a waste of time. We *need* the Spirit to convict us of sin. We *need* the Spirit to point us in the correct direction when we wander to the right or the left. We *need* the Spirit to give us endurance to battle through the pains of temptation, reminding us that our momentary suffering will be worth it in the end. We *need* the Spirit. Our passage closes with the reminder that we have been given the Spirit; this is the very gift that makes our bodies temples; this is the very gift that enables us to live a life of Gospel-transformation *now*. It is because we have this Spirit that the call to holiness is not just about spiritual or ethereal matters, but about the body as well.

The lifelong call to holiness for all Christians is shown in how we use our bodies. Our bodies may have disordered desires,<sup>9</sup> but just because our body has a desire does not mean those desires are good. We must subject every desire to the Word of God. If we trust our feelings or our experience then we are living by sensuality, a type of sin that keep people out of heaven. We must live according to the Word of God that commands of us this weighty-matter of sexual-holiness. If you believe what you like about the Word of God and reject what you don't like, then you don't believe in the Bible; you simply believe in yourself.<sup>10</sup> It is an incredible ultimatum presented to every believer: Follow your heart or follow the God who made the difficult path of sexual-holiness possible with his gift of the Holy Spirit at your conversion. Follow God by

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<sup>8</sup> This is a play-on God's self-revelation in Ex. 34:6-7.

<sup>9</sup> By “disordered,” I mean any desire that does not correspond to how we were created to be.

<sup>10</sup> This idea comes form of a quote by Augustine, which Alistair Begg said in the “American Gospel: Christ Alone” firm. The original placed the object as “the Gospel,” whereas I have modified it to “the Bible.”

following the example of Jesus who was tempted in every sort of way you are, yet fled from every single one without ever sinning; he suffered through every temptation that you may also have the strength to endure through your own. He suffered even to the point of death, believing he would be raised from the dead. That vindication and freedom from sin awaits all who call on the name of Jesus as their Lord and submit now their whole selves—body and soul—to the lifestyle God predestined for them before the foundation of the world. “Genuine evidence of the Holy Spirit’s influence in a person’s life is not excitement, experience, or emotionalism. It’s sanctification producing a Christlike character.”<sup>11</sup>

Having now heard this command of Scripture for you to live sexually-holy lives, let us confess our faith with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism. What does the seventh commandment teach us? *That God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.* And does God, in this commandment, forbid only such scandalous sins as adultery? *We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why God forbids all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires, and whatever may incite someone to them.*

Let’s pray.

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<sup>11</sup> Dustin Benge, via Twitter – April 26, 2021.