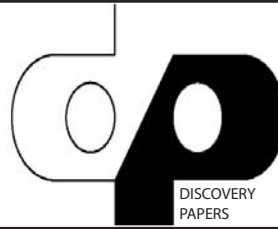


STEADY SEXUALITY

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
5th Message
Paul Taylor
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1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Everybody was surprised to hear it from him. A few weeks ago, a new video went around the internet featuring Russell Brand, a British actor and comedian who used to be married to Katy Perry. In the video, he condemns pornography. He quotes statistics. He talks about his own personal experience. He even quotes a priest. His overall message is that pornography is dangerous.

He calls pornography, “icebergs of filth floating through every house on Wi-Fi.”¹ He confesses,

“I’ve been exposed to such a lot of pornography from such a young age... but pornography is not something I like, it’s something that I haven’t been able to make a long-term commitment to not looking at, and it’s affected my ability to relate to women, to relate to myself, my own sexuality, and my own spirituality.”²

We are exposed to so many messages regarding sexuality. Sex is everywhere. It is in advertising, entertainment, athletics, politics, and video games. We hear conflicting messages from the same entertainment industry. Even what we hear from a Christian perspective can sometimes be confusing. Why does God sometimes seem to be withholding something from us?

With so much input, how do we figure out what to think? How do we chart a clear course? How are we supposed to understand our sexuality? How do we make sense of what our Creator thinks?

Today we are continuing our series in 1 and 2 Thessalonians called Between The Times. Scott Grant and I have been working our way through these books that refer frequently to the return of Christ at the end of time. We’ve seen that they are written to a people living in between the resurrection and the return of Christ. These books help people to figure out what life is supposed to look like between these two major events.

One of the big issues of daily life living in between the times is how to understand our own sexuality.

What does it look like to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, to wait for his return, and to be a sexual person? How does our sex life relate to our spiritual life?

Our passage this morning is 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. Last week we heard Paul talking about the great value of friendship in describing his relationship with the Thessalonians. This week, we move on to one of the most intimate aspects of relationship: sexuality.

Paul’s goal is to give a broad guide for sexuality. It’s not just about what you can’t do. It’s not about whether you are single or married, or divorced, or somewhere in between. It’s about living out your sexuality in a way that honors God in every season of life. It’s finding a steady sense of sexuality—a consistent, honoring, physical, passionate embrace of what God has given us. We’re talking about a *Steady Sexuality*.

Sometimes we get the sense that sexuality works against our relationship with God. The only thing that sex ever does is to get us in trouble. But that’s not at all what we see here. It’s an affirmation of our sexuality expressed in healthy ways. We get some help in being sexual and following Jesus at the same time.

We’re going to spend most of the time on three main instructions in the middle of this passage. But before he gets there, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue on the path that they are walking. Here is his introduction.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Paul starts with a message of encouragement. He thinks the Thessalonians are doing well. His opening message to them is “do what you’re doing, only more so.” Keep it up. Stay strong. Paul begins in this positive way because he is aware that very few things have as

much potential to cause shame as our sexuality. Sex and shame often go hand in hand.

We are taught to be deeply ashamed of our bodies. We are ashamed of sexual experiences we've had or haven't had. We are ashamed of sexual harassment or violence that we have been victims of. We are ashamed of our interest in sex. Sometimes we are taught to be ashamed of the very fact that we are sexual.

Paul starts his instruction in a positive manner because he knows that any discussion of sexuality is going to bring about shame and guilt. He wants the Thessalonians to know that they are okay—God is pleased with them. He wants to talk to them about sex without shaming them.

Many of us have feelings of shame about sexuality. Please hear this encouragement: These instructions are not meant to fill you with shame. They are not meant to show you what a terrible person you are. These are meant as words of hope—words to help us embrace Jesus and our sexuality, at the same time.

With that in mind, let's look at the main part of Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6. We'll read all of it, then zero in on three different phrases to understand the instruction that Paul is giving.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-6

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

We're going to focus on the three main ideas that Paul has suggested. First, there is the reminder of the boundaries of healthy sexuality. Next, there is positive guidance for living with physical bodies. Finally, there is a warning about what happens when we disregard biblical sexuality. We'll look at each of these ideas in turn.

Avoid Immorality

Paul begins his instruction with the simple command, "abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

The first question to ask is "What does Paul consider as sexual immorality?" In other parts of Scripture, he is more specific. He refers to prostitution, sex with family members, sexual activity with someone of the same gender, and adultery. This is what he has in mind when he refers to sexual immorality.

It's helpful to define not just what is outside the bounds, but what lies within. What does God intend for our sexuality? I'm broadening outside of the scope of 1 Thessalonians here for the purpose of helping us to understand how Paul thinks about sexuality. When you take the Bible as a whole, it's pretty clear what is intended in terms of how we express our sexuality.

This is how I would summarize the sexual morality that goes along with following Jesus.

Sex is meant to be enjoyed within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

There are many aspects of this kind of morality. We don't have time to go into detail on every single one, but I'll summarize each part of this statement.

First, *sex is meant to be enjoyed*. God clearly affirms sex. He clearly affirms our sexuality. The fact that we are sexual is not an accident. It is not a necessary evil. It is a beautiful part of how we are created.

We don't always affirm this. That's why there can be so much shame around sex in Christian circles. There was a recent article in Relevant Magazine entitled, "How I'm Overcoming Shame in My Sex Life." The author, who was recently married, writes about some ideas that she had picked up in Christian circles that she realized weren't biblical. Some of them were,

"...that sexuality was the opposite of purity, so engaging in sexual activity compromised my purity; that my identity and value were in my virginity and without my virginity I had lost both my value and my identity; and that sexual desires came from 'the flesh' and needed to be overcome."³

Paul doesn't say "abstain from sexuality" here. He says "abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). A biblical sexual morality affirms our sexuality, and it guides us into the most helpful expressions of it.

Second, *sex is meant to be monogamous* - between two people who are faithful to each other. Cheating

on your partner, promiscuity, and prostitution all reduce the value of sex.

Third, *sex is meant to be enjoyed by a man and a woman*. Same-sex activity is outside of the bounds of how God created people. This is a larger topic than we have time to explore fully. For now, I'll simply say that I've heard arguments from many directions. My conclusion is that it's virtually impossible to make a compelling case from the Bible that God affirms same-sex behavior.

Finally, *sex is meant to be enjoyed within marriage*. The intimacy of two people coming together and physically becoming one happens within the commitment provided by a covenant. The stability and affirmation of a covenant creates the right atmosphere for sex to be expressed and enjoyed.

When Paul says "abstain from sexual immorality," he is talking about a very clear set of biblical instructions for sexuality.

Sex is meant to be enjoyed within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

Sometimes people think that Christians are the only ones with sexual boundaries. We can sometimes feel like we are only ones who believe in sexual ethics. We can sometimes accuse the culture around us of living without any regard for sexual morality.

But that is simply not true. Almost everyone believes in some kind of morality around sex. We live in a world that promotes a strong set of sexual ethics. It involves the importance of consent, the value of freedom, and usually the virtue of being faithful.

We can affirm some of that. The set of sexual ethics that God has revealed overlaps some of our world's values. But in many areas, following Jesus means that we stand apart. Some of what our world calls moral, we call immoral. Following Jesus means that we live differently than the people around us.

Why does that surprise us? Isn't that always the case? Isn't this what we expect? In fact, this has always been true of God's people. One of the defining characteristics of the ancient Israelites was simply that they were supposed to be different. Whether it is with regards to attitudes around money or honesty or ambition or sex, we have different values than the culture that we live in.

Following Jesus means that we live differently. We avoid sexual immorality. Avoid immorality.

But it's hard to be different. It's especially difficult when we live in a world that whispers seductive messages to us every day. "You'd be happier if you had more or better sex. Your sexual fulfillment is the most important thing. You can't be a whole person without sex. Sex solves your problems."

These are powerful messages. The power of culture is that it breeds conformity. Culture woos everyone immersed in it to agree with and affirm its values.

Following Jesus means that we live differently. We need to be clear on our understanding of sexual immorality. We need to hold each other accountable to it. It doesn't matter if everyone else says it is okay. We need to be diligent to avoid sexual immorality.

But it's not enough to just tell us what not to do. Unfortunately, a lot of what the church has said about sex stops there. Here's the list of what we don't approve of. Don't do it. The problem is that just telling us what not to do doesn't give me the help I need to know what to do, and how to do it.

How do I enjoy sex within a monogamous heterosexual marriage? What do I do if I'm not married? What do I do if I'm attracted to people of the same gender? What do I do if I'm married, but sex causes more conflict than intimacy?

Fortunately for us, Paul doesn't stop after telling us what to avoid. He helps with how to live out our sexuality and gives us a reason for all of it.

Steward Your Sexuality

In verse 4, Paul gives a positive command. He says that everyone should "know how to control his own body in holiness and honor" (1 Thessalonians 4:4).

This phrase translated "control his body" is really interesting. A very literal translation would be something like "possess his vessel." Some interpreters think that "vessel" refers to "wife", so they translate that phrase as "have a wife." Vessel could mean "body", but the most likely connotation here is that it is a reference to sexual organs.

This is where preaching directly from the Bible can get uncomfortable. The Bible can be very direct and graphic at times. This is a reference to our sexuality

in very physical terms. Paul is saying in almost crude language, “manage your private parts well.”

This instruction is not a negative one like the previous one. It’s not specifically restrictive. Paul is saying to manage your sexuality—to direct it appropriately. To embrace it; to enjoy it; to experience it, but not let it rule you. To steward your sexuality as God intended you to. *Steward your sexuality.*

This way of thinking about our sexuality contrasts dramatically with our culture. Our culture says that our sexuality is an appetite to be fulfilled. It is a desire that needs to be satiated. We talk about our “sex drive” and our “need” for sex. Sex is a force. It is a right. Sexuality is absolutely core to who we are and cannot be denied. Sex controls us. You might say that our culture teaches that we are possessed by our sexuality.

But we don’t have to live that way. There is a better way to live. A more whole way to live. This instruction to control my body puts me in charge of my sexuality. It is a good gift that God has given to me to enjoy. People say of money that it makes a great servant but a cruel master. The same can be said about sexuality.

Sexuality doesn’t have to define me. I am not gay or straight or sexually active or abstinent. I am a person made in God’s image who experiences certain kinds of sexual attraction and fulfillment. My sexuality is not who I am.

Sexuality doesn’t have to control me. Just because I want to have sex doesn’t mean I have to. I can choose which desires to act upon. I can choose when to act upon them. I can choose to wait. My sexuality doesn’t force me to make certain decisions.

My sexuality is mine to steward, to manage in holiness.

One of my favorite games as a kid was the game Operation. Many of you probably remember this game. The game board was a human body with cavities where bones were. You had to use special tweezers to extract these bones. But if the tweezers touched the side of the cavity, a loud buzzer sounded and you lost that round.

This is what a lot of people think stewarding your sexuality means. Be really careful to avoid all the many ways that sex can go wrong. Hold steady. Don’t do something you’re not supposed to. If you do, the buzzer will ring and you’ll fail. After the buzzer rings enough times, some people get tired of it and give up even trying.

But this isn’t what I mean by “steady sexuality.” What Paul is describing here is a way of viewing sexuality throughout our entire lives that honors God. It’s embracing sexuality as part of me and honoring God with it. It’s a lifestyle and a commitment to trusting God with my sexual desires and decisions. Here’s a few ways that this is helpful.

First, *stewarding your sexuality is not a state, it’s a lifestyle.*

I read an article, “Beyond Harlots and Virgins”⁴, in a popular Christian magazine . The point was that we sometimes only leave room for two options. You’re either a virgin or a harlot. Those are the only two possibilities. If you’re not a virgin, you’re a harlot. Maybe you can become a spiritual virgin by asking for forgiveness, but how many times does that work?

We aren’t called to a state, we’re called to a lifestyle of sexual integrity. We’re called to a day in and day out practice; a way of making choices each day that honors God with our sexuality.

Second, *stewarding your sexuality is a commitment throughout your life.*

The call to steady sexuality is consistent throughout our whole lives. There is an underlying attitude about our bodies that we hold regardless of our stage of life. That common attitude is then expressed differently in unique stages of life. Living that out looks different if you’re in adolescence, singleness, dating, engaged, married, divorced, or widowed. But the commitment to steward your sexuality is the same.

If you’re unmarried, steady sexuality means abstaining from sexual activity, but that doesn’t mean ignoring your sexuality. If you’re married, steady sexuality means faithfulness to your spouse. But it’s not just a call to avoid adultery. It’s a call to expressing your sexuality in a healthy way within your marriage. This means being generous and understanding, patient and gentle, and thinking of the other person.

Stewarding your sexuality throughout your life means that you learn and experience different things in different stages. Sometimes you anticipate. Sometimes you enjoy. Sometimes you remember.

Finally, steady sexuality is a spiritual discipline. We grow spiritually when we practice it.

When you shepherd your sexuality, you learn to wait. This doesn’t just apply to singleness either.

You have to wait at times whether you are single or married or a man or a woman.

Many commands in the Bible have to do with waiting. How do you live here and now when you're waiting for something else? This is what we're talking about when we say that the books of Thessalonians are about living between the times. There are important lessons to learn whether you are waiting to graduate or waiting for your birthday or waiting to engage in sexual activity or waiting for Jesus to return.

Waiting well means we are honest with God that we want something that isn't here yet. We are honest, but we trust him that his timing is perfect.

When you shepherd your sexuality, you learn to be content. Walking with God often means enjoying what God has given you and learning to appreciate it. That's true whether it's your job or your car or your house or your sex life. We are all tempted to be disappointed with what we have and want something else. We learn the lesson of contentment when we trust God with what he has given us.

When you shepherd your sexuality, you learn to turn to God. It doesn't matter whether you are having sex or not having sex—we face the same temptations of selfishness, discontentment, shame, lust, desire, and entitlement. We face disappointment. We long for something we don't have. We learn patience and self-control.

If you're single, your problem is not that you want to have sex. If you're married, your problem is not that you want to have more sex or different sex or sex with someone else. These things won't solve your problems.

Your problem is that your heart is broken and it can only be restored in relationship with God. Your problem is that you aren't whole. But the good news is that God can make you whole. Jesus redeems us and makes us new.

When you become patient and content and peaceful and whole, you become fully human. Stewarding our sexuality doesn't take something away from us. It makes us whole. It restores us to the life that God intends for us.

This is what it looks like to control your body in holiness and honor. This is how we possess our vessels. We practice a lifestyle, not a state. It looks different in different seasons, but we learn the same lessons. And it connects us to God as a spiritual discipline.

If you are struggling with this, talk to someone. If you are having trouble abstaining in singleness, or you are tempted to be unfaithful to your spouse, or you can't stop looking at pornography or you don't know how to handle same-sex attraction or you and your spouse are having constant conflict over sex, please talk to someone. We have pastors and elders and deacons and small group leaders and all sorts of people at this church that would love to walk alongside you in that. Nothing surprises us and we are willing to talk about anything.

We're in the process of putting together a more focused effort to address the issue of sexual integrity. We're trying to help people particularly struggling with pornography and sexual immorality to find healing together. Don't struggle with this alone - talk to someone.

It is not easy to steward sexuality in our culture. We have to help each other.

Protect Each Other

Paul's first exhortation was to avoid sexual immorality. Stay away from what's dangerous. His second exhortation is a positive one - learn to steer your sexuality in way that honors God. His final exhortation helps to explain why all of this is so important.

In verse 6 he gives the reason for these exhortations: "that no one transgress and wrong his brother" (1 Thessalonians 4:6).

Up until now, we've been talking about our sexuality as if it is something that belongs to me. My sexuality. My body. My actions. This is helpful because we need to learn to live in our bodies. We need to live with our desires and take responsibility for our actions.

But this way of thinking needs to be balanced with a very important truth that is largely absent in our culture: Sex isn't just about me. My sexuality isn't something that is just my business. The world we live in whispers in our ear that we deserve to experience the best sex ever. I am told to maximize my experience of sex.

But here Paul reminds the Thessalonians that sex isn't about them. The very nature of sex is that it is about relationship. That's why this section follows the section on friendship.

In Russell Brand's video, he concluded that "our attitudes toward sex have warped and perverted and have deviated from its true function as an expression of love and a means of procreation."⁵ He recognizes that ultimately sex is about relationship.

So when sex is misused, people get hurt. When all I'm focused on is myself and my personal sexual experience, people get hurt. When my goal is to find the best sex ever, people get hurt. When I let my sexuality possess me instead of stewarding my sexuality, people get hurt.

Avoid immorality and steward your sexuality so that people don't get hurt. Our goal is to protect the people around us. *Protect each other.*

I have talked before about my own struggles with pornography. It started in high school, continued through college, and lasted on and off several years into my marriage. God used this struggle in my life in many powerful ways, but it kept haunting me.

When my wife and I went through a difficult time in our marriage, this struggle was part of it. But things started to change when I began to confess to my wife. Every part of it. It was humiliating and shameful. It hurt her deeply. But it was exactly that hurt that finally helped me to change. Sometimes I felt like it shouldn't hurt her as much as it did. But I finally realized that this attitude was part of the problem.

Seeing how I hurt her helped me—with a lot of dependence on God—to finally change. I love my wife and when I saw the pain that my decisions caused, I couldn't make light of it anymore. This is one of the most powerful lies that we can believe: our decisions don't affect other people.

Some people will say, looking at pornography is my business. It doesn't affect anyone else. Or they'll argue that as long as its consensual sex and I'm not being unfaithful to anyone else, then nobody is getting hurt. Wrong and wrong.

Many things that I do on my own hurt other people, in the long run. And just because someone consents to something doesn't mean it won't hurt them. I consent to eating ice cream more often than is actually healthy for me. Consent doesn't guarantee protection.

The reason we are called to sexual integrity is to protect each other. Our sexual decisions can hurt other people, even if they don't involve anyone else or even if that person consents to it.

This is why Paul adds, "the Lord is an avenger in all these things" (1 Thessalonians 4:6). He's not talking about the Marvel comic series. He's not saying that God is going to hunt down people who make sexual mistakes and make them pay for them.

He is saying that we're not alone down here. It's not just up to us to figure out what is best. We were created. We have a purpose. There is someone else who is outside of our experience who knows what is best for us.

God doesn't bring down wrath upon us. But he does allow our sexual decisions to have consequences. He allows us to hurt each other. He allows us to hurt ourselves. He allows us to repeatedly make the same stupid choice over and over again. Why?

So that we will see the foolishness of that choice, and turn away from it. So that we will realize how much we are hurting each other and be motivated to stop.

Ultimately, steady sexuality is about loving the people around us. It's putting the greatest commandment, "love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself,"⁷ into practice in the area of our sexual choices. When we practice steady sexuality, we protect each other.

Conclusion

Our world is so confused about sex. It's encouraging that some people, like Russell Brand, are recognizing some of what's harmful. But the train has left the station and things are only going to continue changing in terms of how our culture views sexuality. We will see more and more sexual choices affirmed and validated. The sexual ethics of the world around us will grow to embrace more and more activity that falls outside of God's intention for relationships and sexuality.

Following Jesus with our sexuality in this culture is not going to get easier anytime soon.

But the apostle Paul has given us some helpful guidance. He has tried to encourage healthy sexual behavior without feeding the shame that we so often feel. He has warned us against the dangers of sexual behavior that falls outside of the bounds of what God intended. He has called us to steward our sexuality in a way that honors God. And he has reminded us that sex is about relationship, not our own needs and desires.

We'll close by reading the last two verses of this section where he brings this all back to relationship with God.

1 Thessalonians 4:7-8:

For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

God has called us in holiness. All of this is about deepening our relationship with the God who created and redeemed us. You are going to make your own choices. Some of us will choose to live by the kind of sexual morality that God wants for us. Some of us will try to be faithful to that and will fail, returning to God in dependence. And some of us will completely disregard it, choosing instead to live by what the world suggests or our own version of what we want.

If you do the latter, you'll hurt yourself. You'll hurt other people. But mostly, you'll disregard God. Living out our sexuality has to do with being faithful to God. Paul ends by saying, "don't cheat on the one who gave everything to you."

Some of you might not realize that this phrase that is written along the wall where we worship comes in the context of a similar discussion of sexuality in 1 Corinthians 6. That passage also exhorts us to live by the same kind of steady sexuality. It ends with these words and a final encouragement. We'll finish off today by reading those words in their context. They echo all the words we've been considering this morning.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

May God give us strength and wisdom to glorify him in our bodies.

(Endnotes)

¹ Russell Brand. (2015). Russell Brand Talks Sex, Softcore & Hardcore Porn [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com>

² *ibid.*

³ *How I'm Overcoming Shame in My Sex Life*, March 10, 2015
Posted March, 2015. Lily Dunn

⁴ Beyond Harlots and Virgins, *Today's Christian Woman*, 2014, October Week 5
Posted October 29, 2014. Kelli B. Trujillo.