

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Sex in the City

Right Living

In Buddhism there is a step on the Noble Eightfold Path called "Right Living" or "Right Livelihood." A Buddhist who wants to live rightly will avoid any occupation or work that harms any living thing. Consequently, serious Buddhists cannot be butchers or hunters or fishermen or bartenders or robbers or executioners or jailers.

"Well," the young Buddhist says, "I guess that means goodbye to that ambition of becoming a hit man for a Chinese Tong." But then he thinks to himself, "I can't work in an abattoir, slaughtering cattle." But does this mean he can't do any work associated with the meat industry? Is it OK to be a truck driver who delivers cattle to the slaughterhouse? Or the farmer who raises the cow to be slaughtered? Or to work behind the counter at Hungry Jacks and sell hamburgers? How about selling shoes or any leather goods? Is it alright to sell gelatin? Or to work in Coles or own shares in any supermarket chain? Can he be a waiter who delivers roast beef sandwiches to a table? Or to be a lawyer or even a court reporter in a court that sentences people to death? Or to be a cop?" He knows he can't be a bartender, but is it OK to clean the pub? He knows he can't possibly work for a pest control company, setting traps to kill cockroaches and rats and poisoning termites. But can he be a doctor that poisons thousands of innocent worms swarming in a child's intestines? Can he work for the pharmaceutical company that sells the drugs that poison such living organisms? Knowing that he can't do any work that involves lying and cheating he rules out being a real estate agent, a car salesman and a politician.

Our passage is also about right living and right livelihood. Verses 1-12 clearly belong together. You will notice that they begin and end the same way. Paul begins by emphasising the importance of living the kind of life we have been taught to live, a life which pleases God: "*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more*" (v1). Paul ends by emphasising the importance of living the kind of life we have been taught to live, a life that is a good witness to outsiders: "*...and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one else*" (vv11-12).

In contrast to sincere Buddhists right living and right livelihood for Christians is remarkably simple. For our reason for living is entirely different. The Buddhist is motivated to avoid doing anything that will obstruct his progress towards enlightenment. But, as 1 Thessalonians 4 teaches us, for Christians right living is all about living a life that pleases God and which, therefore, is a good witness to unbelievers. Both at the beginning and end of our passage Paul emphasises that this life is a taught life: "*For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus*", he says in verse 2. We are not left groping around in the dark wondering what jobs and occupations we can do and what we can't do. We have been given clear teaching as to what kind of a life pleases God. We can work in abattoirs and even in Hungry Jacks and Coles without a twinge of conscience. What matters is that live quietly, roll our sleeves up and do honest, God-pleasing work. Buddhists do not believe in a personal Creator God. By contrast, the Creator God we worship has revealed his will to us in and through Christ. So provided we live according to that revelation, that is, Biblical teaching then we have immense freedom.

As we approach the matter of right living the most important thing you and I need to understand is that we belong to God, not to anyone else and certainly not to ourselves. If we take the revealed will of God and boil it down to its essence what do we end up? "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification*", Paul reminds us in verse 3. Many

commentators and Bible scholars go wrong here. They think Paul is saying that it God's will that we *become more and more* holy. The language of sanctification is never used this way in the Bible. It does not refer to a process but to a state. To be sanctified is to be set apart for God. The saints are the sanctified ones, exclusively belonging to him. We are called to live lives which express the fact that we belong to him.

Ultimately, my kids belong to God, but there is a real sense in which they are mine. So I deeply care about how they live their lives. All parents are grieved if their kids do things that radically violate what it means to belong to the family. Roy Keane, the former captain of England's most successful football team and of Ireland, was sent home in disgrace from the World Cup because he acted in a totally unacceptable manner. To be a member of a World Cup soccer team a player must regard himself as effectively belonging to the team and conducting himself in a way that honours the team. If he doesn't he will be severely disciplined and may even, like Roy Keane, be chucked out on his ear.

What characterises the lifestyles of those who belong to God? Paul continues, "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality*" (v3). When Paul spent his three weeks in Thessalonica, modern day Salonika, planting the church there, he saw this city was like any other in the Greek-speaking world of its day, a city wallowing in sexual promiscuity and immorality. John MacArthur describes American society as "a society literally drowning in a sea of sexual evil, and the same applies to Sydney, hence my title for this sermon, *Sex in the City*."

If you have three weeks or less to get someone established in the Christian life you only have time to cover essentials. Paul thought it was of first importance to get the sex lives of these new Christians sorted out right from the word "Go." Now, when he gets his own first opportunity to follow-up by means of this letter, he still thinks it is of first importance to make sure these Christians have got their thinking straight about sex.

For Christians the sex life is not of secondary or peripheral importance. Precisely because we live in a city where we are constantly bombarded with the world's obscene and absurd thinking about sex we need to be perfectly clear among ourselves as to what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour. Let's be quite clear about one thing right from the start. Paul is not saying that Christians, as those who belong to God, must stop having sex. No, Paul says, "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.*" Sex is good, created by God, not just for the procreation of children, but for our enjoyment and pleasure in a marriage relationship. We must have nothing to do with sexual *immorality*. You must utterly spurn homosexual and lesbian relations, relationships with prostitutes, sexual relationships before marriage (what the world calls 'living together') and, if you are married, relationships which go beyond the limits with someone other than your spouse.

"*Abstain from sexual immorality.*" Many who call themselves Christians, who attend churches on Sunday, have not allowed the teaching of God's Word concerning the evil of sexual immorality to impress itself upon their hearts. In 1996, the *National Church Life Survey* (NCLS), which surveyed all mainline denominational churches plus Charismatic churches, included some questions about sexuality. It discovered:

- 56% of all church members favor accepting celibate gays and lesbians as members
- 43% favor accepting gays and lesbians as members
- 12% favor accepting gays and lesbians in leadership positions
- 58% disagreed that "*Gays and lesbians are as healthy and moral as anybody else*"; 27% agreed and 15% were unsure.

A lot of church members have not come to terms with what the Bible teaches about homosexuality. "*Abstain from sexual immorality*", says Paul. All sex outside of marriage is contrary to God's revealed will and so is objectionable to God. As those who strive to please God we must have nothing to do with any form of sexual immorality. This has clear implications for dating. You need to be very careful to draw the line as to what kind of body contact is acceptable. The Bible does not set down any hard and fast rules here. But I put it to you that anybody with an ounce of common sense can see that since Christians are committed to leaving sexual relations till marriage will not touch each others' private parts. You must control your bodies and that includes controlling your hands.

"*Abstain from sexual immorality.*" Let me quote from the Assist Crisis Pregnancy Center: "Abstinence is not the absence of sex. Abstinence is treasuring sex, saving sex, honouring sex, keeping that valuable pleasure in the appropriate context. Sex outside of God's law is like a train that has jumped its tracks, or like a fire that has left the fireplace and is burning your carpet and your drapes, or like a river that has flooded its banks and is making its way down the streets and into the homes. The train, the fire, and the river are very good and wholesome things, but once they transgress their boundaries, they are utterly destructive. Abstinence is preserving wholesome sex for the right mate at the right time. Somewhere on this planet is a girl or a guy that you might not even know yet, but someday, that person is going to be your wife or husband. You need to see abstinence as saving yourself for that special person." Abstain:

Always remember that God designed it so that the best sex is sex saved for marriage. It's worth the wait!

Beware! The consequences of sex outside of marriage are: emotional pain for you and your parents, the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy, and the devastation of sexually transmitted diseases.

Set your limits as to "how far" you will go BEFORE you go out with anyone.

Talk to your parents, or another adult who cares about you, about the pressures to have sex. Ask a friend or friends who share your convictions to keep you accountable for staying pure until marriage.

Imagine your ideal lifelong mate and don't settle for anyone less in a date.

Never believe "it can't happen to me!" Never.

In verses 4-6 Paul spells out three essential principles you must follow if you are to make a clean break with sexual immorality:

1. Control your body (4-5a)
2. Don't act like non-Christians (5b)
3. Don't take advantage of fellow-Christians (6a)

The first thing is to control your body. As Paul puts it: "*that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour*" (v4). Literally, Paul speaks about "possessing his own vessel." Some commentators think that Paul is here thinking of a wife as being the weaker vessel. Consequently, they think Paul is talking about how to acquire or take a wife, one's vessel, in holiness and honour - how to get yourself properly hitched in marriage. Others think Paul has in mind how to live with one's wife as the vessel. Although Peter does refer to the wife as the weaker vessel it is in fact highly unlikely that the word "vessel" here refers to a wife. Most commentators rightly, I believe, understand Paul to be speaking about controlling one's body. Now control does not mean suppression. I do not have to be ashamed of my sexual drives. However, I must control them. You've got to watch that word "holiness." It's obviously very important in this context because in verse 7 we are reminded afresh: "*For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*" When some Christians think of holiness they think it means being other-worldly. But "holiness" means not being other-worldly but different from the world. Christian husbands and wives

have deeply fulfilling sexual relations but they refuse to defile the marriage bed. Here notice that “holiness and honour” go together when it comes to sexual control. God-pleasing sexual control means our sexual behaviour expresses honour not merely to God but to our spouse as well. So, for example, a Christian husband honours his wife and expresses this by the way he controls himself, not forcing himself on his wife when he is ready for sexual relations and she is not. On the other hand, a Christian wife honours her husband when she recognises his sexual needs.

In explaining what is meant by abstaining from sexual immorality Paul tells us not to indulge our bodies “*in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God*” (v5a). Hugh Hefner, the man behind Playboy magazine, has done incalculable damage, persuading many to follow their lusts. Early in his career he said, “Sex is a function of the body—a drive which man shares with animals, like eating, drinking, and sleeping. It is a physical demand that must be satisfied. If you don’t satisfy it, you will have all sorts of neurosis and repression psychosis. Sex is here to stay; let’s forget the prudery that makes us hide from it. Throw away those inhibitions, find a girl who is like-minded, and let yourself go.” The world tells you that if you really love someone it’s OK to sleep with him or her. Only those “who do not know God” can think this way. If you know God, then you know he is a holy God. He is NOT a spoilsport. He is not opposed to sexual fulfilment, provided we satisfy our sexual drives in accordance with his will. But we must never allow our passions to get the better of us and lead us into conduct which is utterly opposed to God’s will. You may feel strongly attracted to a non-Christian girl or fella. It doesn’t matter how deep your feelings may be - you must not act like those who do not know God. Because you know God, you know better than this. You have no excuse. You must do what God requires no matter how much it costs.

Paul also warns us: “*that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter*” (v6a). Paul is addressing the members of the church of Thessalonica, Christians who see a great deal of each other. In any community where Christians see a lot of each other it is natural and normal for strong feelings of attraction for a particular person to develop. But you must let the Holy Spirit enable you to develop self-control, because if you cross the line with another Christian you are not only wronging that Christian but also that person’s future life partner or perhaps that person’s father. It is particularly this latter situation that Paul has in mind when he issues this warning.

And it is a warning. For Paul teaches, “*the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you*” (v6b). Let me now teach you the same thing. If you, as a Christian, step over the line in your sexual conduct then you will pay the price. I don’t know how the Lord will avenge the persons you wrong by such behaviour. You may suffer dire consequences in this life, as David did. Or, and this is far worse, you may suffer grave consequences on the day of judgment. But let me tell you plainly - you will not get away with it. God is a holy God and he takes sexual purity very, very seriously. So make sure you stop listening to the absurd nonsense the world throws at you and make sure you listen very, very carefully to what God says.

Lastly, do not throw up your hands and say this teaching is too hard. Paul concludes this portion by saying, “*Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you*” (v8). As a Christian you have the Holy Spirit living within you and, therefore, you have no excuse for not listening to God and further you have all of the power you need to live the way God wants. You can only practise sexual immorality if you treat the Holy Spirit with contempt.