

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Holy Relationships

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7/15/2014

I recently graduated from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. A theological seminary is a school where people study God. Some become pastors, others missionaries, and others teachers. My first semester there I took a very challenging class. Our professor was an interesting teacher but the days were long. One afternoon we all looked extra sleepy and extra bored. So out of nowhere my teacher stops lecturing about God. And he says a single word. This single word got all of our attention. “Sex...”

The word he said was “sex.” Everyone woke up after that! Today we’re also talking about God and sex. The Bible tells us God gave us sex for marriage. How we see sex largely affects how we see God. Maybe you want sex so bad you’ve decided God doesn’t exist. Maybe you think God hates you because you’ve had sex already. Maybe you feel dirty because of the things you’ve done or thought. Scripture tells us that sex has a lot to do with holiness. It tells us the physical and spiritual are closely related. It tells us we can’t claim to follow Christ and live impurely. God wants a holy people who honor him in all things. Holiness basically means separation from sin and evil. But even more than this holiness means becoming like Christ. Let’s read how God wants to make you holy like Jesus. Please read with me 1st Thessalonians 4:1-8. What does God want for us?

A holy God wants holy people. (4:1-2)

Holy people walk with God. (4:1) Verse one tells us a man named Paul wrote a letter to a group of Christians. He wrote to a local church to encourage them in what they had “received.” These Christians had received a very important message. They had received the gospel. The gospel is that Jesus lived, died, and rose again from the grave. And that if you believe in him, Jesus pays for your all your sins. You receive the holiness of God to cover all your sins. We begin to walk with God by believing in the gospel. When you believe the gospel, God makes you holy. If you don’t yet believe the gospel, begin today. God wants to make you holy so you can walk with him. Holy people walk with God.

What’s the best way to walk with God? How can I walk in such a way as to please God?

Holy people please God by obeying God. (4:1-2) Verse one also tells us some of the Christians are walking rightly. They believe the gospel but there’s something else they’re doing. These people are honoring and pleasing God with their lives. This means there is a right way and a wrong way to walk with God. The wrong way is to believe in the gospel but not obey God. The right way is to believe in the gospel and seek to obey. Now this doesn’t mean you’ll have a perfect track record. But it does mean you’ll try your best to please God. You know your salvation is dependent on him and not you. And that actually motivates you to do lots of good things. Holy people please God by obeying God.

In this way God is like our parents. When I was growing up, my parents had to ask me to obey them. They told me to take out the garbage, clean the bathroom, and sweep. I didn’t like doing any of those things because they were hard. I didn’t like obeying my parents and they didn’t like my disobedience. But now my parents don’t have to ask me to take out the trash. Now I take out the trash and vacuum without being asked. I do these tasks because I know they’re good. My parents are thrilled because I’ve grown up. God wants us

to obey him not because we have to, but because we get to. When we see how good God's plan is, and obey it, it pleases God. Verse two tells us that Paul speaks on behalf of the Lord Jesus. So what I'm going to tell you about holiness doesn't come from me. What I say on the topic of sex and living rightly comes from Jesus Christ. Our right living brings a real person joy and happiness. Jesus gets excited when we do the right thing to please him. Holy people please God by obeying God. A holy God wants holy people.

What makes living a holy life worth it? Why not just give in and just do what's comfortable?

Uncommon holiness pleases God. (4:3-6)

God loves uncommon holiness. (4:3) Verse three tells us God wants us to be sanctified and abstain from sexual immorality. This means God wants you to grow in spiritual wisdom and maturity. And one of the ways we do this is through giving him our sexual desires. The word for "sexual immorality" in the original language is "porn-ace." This sounds like the modern english word for "pornography." So another way of saying this verse is "God wants you to be holy." "And God wants you to live a porn-free life." But the advice here is much deeper than not looking at porn. It's telling us not to make our desires and wants the center of our life. Don't make your flesh and passions your main focus. Maybe you don't struggle with sexual temptation. Instead you want power over the people you know. You want fame for being the best, smartest, coolest kid. Or you want glory when only God deserves glory. A pornographic life starts with "me." A holy life starts with "God." Don't make your life about fulfilling your thirsts. Make your life about God and true happiness. Uncommon holiness pleases God. How can we have uncommon holiness?

Holiness comes with self control (4:4) Verse four says we are to control our bodies in holiness and honor. In the original language the word for "body" is the word for "vessel" or "cup." God wants us to be careful about what we put into ourselves. Do you spend your time filling yourself with temptations and images? Do you spend your time filling yourself with your fantasies? Or do you fill yourself with God and his goodness? Do you taste like vinegar or well-aged wine? Are you filled with bitterness, selfishness, and envy? Or are you filled with the sweet gospel about Jesus Christ? When we fill ourselves with God, we'll have the strength to say "no." Self-control comes from a life that is all about Jesus. Holiness comes with self control.

Maybe you just want to know how far you can go with your girlfriend or boyfriend. Can we kiss, cuddle, make out, touch each other? Have you ever been on a hike along the edge of a steep cliff? The view is breathtaking but one wrong step and you're dead. Stay away from the edge of the cliff! The view is just as great from way back here. Don't just turn away from the cliff. Turn to Jesus. Run to Christ. He can give you self control.

Why have self control if nobody around you is doing it? Uncommon holiness pleases God. (4:5) The author Paul wrote to a culture that didn't believe this way. Like many today they thought sex outside of marriage was fine. Our celebrities and famous people are all sex symbols. Sex outside of marriage is considered healthy and fun. If it's not hurting anyone, and you love each other, why not? The Bible tells us people act this way because they don't know God. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you have tasted the grace of God. That grace so transforms us we begin to lose our desire for evil. It's like discovering the super high quality chocolate Toblerone. After that it's difficult to go back to the wax-filled American brands. We lose our taste for sin as we develop our taste for Christ. God loves it when we love him most. Uncommon holiness pleases God.

My wife and I went camping at Virginia Beach recently. The last time we went I had trouble building a fire. So this time I brought lighter fluid and I thought it would be super easy. I threw a couple logs down in a pile and doused them with lighter fluid. I lit them and the flames burst several feet high. About 15 minutes later the fire died. Monica re-arranged my messy pile of logs and I doused them again. Again 15 minutes later the once huge flames were completely gone. Finally, we decided to re-start the whole campfire. We separated the logs and built a carefully constructed campfire. I made sure there was enough room for the fire to get air. And this time I did it right and the fire lasted. We douse our relationships with sex to make up for what's wrong in them. The flames are huge and it seems like we really got something. But when the sex gets boring the flames go out and the relationship dies. Marriage is when we take the time to build a careful fire. When we build the campfire the way God intends it, it's really good. Sex inside of marriage is a wonderful thing. Sex outside of marriage burns brightly but it's inherently selfish.

The opposite of holiness is selfishness. (4:6) Verse six tell us that sexual sin hurts other people. There is no such thing as "safe sex" outside of marriage. Sex becomes about fulfilling out emotional or physical needs. We "take" happiness by using our boyfriend or girlfriend's body. We "take" power and self-worth at their expense. This type of sin exploits and manipulates. Verse six warns us that that the Lord will punish this sin. Scripture calls Jesus "the avenger." God will not let us take advantage of each other forever. One day he will come as an absolutely perfect judge. Will you receive him as one who has graciously forgiven you? Or will you be forced to answer for all your sins? That's a scary warning, but it's for our own good. The opposite of holiness is selfishness.

A holy life leads to everlasting life. (4:7-8)

A holy life leads to everlasting life. (4:7-8) Verses seven and eight call us to pure lives. When we reject God's plan for sex, we reject God. Maybe you're frightened right now because you've rejected God. Or you've tried to live a pure life and find that you keep failing. If only God had made you more ugly, obedience would be easier. The Bible tells us the problem is not our bodies but our hearts.

Matthew 15:19 says, "For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (ESV)

Lust and sexual sin doesn't begin with your outside, but with your inside. You have a broken heart that will never want to do the right thing. If you ever want to be holy and do the right thing, you need a new heart. This whole time I've been telling you that uncommon holiness pleases God. But you need to understand that uncommon holiness also comes from God. When you believe in Jesus, he gives you the strength to obey. Don't leave here thinking you can change on your own. God gives you the Holy Spirit to convict you and mold you. The Holy Spirit comes and lives within you to make you new. If you've failed a thousand times, God still loves you. He still wants to fill you with his Holy Spirit. God is the only one who can make you holy. A holy life leads to everlasting life.

Imagine you're invited to a dinner party with God. God supplies you with a nice clean tuxedo or dress to wear. Would you instead show up in worker jeans and a muddy t-shirt? Would you show up looking like you just played frisbee or thunder ball? Or would you wear the finest most classy outfit God gave you? God has invited us into relationship with him. Are you living the way God wants or the way you want? Are you willing to give up your filth for his holiness? Maybe you see just how bad your outfit is. Your life is so stained with sin you feel hopeless. If you ask him, God will give you a brand new outfit. He'll clothe you in

his righteous and holiness. So that when you show up for dinner, you'll look fantastic. Come to dinner dressed in the holiness of God. Uncommon holiness pleases God.

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