

The Holy Life
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 12, 2021-PM Service
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1 Thessalonians 4:1-11

When I was a young person I used to go to the All Ontario Youth Conventions. It was one of the highlights of my summer. Several hundred young people would show up on the campus of some university where we would spend 3 or 4 days listening to speakers, worshipping with guitars instead of organs, meeting new people from exciting places like Dunnville and Wellandport, and generally engaging in shenanigans. These were good times.

In the afternoons at these All Ontario conventions, there would always be a bunch of seminars held on different topics. A seminar on prayer, a seminar on evangelism, a seminar on leadership, a seminar on music – all sorts of subjects that touched on the Christian life. But the seminar that was always the best attended, the seminar that my friends and I always signed up for first, the seminar that was always scheduled in the biggest classroom, was the seminar on dating and sex. It was entirely predictable. The room would be completely jammed with young men and women who were boiling over with these new urges, young men and women who were standing in a hormone hurricane. We were all trying to figure out how a sexual being could be holy.

We weren't the first to deal with this issue. Sexuality and holiness have been hard to put together since the very first days of the church. 1 Thessalonians is either the earliest or the second earliest letter we have from Paul and one of the main issues is personal holiness applied in the area of sex.

If you know the Thessalonian culture, you wouldn't be surprised by Paul's concern with sexuality. Thessalonica was a sexualized town in a sexualized culture. Sexual morals were different back then. Prostitution was legal and accepted. It was no big deal for a married man to spend time with a prostitute, it was his right, a kind of leisure activity, maybe like a round of golf. Sex was also a big part of the religious life at the shrines in town. Two of the biggest worship centers were dedicated to Cabirus and Dionysius and worship in both of these settings seems to have involved sexual practices. Many husbands also had mistresses and that too was viewed less as a scandal and more as a husband's right. The Greek orator Demosthenes sums up the sexual ethic of the day with these words – if he were leading a seminar of 17 year olds, here is his advice to them. "Mistresses we keep for our pleasure, concubines for our daily and physical wellbeing, and wives in order to bear us legitimate children and to serve as trustworthy guardians." Wow.

There are all sorts of ways that this strikes us as appalling. It seems really sexually permissive, and it also seems really, really degrading to women. It's a culture that makes men into sexual consumers and sexual lords, and women either into property (wives) or playthings. It's hard to imagine an arrangement more demeaning to women than this one. But what's interesting to me, and important to understand, is that underneath this sexual culture there seems to be a kind of view of what a human being is. Underneath this there seems to be a kind of philosophy of human nature. Man – and it is man in this case - is a creature who is at the bottom, who is fundamentally, a consumer. Man has desires, and life is about fulfilling those desires. Man has appetites, life is about satisfying those appetites. Man has hungers and life is about feeding those hungers. That's who we are: Homo Consumptis – the consuming animal Paul alludes to is the mindset in verse 5: He describes how the Thessalonians used to be controlled by "passionate lust." Or to use the longer description he uses in Ephesians 4: humans are creatures who have abandoned sensitivity and given themselves over to sensuality in a continual lust for more.

As backward as this all sounds to us, it was normal to the good people of Thessalonica. It was the water they swam in, and apparently the members of the new church – and at that point it was very new – probably less than two years old – were having a hard time changing their mindset about sexuality. Their hearts may have belonged to Jesus, but some of them at least, were giving their bodies over to lustful passion and the old gentile ways. It's bad enough that Paul sees fit to make it one of the chief topics of his letter. Fornication is the word he uses to describe all that old cultural behavior and his word on the matter is simple: "Stop it! Get control of your body and stop doing these things that exploit other people."

We don't have the same sorts of sexual excess that the Thessalonians had. Prostitution is illegal and socially unacceptable now, thank goodness. Concubines have fallen out of fashion. And if a man has a mistress it's a scandal. So you might be tempted to say: thank goodness we've managed to improve our sexual culture!

We've managed to get rid of the old problems. But have we really rid ourselves of these problems or have they simply taken on new forms? We don't have concubines, but we certainly have pornography. Porn is everywhere. According to the Christian website xxxchurch.com which most of you have probably heard of, there are 11 million people addicted to pornography in this country. In 2007, one quarter of all internet searches were porn related. And it's becoming more and more socially acceptable. Years ago my family and I visited New York City and like many visitors, we went to Times Square – in many ways one of the cultural hubs of this country. And, as you probably know, Times Square is full of great big billboards for companies and movies and products and musicals – glittering adds standing 10 stories tall. While we were there I noticed that one of 10 story ads was for Jenna Jamison's latest movie. Who is Jenna Jamison – she's probably the most famous porn star. There she was right alongside the other cultural icons: Mamma Mia, The Lion King, Disney, Jenna Jamison. Porn is coming out of the shadows and is starting to assert itself as normal.

So you see the cultural forms have changed, but that's not the problem. And that's because that underlying issue, that warped vision of what a person is, is just as strong today as it was in Thessalonica: human beings are consumptive animals. Human beings are creatures driven to satisfy its pleasures. We have appetites; life is about satisfying those appetites. That's a message we don't just get from porn, but from every ad, that a thing or an experience has the power to make us happy and fulfilled. Food ads, clothing ads, vacation ads, retirement ads, decorating ads all conspire to tell us this false story about ourselves, that we are consuming animals.

Paul in this passage holds up for the Thessalonians and for us, not only a different way to look at their sexuality, but a different way to look at what a person is. Obviously he tells us to avoid sexual immorality, obviously there's an instruction here to flee from fornication, but there's also something more. "Each one of you should learn to control his or her own body in a way that is holy and honorable." Instead of creatures hopelessly driven by appetite, Paul sees us as holy people. We are called to holiness. You are called to be holy.

As a way to hear what Paul means by that, I want to think about the word holiness together. What do you think of when you think of being called to holiness? I think of saying no. Back in the day, when I heard my minister or youth leader or one of my parents say, you are called to be holy, I heard it as a call to self-control. Sexual holiness meant restraining your sexual urges, saying no to them. Holiness in speech meant watching your tongue and avoiding using those bad words. Holiness in my personal life meant not buying things on Sunday and not lying to adults. I associated the word holiness with the word 'no'. So in my mind a picture of holiness emerged which saw holiness as removed from the world, floating above the churn of the world. Like the angels maybe. If you asked me to name something holy, I probably would have had angels high on the list, because as kids we heard about the holy angels. and angels definitely seemed high and lifted up. Airy fairy creatures floating above the churn of the world. So as a kids I imagined the call to sexual holiness in a place like 1 Thessalonians 4 as a call to suppress and deny my desires. This was unintentionally strengthened when my teachers told me that to be holy was to be set apart. Which is true. In my mind I thought: set apart means away from desires and worldly concerns. Set apart. Floating high and away from the churn of the world.

That's not what Paul means by holiness, that's not what the Bible means by holiness. To be set apart in the world does not mean to be set apart from the world. And while part of holiness is saying no to things, most of holiness is saying yes. A picture of real holiness is someone totally filled with the love of Jesus and completely engaged in the work of Jesus. Someone who is wholeheartedly engaged in the work of the kingdom. A picture of someone set apart is not someone who has suppressed all desire, but someone whose every desire is set on the word of the kingdom. An Olympic athlete is a good picture of set-apart holiness. A track athlete has a goal to make the Olympics and she sets her life apart for training. For 4 years every part of her life centers on this goal. Her work patterns, her eating, her relationship patterns, her sleeping patterns, her mental energy, all of it is set apart for the goal of making the team. She is not disengaged; she is totally engaged. And while she is certainly saying no to things, most of her training is a big yes. She loves her sport. It is her passion. It is her desire, and so she gives it her life, her soul, her all.

When Paul tells us to not to live as we lived before, but to live lives of holiness, he's calling us to live a life of yes in Christ. He's telling us that the way of homo consumptis is a way of disappointment, emptiness and death. But to live in Christ, to live for him, to let love for him and passion for his kingdom and love for his world overwhelm you – that is the way of life. Sexual holiness isn't just abstention, it's a joyful pursuit of a love which lasts a lifetime, creates deep trust and intimacy and creates a household which is so stable and overflowing with love that it blesses and fills the lives of all those who come into contact with it. Holiness of speech isn't just not swearing; it's sharing words of encouragement, it's finding and speaking truth, it's using

words to create beauty and to inspire, it's using words in deep conversation to form bonds of love. A holy person doesn't float above the world, she is utterly immersed in the world for the love of Jesus and his kingdom.

Verse 7 has a nice way of putting it. In the Greek Paul says you are called *in* holiness. Not *to* holiness, you are called *in* holiness. Like it's something you're immersed in.

Craig Barnes used to teach at Pittsburg Theological Seminary and he wrote about an installation service he conducted for a graduating student he mentored. The student was being installed at some podunk country church off in a forgotten corner of a midwestern state. A place so small that it didn't show up on MapQuest, says Barnes. As the ordination service began he looked out over a full congregation of worried farmers and exhausted mothers. The sanctuary was lit by fluorescent lights. One of the lights hummed through the whole service. When he first approached the pulpit, the microphone squealed with feedback. In other words, a dream first church. As Barnes led the service he thought that his student had never faced an exam as hard as the one he would face every Sunday morning.

But after the service everyone went down stairs for the obligatory potluck, which took place in the church basement that had a low ceiling, linoleum floors and walls covered with old Sunday school papers. The fellowship committee had put out tables covered with red-checked table cloths and the tables were set with ham casseroles, rolls spread with Country Crock, fried chicken and jello salads with fruit suspended in them. Around these tables sat the people talking with each other about the weather, the schools, how business was going. The children ran around squealing and playing, and around the pastor a steady stream of people formed, around the pastor Barnes noticed something remarkable was happening: all the tired mothers and anxious farmers were gathering eager to meet their new charge. One by one they came up to him and shook his hand, or patted his back or gave him a hug. Some of them had tears in their eyes.

As Barnes sat watching this with his plate of fried chicken and jello in front of him, he realized something: this was a Eucharistic feast. God was in that room. 'The holiness of the room was so apparent; I almost took off my shoes.' All those tired farmers and worried mothers were totally committed to this little community, to the work of Christ's church, to the kingdom of God. They were a holy people. And as the Spirit fills you, and the Spirit fills me, and the Spirit fills us together, so are we.

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