# Help for Sexual Sin

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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*Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)*

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**livinghopechurch.net**

**Introduction**: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 4. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: “Help for Sexual Sin.” Tonight we are going to talk on a subject that effects every one of us, we are going to be discrete, but we are nonetheless going to hopefully give hope and clarity to a very confusing culture that we live in.

“The first sexual thought in the universe was God’s, not man’s.”

- **Doug Barnett**

**Reading of Holy Scripture**

**1 Thess. 4:1-8**, “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as youreceived from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. **2**For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3**For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4**that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, **5**not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6**that 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. **7**For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8**Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

The entire Bible tells us how to live life the way God designed it, and that includes the sexual union, which God Himself designed. Consider the book of Proverbs. There is no topic in Bible to which more emphasis is given than that of sexual purity. The irony is great in light of the fact that Solomon was virtually ruined because of his attraction to foreign wives (1 Kings 11).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Which Banquet Will You Choose?**

Sadly, we live in an age in which sexual immorality is on display virtually everywhere. Sadly, sexual sin continues to have a devastating impact on the church. Scandals among her leaders have besmirched the reputation of Christ in the world. Families have been torn apart by sexual immorality.

**The Main Problem**

What is the main **problem** when it comes to impurity and fornication?

1. Someone might say the main problem is **ruined families**. I can’t tell you how many people right now have ruined their lives because of the slave master of lust. It is destroying lives and families. Growing up it destroyed my family. It ripped my parents’ marriage apart. What I learned from cable television and movies destroyed my youth. It’s ruining your neighborhood, and destroying families everywhere. But that’s not the main problem.
2. Someone else might say the problem is **easy access**. The addiction to pleasure is more available than ever. Easy access to sensuality and outright pornography on the internet and cable TV has already captured many men and women and making slaves out of them. Lust leads to the misery of man. That adds to the problem, but that’s not the main problem.
3. Let me make it clear that the greatest problem is not the misery of man caused by lust, but that people created by God are worshipping the creature above the Creator.

**Who is Your Master?**

God’s purpose in creation is ***not the happiness of man***, but the ***glory of God***! And when a person is a slave to fornication, He is not a slave to God. You can’t serve two masters. And therefore, the greatest problem with lust and fornication is that God not glorified properly through His creation. That take that which is designed to glorify God in a beautiful God-fearing marriage, and use it to for the pleasure of sin for self in total rebellion against God.

**So what is the solution?**

The solution is that we become worshippers of God and to do things God’s way. He has given us a beautiful union to express the sexual desire He created. **1 Cor. 7:9** says, speaking of single people: “...if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

That’s the way that anyone can conquer any sin. You become a worshipper of God and your pleasure in God becomes greater than the pleasure offered by any sin. We are go into more of this later, but let me say briefly that we must leave the slave master of lust, or any addiction in this life, and we must become slaves of Jesus Christ and addicted to joy in Him. We must learn to leave the worship of pleasure, and long for the true worship of God. That means that all believers can and will eventually abstain from and overcome all fornication—whether it be in mind or in body. As followers of Jesus Christ, we now have the ability to remain pure because we have a new Master. “[H]e which hath begun a good work in you **will perform** *it* until the day of Jesus Christ” (**Philippians 1:6**). The lust of the flesh is clearly at war with our new Master. If you are a believer, God promises that you will persevere in holiness until the end.

So Paul warns us in this passage about illicit sexual desire and sinful sexual behavior. What’s the real problem?

1. The Solution: Pleasing God, 1 Thes. 4:1-3

**1 Thess. 4:1-3**, “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. **2**For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3**For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality...”

**Sexual Sin is Not the Problem**

Sexual sin is really not the problem. It is the fruit of a larger problem. Sexual sin is a barometer. God invented sex. He wants His creatures who so desire to enjoy all the benefits of marriage, and that most of the time includes sex. Sometimes after a time one spouse or the other becomes a care taker, so it is not guaranteed. But it is included most of the time.

It is the only relationship where a person can be “naked and unashamed.” The real problem is not sexual sin. It is a lack of submission to God that leads to blindness and self-harm. God’s way is always the best and safest way.

**Brothers**

So let’s be clear: Paul calls these dear people, brothers. Christians struggle with sexual sin. No Christian ought to be mastered by it. Hence the warning.

By tactfully calling them ‘brothers,’ Paul expresses his confidence not only in their salvation, but also in their willingness to hear and obey the instructions he is passing on. What he is saying is nothing new, for he had told them the same things when in Thessalonica, so they cannot plead ignorance as an excuse.

**Regulates our Behavior**

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not simply teach us what to believe, but it regulates our behavior and shows us ‘how to live in order to please God’. It directs our lives into holiness and enables us to ‘walk the talk’. This in turn pleases God.

The Thessalonians were living holy lives, but Paul did not want then to rest on their laurels so he urges them ‘in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more’. Paul is driving them on to overflow with godly living. They must make it their constant aim to live more and more in obedience to the Lord’s commands. Paul says ‘in the Lord Jesus’ to emphasize that his instructions come by virtue of his union with the Lord, whom he represents and whose Spirit inspires him.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Growing into the Image of Christ**

The purpose of believers is to please God in all things. We are to abound in the work of faith and to live lives that are worthy of the calling we have received. We are to produce fruit in keeping with repentance and to honor God in private and in public. The Christian life is a bit like climbing a ladder. The higher we climb the more we are transformed into the image of God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Instructions from God: Please God!**

The word ‘instructions’ is a military term and is used strictly of commands given by someone in authority to an inferior, who must carry them out. These instructions, imparted to the Thessalonians during the missionaries’ visit, were given ‘by the authority of the Lord Jesus’. They were Christ’s commands. Such a comment added weight to Paul’s exhortation and reminded the Thessalonians that Paul was Christ’s minister proclaiming Christ’s will; therefore, whoever rejects his ‘instructions’ rejects God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Not Just a Philosophical Obedience**

Paul makes it explicit that it is God’s will for them to be ‘holy’ or ‘sanctified’. Sanctification is both a gift and a demand, and those who follow Christ must turn from all that is impure and polluted, renounce the fleshly desires of the sinful nature, and honour God with their bodies. God has called us to be holy in all that we do, say and think. Only when we follow the path of holiness will we be transformed into Christ’s likeness.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, growing and changing in Christ means that we experience all of God’s pleasures in God’s way.

1. The Warning: Abstain from sexual immorality, 1 Thes. 4:3-6.

**1 Thess. 4:3-6**, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; **4**that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, **5**not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; **6**that 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.”

**What is fornication?**

**Verse 3** says that whatever sexual immorality is,

* Something that should be avoided at all costs. “abstain from sexual immorality”!
* It’s something that even the most godly people deal with.
  + Paul told young **Pastor Timothy** in **2 Timothy 2:22** to “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”
  + **Joseph** fled from Potiphar’s wife.

**But what is Sexual Immorality?**

Fornication is **illicit** intimate behavior. The word “sexual immorality” is *porneia* which refers to any kind of illicit intimacy. When I say illicit, I mean an improper use. Fornication is to take the holy desire God gave you for a future spouse, and to squander it outside of that marriage covenant.

**Illustration: Proper Use**

Everything has its proper use.

* Gas is good for burning in engines. Put a match in it, and you will be maimed for life.
* Trees are good for building houses. Jump out of one and you will break your legs.
* Marital intimacy was made for marriage. Use it for any other purpose, and you will mess up your life.

**Squandering that which is Reserved for Marriage**

Essentially, it is **squandering** that which is reserved for marriage. Let me show you how this is directly implied from our text. Look at **1 Thessalonians 4:3**. Paul says God’s holy people should “abstain from fornication”. How can one do that? In this way (**verse 4**): “every one of you should know how to possess [CONTROL] his vessel in sanctification and honour”. In other words, the desires in your body should be possessed, or controlled, or restrained for their sacred and honorable uses. Paul says you should be skilled at this, knowing how to control your vessel, your body in sanctification and honor—honoring and pleasing the Lord!

So let me review: *Fornication is a craving to fulfill outside of marriage the desires that God has reserved for marriage alone. God gave you those desires as a sacred trust for your marriage, and He calls on you to reserve those desires in purity for your spouse.*

**Intimacy Squandered in Several Ways**

Now this squandering of that gift of intimacy in marriage can be squandered in at least three ways that are spelled out in this passage.

* + 1. **Pre-marital relations**. Two people acting as if they are married when they are not is fornication. I mentioned this already. Verse 4 says that you should be skilled and learn how to reserve and control the desires of your body for the holy relationship you will have with your future spouse.

This law is laid down by God way back in Genesis 2:24. The Lord says that intimate physical relations are reserved only for a man and his wife. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (**Genesis 2:24**; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2; Exodus 20:14 [seventh commandment]). Any kind of intimate physical contact with another person that you are not married to is forbidden in Scripture.

Until you are married man, that woman is not your wife. It may be someone else’s wife. So you shouldn’t touch her in any way. You are allowed to do that when you are married, not before.

* + 1. **Adultery**. **Verse 6** also has fornication and adultery in view, because it says “That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter”. This means that another Christian’s wife or daughter is in view and the sin in view is mainly sexual relations with a woman that is not your wife, but belongs to another man. You would sin against her and him.

But let’s not think that the only sin in view here is the behavior of having relations with a woman not your wife – or a man not your husband.

* + 1. **Immoral thoughts**. But holiness is not just relegated to actions! Amen! God looks on the heart. Look at verse 5, “Not in the lust of concupiscence [PASSION], even as the Gentiles [THE LOST] which know not God:”

So if your mind is consumed with lustful thoughts, then you are sexually immoral. And **if you have the roots of fornication in your mind, you will one day have the fruits of fornication in your life**.

So let’s review. The text says: “For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that you should abstain from sexual immorality”. God says here: holy people *avoid sexual immorality*. Don’t call yourself holy or a child of God unless you are chaste in your heart and in your walk. You are to be totally abstinent when it comes to intimate thoughts and intimate actions, and you should reserve those sacred thoughts and actions for the person that you marry.

**Why Abstain?**

**Why** should you and I as believes abstain from fornication? Why should you make a vow tonight to keep yourself pure from immorality?

I’m going to give you three warnings and five incentives.

**Five Warnings**:

* + 1. **HOLINESS!**

First, you should abstain from fornication because is the opposite of **holiness**. Fornication is a derailer of holiness. God’s will is that you would be holy. Verse 4 says, “For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification”.

So before we understand exactly what fornication is, we all need to be up to speed with what God is calling us to. Paul says emphatically that the will of God for you as His child is holiness—your sanctification. And whatever fornication is, it is the opposite of holiness.

Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit that begins at regeneration, and continues until death or the Lord’s return. **Philippians 1:6**, “he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ”. Therefore if you enter into fornication as a child of God, you are derailing God’s plan for holiness in your life.

Let me say that are three ways of looking at our holiness. These cannot be separated they are like a perfect pyramid.

* + - 1. First, our holiness is **Positional** by God in Christ at the time His people are justified/saved. The moment we are regenerated we are made holy. God “made him [CHRIST] *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (**2 Corinthians 5:21**).

Now, we can’t leave it there, because there is also a personal side to holiness.

* + - 1. Second, our holiness is **Personal**, that is, it is the responsibility of every Christian. Everyone who is positionally holy, where God has done an amazing work of regeneration and transformation in the heart personalizes that holiness, and fruit comes out in the life. It’s just as **1 Peter 1:15** commands: “[A]s he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation”.
      2. Third, our holiness is **Progressive** and a growing process for each Christian (babe vs. mature; milk vs. meat). We are to “grow in grace” (**2 Peter 3:18**). We are to move on from being babes to being mature teachers of the Word. We are to move on from milk to the strong meat of the Word.

As I said, you cannot separate these aspects. You can’t say that you are positionally righteous, unless the righteousness of Christ is bearing fruit in your life.

* **Luke 6:46**, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?”
* **John 14:15**, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”
* **Matthew 7:21**, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”

Is it possible for a Christian to commit fornication? Yes. That is why Paul is warning Christians! The overall teaching of the Bible though is that sin remains, but it will not reign. As a Christian, you still carry around a body of flesh that is totally depraved. And “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing” (**Romans 7:18**).

But as a Christian something has happened. You are a new creation in Christ. **Romans 6:6**, “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” In other words, your slavery to sin ended the moment you put your faith in Christ. You now have the liberty not to sin! You are free. Therefore, you have the power to be holy. You should fulfill the holy will of God in your life. And Paul says in our text: “this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication”.

So fornication is the opposite of holiness. Holy people abstain from fornication. God’s will is your holiness, therefore as a blood bought Christian on your way to eternal holiness with God you “should abstain from fornication” (**verse 3**).

* + 1. **PICTURE OF CHRIST**. We should abstain from fornication secondly, because it **mars** the picture of Christ and his Bride. We find out in **Ephesians 5** that the marriage covenant is sacred because it points to our union with Jesus Christ. To love anything in our lives above Christ is spiritual fornication. So to commit fornication is to mar the picture that God has given to us of Christ and His church. He would have his Bride to be “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” (**Ephesians 5:27**).
    2. **DETHRONES CHRIST.** Thirdly, we should abstain from fornication because it is a task master that **dethrones** Jesus Christ. “No man can serve two masters” (**Matthew 6:24**). Ultimately, Christ is all any one needs. Married people and single people have problems with lust. Marriage doesn’t take the problem of lust away. Lust is a heart problem where a person is looking to another person for joy instead of looking to Christ for joy. No human being can fulfill the deepest longings of your heart. Your heart was made to love God. Everything else ultimately leaves you unsatisfied.

In other words, our ultimate fulfillment is in God and not lust or in another person. We can have only one master, and that Master and Lord is Jesus Christ. If Christ is Lord of our lives, we can and must abstain from fornication.

**FIVE INCENTIVES**

Now five **incentives** for taking a vow of purity.[[6]](#footnote-6) Now this is not necessarily a vow of celibacy. God may want you to be celibate, and if He does, He will give you the grace to restrain desires and even take those desires for the most part away. But we all need to take this vow of purity to reserve those desires for intimacy for the person that God Himself will send to you in His perfect time, if it is His will. Essentially it is a vow to remain content in God.

* + 1. The incentive of **pleasing God**, **verse 1**: Paul exhorts us “ how ye ought to walk and to **please** God.” A vow of purity pleases God. That should be enough for any Christian. This ought to be enough for any Christian. There are more incentives, but this is most important on the list.
    2. The incentive of doing the **will of God**, **verse 3**: “this is the **will of God**, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication.” A vow of purity is God’s will, and Christians love the will of God. Christlikeness means that we delight to do God’s will (**Psalm 40:8; Hebrews 10:7**).
    3. The incentive of **honor**. **Verse 4**: “That every one of you should know how to control his body in sanctification and honour.” Controlling your body in purity is a matter of your *sacred* honor – either being honored by the community or showing honor to your wife and other women, or showing honor to your future wife or husband. Of course, the greatest honor is from God. He will say “Well done thou good and faithful servant”. A vow of purity is the honorable thing to do.
    4. The incentive of Christian **love** which seeks the good of others. Keeping pure is the loving way to treat others. **Verse 6**: “That no *man* go beyond and defraud [STEAL FROM] his brother in *any* matter.” Fornication is total selfishness—seen by the word “defraud”—to take something for selfish gain that doesn’t belong to you. It is a total disregard for the other person and for God.
* When you fornicate with someone, you sin against them and dishonor that person, and you dishonor God.
* When you fanaticize about a person you are not married to, you show selfish greed and thievery in your heart, and you sin against God and that person.
* If you look at a person in a smutty picture, that is a real person that posed for that, and you dishonor that person; you disregard their value before God as a creature and a creation of God.
* Ultimately fornication disregards God! You show disregard for God.

It is not Christian love that moves us in any of this. It is simply selfish desire. But Christians are people deeply moved by love for others. Christians love people; they don’t use them.

* + 1. The incentive of God’s **vengeance**. **Verse 6**: “…because that the Lord *is* the **avenger** of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified.” In **verse 8** it says, “He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit.” Listen, one day you will stand before God! Face to face! You’ll give an account for every action. If you refuse to turn to the Lord as your all-satisfying pleasure, and you make a master out of your lustful passions, sooner of later you will meet the wrath of God. The Scripture says in several places that no fornicator, no adulterer, no unclean person, no whoremonger will enter into the Kingdom of God, but will have their part in the Lake of Fire, which is the second death (**Ephesians 5:5, Revelation 19:8**). **Hebrews 13:4** says it well: “Marriage *is* honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but **whoremongers and adulterers God will judge**.” Is that in our Bible? Yes. What does that mean? That everyone who’s fornicated will go to hell? Unless your sins are blotted out by the blood of Christ, unless the wrath of God for your actions is satisfied by the bloody violent sacrifice of God’s Son the Lamb, then you are condemned already, and your fornication will be paid for by ***you*** and not by Christ. Unless you are a Christian, unless you flee from the wrath to come, you will have to pay for the crimes you have committed against a holy God. But if you persist in fornication, then forever and ever, you will meet with the wrath of God.

1. The Encouragement: seek Holiness, 1 Thes. 4:7-8.

**1 Thess. 4:7-8**, “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. **8**Therefore  whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

**Not an Opinion**

This is not Paul’s opinion. Holiness is the best way. But it is also commanded.

1. Most of the material for this sermon has come from: Newheiser, J. (2008). *Opening up Proverbs* (pp. 72ff). Leominster: Day One Publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (pp. 75–76). Leominster: Day One Publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The five incentives for purity and the three pathways to purity are taken from John Piper’s study on this passage entitled “This is the Will of God that You Abstain from Fornication” (October 15, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)