

*1 Thessalonians 4:3-5***PREFACE**

Last week we finished by including the first part of v3, in a general sense, as a wrap-up to the first two verses of Chapter Four, which are about Paul exhorting the Thessalonians to live lives pleasing to God. But in this specific context, Paul uses the first part of v3 to launch into an exhortation for them to live lives of sexual purity.

We have no evidence beyond this passage—if even that—that Paul has in mind any specific individuals of transgressions within the church regarding this. It may just be that He felt it important to include this counsel, since most in this church had come out of pagan, idolatrous backgrounds—where the cultural and moral standards would have been dramatically different.

Background

Let's begin in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council, which was called so that the Christian faith might establish some fundamental requirements for new converts. In v1 we find the triggering event for the council.

Read Acts 15:1.

As we learned in our study of Galatians, these were the “Judaizers”—Jewish Christians who saw Christianity not as a separate faith system, but as a sect of Judaism. They wanted to establish a *Jewish* baseline of fundamentals to which every Christian must hold. As we read in v2, “the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.”

The Pharisees in attendance were of the opinion that Christians should be required to obey the Mosaic law (v5), but the apostle Peter was most eloquent in steering the council toward the autonomy of the Christian faith.

Read Acts 15:10-11.

Thus, in what we today would call the *final communique* issued by the council, they wrote and delivered to the churches the statement pertinent to our study:

Read vv28-29.

that you abstain from... fornication

Here is the Greek word found in our Thessalonian text (v4): *porneias*

fornication, sexual immorality = *porneias* = from <G4203> (porneuo); **harlotry (including adultery and incest)**; figurative **idolatry** :- fornication; **any sexual sin**.

So this the council considered important enough to include in the “essentials,” even as they were removing the strictures of the Law as propounded by the Judaizers. And once again we ask the important question, Why?

Every one of us has his or her idea of what is “normal.” Every marriage has its own normal. For example, the life Linda and I enjoy at our home—that which we consider normal—is a far cry from that which is normal in the homes of, say, Pastor Jeremy and Serena, or Pastor Daniel and Aimee [each with four young children]. Likewise, in the first century a new convert to Christianity who had been born and raised in Jerusalem as a Jew would have a far different idea of “normal” from a convert who had been born and raised in, say, Athens, or Corinth. Today we might draw the comparison between someone born and raised a Baptist in the Midwest to someone born and raised without any faith at all on the Strip in Las Vegas. Two polar-opposites when it comes to what is normal.

The church fathers knew that many new to faith in Christ would have a very different idea of that which is normal—pagan idolatry, multiple deities and, not least, not just sexual promiscuity, but promiscuous sex even being incorporated into temple worship.

Robertson: Pagan religion did not demand sexual purity of its devotees, the gods and goddesses being grossly immoral. Priestesses were in the temples for the service of the men who came.

Demosthenes: We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the faithful guardianship of our homes.

So it was necessary for the church fathers to spell out, explicitly as a rule, that this sort of libidinous behavior was not permitted.

[Back to Thessalonians.](#)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5.

v3

Paul states explicitly in v3 that God’s desire for their lives was sanctification—holiness, purity—and especially in regards to their sexual life. And in v4 he defines what he means by this.

v4

And, in v4, here we go again: *no one* agrees on just what is meant by this verse.

that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor

The disagreement centers on what Paul means by two words in this verse: in the NASB the words translated “possess” and “vessel.”

possess^{nasb, kjvs}, **control**^{niv, esv} = *ktaomai* = a primary verb; **to get, i.e. acquire** (by any means; own) :- obtain, possess, provide, purchase.

vessel^{nasb, kjvs}, **body**^{niv, esv} = *skeuos* = of uncertain affinity; a **vessel, implement, equipment or apparatus** (literal or figurative [specially a **wife** as contributing to the usefulness of the husband]) :- goods, sail, stuff, vessel. [The NASB “vessel” is the most literal translation, but doesn’t help us to know what Paul meant by the word, since vessel could mean any everyday object, like a jug or bowl, one’s own body, or a wife.]

To illustrate the disparity, here is an abridged list of the various interpretations from different commentators (*not* Scripture translations):

- possess his own body (i.e., take responsibility for)
- control his own body
- acquire his own wife (i.e., get, obtain)
- possess his own wife
- have his own wife (i.e., live with)

Deepening the challenge is the fact that the different interpretations are about evenly split—for example, between “possess” and “control,” and “body” and “wife”—making it all the more difficult for the layman to decide which is correct. But there is the consolation that we can learn truth and draw application from *all* the variants. So let’s consider a few of them.

Considering the times in which this letter was written, it is understandable that this counsel is directed toward the male of the species—the man, the husband. But it does no violence to the text to apply these truths today to both sexes. Even with the physical and psychological differences between the two, both struggle against temptation that would lead them *away* from “sanctification and honor.”

Sidebar: This was illustrated for me even as I was preparing the notes on this page. As is my habit, when I first sit down at my desk in the morning, I make a quick check of the headlines just to make sure the world hasn’t ended overnight and they forgot to tell me. I clicked on two headlines that seemed interesting to me:

LIFE on Jupiter Moon? NASA to Announce ‘Surprising Activity’
and
SCANNING SOFTWARE DECIPHERS ANCIENT BIBLICAL SCROLL

Both articles were interesting, but on both web pages there were large, illustrated links encouraging me to click on them to watch videos of accidental “wardrobe malfunctions” of TV weather girls or news anchors. Even reading a story about signs of life on the Jupiter moon Europa, or how technology is confirming the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible, we are tempted away from a life of holiness.

possess his own body
control his own body (NIV, ESV)

This interpretation is well-supported by other passages, including what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.

David, in 1 Samuel 21, refers to the male body as a vessel.

Read 1 Samuel 21:4-5. (NOT NIV)

So the call here is for us to exert control over our own body—which is, after all not just “the vessel of our soul,” but “a temple of the Holy Spirit.”

acquire his own wife (i.e., get, obtain)

possess his own wife

have his own wife (i.e., live with)

Some interpreters say this verse speaks not just of personal purity, but personal purity within marriage. That is, individual purity is *accomplished or sustained* because of a man holding to his wife, a woman holding to her husband.

And I can see this interpretation—especially because of how this ends, that we are to do this in “sanctification and honor.” I don’t know about you, but it is a stretch for me to “control my own body *in honor*.”

honor = *time* (tee-may') = from <G5099> (tino); **a value**, i.e. money paid, or (concretely and collective) valuables; by analogy **esteem (especially of the highest degree), or the dignity itself** :- honour, precious, price, some.

In a way that can be made to work if we are speaking of our own body, but the sense is easier to apply to the idea of holding my *wife* in purity and honor. And that is what the apostle Peter speaks of in his first epistle.

Read 1 Peter 3:7. (KJVs or ESV)

Another way to think of the end of v4 is that these two words—sanctification (holiness) and honor—describe a healthy marriage with the correct balance: “holiness due God, and honor due the wife.” (Lightfoot)

If we back off and look at it broadly, this view of v4 paints a picture of a man and woman coming together in the Lord as husband and wife, not just for mutual satisfaction, but for mutual protection against the temptations of impurity—“sexual immorality.” It is a picture of mutual respect, of submission and honor, belonging to each other solely. Paul sums this up neatly in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-4.

v5

This is a picture in marked contrast to v5, which brings us back full-circle.

Read vv4-5.

It was *necessary* for Paul to give this command to the Thessalonian church because so many of them had come out of a culture with a radically different norm where it came to sex and marriage. His reason for emphasizing this to them was so they would not just *leave* that pagan culture, but never return to it.

For us, while we may not have come out of a culture like that, we are daily tempted to join it. Paul’s injunction is for the purity of the union between man and woman in and through marriage—which is a picture of the purity of the church, the bride of Christ, in union with her Lord.

Read Revelation 19:7-8.