

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now we're going to spend some time meditating on God's ways and reflecting on His precepts as we find them in the passage that we read in 1 Thessalonians 4.

Now, I don't know about you, but until two weeks ago, I had never heard of Harvey Weinstein.

And now I'm clearly not a film buff because apparently he's a big deal. And obviously he's been in the news a lot in these past couple of weeks.

And as I've been picking up a little bit about him, I've discovered that he, or in any case, the production company that he part owns, has raked up a total of 81 Oscars.

Don't quote me on that. That may not be accurate, but that's certainly what I picked up in one of the reports on the news. Another bizarre statistic that I heard, I think it was on the radio.

[1 : 1 0] At some point this week, I had the radio on in the car and the Harvey Weinstein saga was being discussed. And the bizarre statistic that I came across was that somebody, and people really must get out a lot more, but somebody had examined 1,396 Oscar acceptance speeches.

I think it's up to and including 2015. Again, I may not have the details exactly right. And what they did was do an analysis of who had been thanked in the course of all these acceptance speeches.

You know, you know the drill on Oscars night, the winners go up and they thank mom and dad, and they thank whoever. You know, they've got this long list of people they thank. Well, somebody had counted it all up.

They tallied it all up. And it turns out that Harvey Weinstein has been thanked more times than God in Oscar acceptance speeches. Not hugely significant, but a curious anecdote relating to this saga that I'm sure you have been also privy to and hearing about on the news.

So, I had never heard of him. I have heard of him now. I kind of wish that I never had. But there it is.

[2 : 3 3] His fall from grace as multiple accusations of rape and sexual harassment have emerged has been nothing if not spectacular. And it is, I'm sure you agree, a sordid business.

But perhaps one positive that emerges from this is the manner in which it has brought out into the light the treatment of so many women who have been subjected to this kind of behavior.

And also, as that has happened, it has also as a result shed light on the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment in our so-called civilized society.

One way in which that has been illustrated or brought into sharp focus is by how the hashtag MeToo, what would you call it, phenomena has gone viral.

I think I was reading online in one of the papers that there have been over a million uses of the hashtag MeToo. So, for those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, that is women, mostly women, although men perhaps can also identify with this, basically declaring that I've also been a victim of sexual harassment.

[3 : 54] In addition to all those who have actually used the hashtag, apparently there have been over 12 million posts, comments, and reactions on Facebook relating to this theme of MeToo.

So, everybody seems to have an opinion about Harvey Weinstein. Well, maybe not everybody, but lots of people. I wonder, does God have an opinion?

Or more importantly, what does God have to say to us as Christians concerning this whole area of sexual conduct and misconduct? Do we have instruction in God's Word on this?

Or do we need to grope around in the dark and try and work out how we are to live? What attitude we are to have when we hear of the kinds of things that we've been hearing about in these past couple of weeks?

I want to spend a little time this evening considering a passage in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians in chapter 4 and verses 3 to 8. I think we read from verse 1 just to get a little bit of the context, but we're going to be focusing our attention on verses 3 to 8.

[5 : 09] And we're going to divide the passage up in the following way, really just following through the verses in the order in which we find them, but giving each of the verses a heading to direct our thinking somewhat. And the headings that will direct our thoughts are as follows. First of all, I want us to think about what I'm calling God's desire for you. What is God's desire for you as a Christian? I think it is important to stress that Paul here is writing very deliberately and explicitly to the believers in Thessalonica. He is saying as Christians, this is what God has to say to you. Now, the truths that he expresses are true for everybody, but the instruction is directed in the first instance to Christians. And that's particularly true of this first point that we're going to notice, and that is God's desire for you. The next thing we're going to comment on is what I'm calling

God's rule for sex. What is God's rule for the practice of sex? The third heading that we've got, and again, it's simply following the verses that we have in the passage, is God's call for self-control.

We find that in the verses that we've read. And then finally, we're going to think about God's attitude to sexual misconduct of different kinds. So, that's more or less how we're going to deal with the passage. But we're going to start with what I'm speaking of or describing as God's desire for you.

Notice what Paul says at the beginning of this little section about sexual behavior, and particularly sexual misbehavior. Notice how he begins the section and how he ends the section in verses 3 and 7. In verse 3 he says, it is God's will that you should be sanctified. It is God's will that you should be sanctified. He's speaking to the Christians and he's saying, look, get this straight. This is God's will for you. This is God's desire for you. This is God's purpose for you that you should be sanctified.

And then also in verse 7, a very similar language, therefore he who, I'm sorry, verse 7, for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. So, here Paul establishes for us or identifies for us, God's purpose for us. And for Christians this should be our starting point. You know, who are we? What would God have us be? Why has God redeemed us? And Paul is very clear in answering these questions.

[8 : 05] God's desire and purpose for us is that we should be sanctified, that we should live a holy life. Sanctification or being made holy is at one at the same time a gift and a demand. We're given a new status as holy in God's sight, set apart for Him, for His glory, for His service. But we're also called to live lives that reflect our status. So, as an act of God's grace, we are sanctified, we are set apart.

God looks on us and He says, you're mine. And in doing so, He sanctifies us, He sets us apart. But having established that we are His, He says, now live in a manner that reflects who you are.

Live in a manner that reflects your status. Live in a manner that does justice to who you claim to be, one who bears the name of Christ, a Christian. Live a holy life, be sanctified.

And of course, in identifying this as our purpose, Paul is simply echoing the call that God Himself addresses to His people, be holy as I am holy. Now, one aspect of this holy life that God desires for us, that is His purpose for us, one aspect of this holy life involves avoiding sexual immorality.

There in verse 3, He identifies our purpose, and then He develops or identifies one element within that. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality. Now, a holy life is much broader than that one prohibition, if you wish, or that one call to avoid sexual immorality, but that is one element of a holy life. It's one element of a life that is sanctified, avoiding sexual immorality.

[10 : 11] And we'll come on to what that is talking about in a moment. But to just focus again on this first element, God's desire for you. Yours is a high calling. Yours is a dignified calling. And you should stand tall and live the life that God has called you to live. Don't be satisfied with anything less.

Don't be content with living a life that is anything less than what God would have you live. A holy life, a pure life, a sanctified life, pleasing to God and of blessing to others.

So, there in the passage at the beginning of the section and at the end, we have identified God's desire for us, for you. But then we also find in this passage what I'm calling God's rule for sex.

And in verse 3 again, we find that certainly implicitly, it is God's will that you should be sanctified and that you should avoid sexual immorality. Now, Paul doesn't provide us in this passage with a manual outlining God's rule for sex, but he does implicitly acknowledge such a rule in calling on believers to avoid sexual immorality. Now, we read that and we say that, yeah, that's fair enough. We should avoid sexual immorality. We take it as a given that there is such a thing as sexual immorality. That seems to us entirely reasonable. Of course, there is such a thing as sexual immorality.

People may have different ways of defining what comes into that category, but yay, there is such a thing. But interestingly, for those to whom Paul was writing to the Greeks in Thessalonica, that would have far from been a given. And we need to appreciate something of the cultural context into which Paul is writing this letter. For the Greeks who lived in this city where there was this gathering of believers, largely new believers, new to the faith, learning what it means to be a Christian, they lived in this context, in this city, in this cultural milieu where the very idea that there was even such a thing as sexual immorality would have been a novel and even laughable notion. For the Greeks, largely, sex was amoral. Sex was an appetite to be satisfied in whatever manner deemed convenient.

[12 : 52] God has a very different perspective, and Paul is bringing to the attention of the believers in Thessalonica God's very different perspective. Sexual conduct falls within a God-established moral framework, and that framework in turn reflects two of God's priorities. Let's call them that.

The first priority that I want to suggest that God has and that is reflected in His view on sex is a high view of the body, of our physical bodies, but also a high view of marriage. Now, again, we have to contrast that with the view that would have been prevalent in the Greek world. For the Greeks, the body was of little consequence, a shell for the soul or mind. And given that that was the perspective that they had, what you did with your body or with other people's bodies was morally neutral. While the cry of our society in different areas of morality is, it's my body, perhaps for the Greeks, the cry would have been, it's just a body, but not so with God. God has a high view of our bodies. He has created our bodies, and when He finished creating all that He had created, He declared, as we well know, He saw all that He had made and that it was very good. And that includes our physical bodies. We are physical beings, and we will ever be so. For eternity, we will enjoy and own. Part of our identity will be physical, glorified bodies. God has a high view of the body that's reflected in His view of sex, but also a high view of marriage. Now, again, for the Greeks, marriage was viewed by many. I don't want to be guilty of making too many sweeping statements, but by many it was viewed as an institution from a very utilitarian and misogynistic perspective. Let me just quote to you what one Greek orator, statesman of the fourth century said concerning sex and marriage, a guy called Demosthenes. And he has a fairly well-known quote on the subject. And he says the following, we keep prostitutes for pleasure, we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body, and we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes. Very romantic. But that reflects the Greek view. You see a very male-dominated view, how women were simply useful for whatever purposes, be it pleasure or child rearing or administration of the home, and a very amoral attitude towards sexual practice, sexual conduct. No suggestion that there were rights and wrongs in this, but rather that which was deemed convenient or suitable for men largely. Now, God's view of marriage, of course, is so different.

God's high view of marriage, an institution of His own creation, places sex as a God-given pleasure to be enjoyed exclusively within the boundaries of marriage between one man and one woman. A union that is described in the Scriptures in almost mystical and sacred terms, you know, the two will become one flesh. A high view of marriage, a high view of sexual practice within and exclusively within the boundaries of marriage. All other sexual activity that you care to mention or conceive comes under the umbrella category of what Paul here speaks of as sexual immorality, where that expression translates one Greek word, often used in the discussion of these matters, *porneia*. From the root of that word, of course, we get our English word pornography. And it seems to have been a catch-all word to include all sexual activity outwith that which is sanctioned by God within the bounds of faithful marriage.

So, God has a view on sex. And when we think back to where we began, thinking about Harvey Weinstein, it seems to me that we can see the roots of the scandal that has developed. Of course, it's nothing new, it's just that it's come to the light. But we can see the roots of the behavior in a rejection of God's rule in the realm of sex, not only by the individual who has been guilty, it would seem, on a grand scale, though clearly he is guilty of rejecting God's rule in this realm, but also of the society that he forms a part and I guess in some measure, given his power, has helped to shape. You see, in our society, sex has been removed from the sanctity and privacy of the master bedroom and relocated into the public glare of the playground. Just one more recreational activity. And it's hardly surprising if that is the extent to which it has been devalued that we then see the harvest of such an attitude, of such a devaluing of this God-given activity. So, we have God's desire for you, that you be holy, that you be sanctified.

You have God's rule for sex that is implicit in the very presence of what Paul speaks of as sexual immorality. Implicit in that is that God has determined what is right and what is wrong in this realm. And he has told us what is right and what is wrong. But let's move on to another aspect of this that we find, what I'm calling God's call for self-control. Notice what the passage goes on to say in verses 4 and 5. Well, let's read from verse 3. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God. So, there's a contrast. Paul draws a contrast between those he calls the heathen and between those who are believers, those who are Christians. The word heathen, I think, you know, and we tend to use the word heathen or if it's used, we don't use it often, but it has a pejorative sense to it. It's really got a negative sense to it. I think Paul doesn't use it in a negative way. He's describing negative attitudes that were prevalent among the heathen, but the actual term or description, heathen, isn't intended to carry any negative overtones. It simply means those who are not

[20 : 24] Christians. The actual word is the nations. We might say society. What does society think? How does society behave? Now, it's a broad brushstroke, but that's, I think, what Paul has in mind. He's contrasting the heathen, those who are not Christians, in this case the Greeks in Thessalonica principally, though it goes beyond that, and the Christians within the believing community there in that city. So, there's a contrast. Now, let's begin with what he says about the heathen, the order in which Paul deals with it. He speaks about the believers first and then about the heathen, but we'll invert the order. What does he say about the heathen? Well, there in verse 5, it's in the negative because he's saying, you shouldn't be like this, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God.

The language that Paul uses to describe the heathen's attitude to sex is this expression, passionate lust. Now, it seems that the language carries the sense of a dominating desire. That word translated passionate has that sense, a desire, an impulse, an appetite, whatever you want to call it, that is dominating, a dominating desire, with the emphasis, I think, on dominating. So, sex is no longer our servant but our master. Now, we see this in many what are even described as sexual addictions, sexual addiction to pornography. It's a huge problem and I can guarantee that it is not a problem only out there. It's a huge problem. Addiction to pornography, to promiscuity in general, an illicit affair. It can have a dominating effect where those involved know that it doesn't make sense, know that it's wrong, know that it will end in tears, but simply can't, it would seem, disentangle themselves from that illicit adulterous affair. There's almost a slavery to this passion, this desire. And what Paul is saying is that in broad terms, the heathen are so characterized as slaves to their desires. In the last last few years, you know, you hear more this language of sex addictions. I think the first time I heard the language describing an individual was a few years ago in connection with Tiger Woods. And in these past days, we hear it in the context of Harvey Weinstein. And he's off to a, so we're told, off to a, offer rehab at some sex addiction clinic. It costs some horrendous amount of money to be there.

Kind of almost as an aside, some have perhaps somewhat cynically, but maybe accurately suggested that in these matters, the powerless go to prison while the powerful go to rehab. Well, I don't know if that's true or not, but it's been suggested and it caught my attention. Now, I'm not convinced that therapy is the answer. Sin needs to be repented of rather than cured from. But this is how Paul describes the heathen. They are slaves to, they are under the control of passionate lust or dominating desire. But he presents an alternative. He presents an alternative for Christians. And what is that alternative? Well, we have it in verse 4, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable. That's the alternative. Now, before going to the heart of the matter, which is this matter of learning to control our own bodies, I think it is instructive to note how Paul urges everybody to take control. Notice what he says there in verse 4, that each of you should learn to control his own body. And there's a deliberate use of language there by Paul. He doesn't just say, you know, you should control your own body, but each of you should learn to control your own body. Well, what's the implication? Well, the implication is that we are all subject to and prone to sexual misconduct and sexual sin. We all need to learn to control our bodies in this area of life. All of us. All of us are in some measure guilty or tempted in this area in one way or another. And I think that's an important point to stress. One of the things that I've been, I don't know if reflecting on is putting it too strongly, but noticing as I've been listening to people's reactions to the revelations about Harvey Weinstein, the allegations, I suppose we need to call them, about this man. One of the things I found interesting is how often the response of those around him, others in that world of cinema and celebrity, how often the response is to demonize or perhaps more accurately to dehumanize this man.

And so often on several occasions I've heard the language of monster used. He's a monster. You know, and part of us kind of responds to that and say, yeah, he is. He's a monster. You know, look at the way he's behaved. What a monster. But I wonder if, it may not be consciously, but I wonder if subconsciously there's, what's going on there is a sense of trying to lay the guilt all on a few monsters. And wouldn't that be nice? If in this area, the problem is a few monsters, a few Harvey Weinstains. That's the problem. Not the rest of us. We're okay. We're okay. We don't do that kind of thing. We're not guilty of that kind of sin. But oh yeah, there's a there's a few monsters out there. If only we could get rid of those few monsters, then all would be well. And so you dehumanize, you demonize, and in that way you get yourself off the hook.

In fact, one journalist that I noticed who was commenting on the Me Too phenomenon, hashtag Me Too phenomenon, I think makes the following, I think valid point. It's not just one monster. Me Too reveals the ubiquity of sexual assault. And I suspect she is right in that analysis. But back to the main point.

[27:11] Paul says that as believers, we're not to be subject to these dominating desires to this passionate lust, but rather we are to control our bodies. We are to exercise self-control. Implicit in the call, and it may be an obvious point to make, but it's worth making, is that that is possible. Now, sometimes we're told that that's not possible. We're told that self-control is impossible. Some would place a sexual appetite in the same category as our appetite for food and drink. If you're hungry, you have something to eat. And if you'll forgive the language, if you're horny, you have sex. It's the same. You wouldn't deny somebody food and drink. If they need to eat, they need to eat. That's just the way we are. We die if we don't eat. Well, that's true. You die if you don't eat, but you don't die if you don't have sex. I think I can safely assure you that nobody has ever died for lack of sex. They're not in the same category. If you wish to use the language of appetite, I don't have an issue with that. Use the language of appetite, but not if it is to be used as some kind of excuse for saying that somehow it's not possible to exercise self-control. God would not call you to do something that is not possible. It is possible, and this is what you are called to do, to take control, to learn to control your own body. Sex is good, but it is not essential to human existence or to living a full and happy life. Jesus was, is the most rounded, most human human, and He never had sex. He learned to control His own body, and we must do likewise. Such control, says Paul, is holy and honorable.

So, there is this call to self-control. But the final thing I want us to notice in this passage is what I'm calling God's attitude to sexual misconduct. Notice in verse 6 what Paul goes on to say, and that in this matter, this matter of sexual behavior, in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins as you have already, as we have already told you and warned you.

What does that tell us about God's attitude to sexual misconduct? The language that is used here, that the English verbs that are employed or that are used in translating the Greek verbs, are the language of to wrong and the language of taking advantage of. Now, both of these verbs significantly imply victims. So, speaking of a conduct that leads to or involves there being victims, of that conduct. The word translated to wrong, it would seem, has the sense of or can have the sense of overstepping the boundaries or of inappropriate conduct. So, all sexual sin is wrong in that it is sinful, but some is particularly pernicious as it wrongs others. Now, adultery is an obvious example, and possibly what Paul has in mind here in this verse. We don't know. He's not explicit. But I think we can extend this, this idea of sexual conduct that has victims, I think we can extend it to the whole spectrum of sexual harassment, assault, and rape that has been, you know, in the news so much in these past days as a result of these scandals that have come to light.

Often, of course, in reality that this wronging or violating of others is perpetrated in the context of, to use Paul's other verb, in the context of taking advantage of a position of power. In the case of the Greek context into which Paul is writing, the victims would have been many, they would have been women largely, they would have been slaves, they would have also sadly been children. Those over whom others had power, and so they were able to wrong them, they were able to take advantage of them.

I'm not saying that Paul is speaking necessarily specifically about that. I don't know specifically what he's speaking about, but he does speak about conduct that has victims and where it is possible to take advantage of another. And that does seem to point in that kind of direction. And what is God's attitude to that? Well, God hates such behavior. He hates sex being used to abuse and wrong and take advantage of others. He hates it so much that he commits himself to avenge such behavior. He will punish the offender. That is what Paul says. So, clearly, here in this verse, the Lord will punish men for all such sins as we have already told you and warned you. Now, it's interesting here, Paul has been contrasting what the heathen do and what Christians should do. And yet here, when he issues the warning, he includes everybody. He says, I've already warned you about this. So, when I'm talking about God punishing these offenders, I don't want you to sit back smugly and say, oh, yes, these terrible heathens out there doing these terrible things. Isn't it good that God's going to punish these monsters? He says,

[32 : 46] I'm warning you as well, because if you're guilty of this, then you too will experience God's punishment. He will avenge those who have been victims as a result of your misconduct.

He will avenge those who have been accused of killing them. He will avenge those who have been punished for the punishment and the punishment. So, we know, of course, that human justice is so often ill-equipped to deal justly with sexual abuse. So, often, it's difficult to bring together the evidence that is necessary to bring a conviction. We know that, you know, conviction rates for rape is so tiny, and that's the problem. The problem is to gather the evidence, and so often, the guilty get off scot-free.

We know that's simply a reality. Not so with God's justice. God, Paul assures us, will punish those guilty of this sin. Let's draw things to a close by posing a question to ourselves. What will we do?

What will you do? Verse 8, I think, helps us to think about the options that we have in answering that question. Verse 7, we've already touched on in terms of God's desire for you that you live a holy life.

Then in verse 8, Paul says, therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man, but God who gives you His Holy Spirit. I think there are two options in the light of God's instructions on this matter. One option is to reject God's wisdom. It's to reject God's way. It's to reject God's rule.

[34 : 20] To say, well, that's what God says. I think differently. I know better. I'm going to live my own life. It's my body, and I'll do with it as I please. So, you can reject what God says. That's one option. What does that imply? What can we say about somebody who would reject God's instruction?

Well, what does Paul say here? Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man, but God who gives you His Holy Spirit. He's speaking here specifically about Christians who would reject this instruction. He's saying such Christians are foolish and ungrateful. It is an act of the utmost folly to reject God's instructions. God is our Creator. God knows us best. God has set precepts and rules for us for our good to reject His instruction as an act of the utmost folly. So, such is a foolish man.

But also, Paul says, an ungrateful man. Because notice what Paul also says here. You're not just rejecting God, but you're rejecting the God who gives you His Holy Spirit. The God who has given us His Holy Spirit to dwell within us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. And we have been given the Spirit that He would help us, that He would enable us to live holy lives. And to use that body of which the Holy Spirit is a temple, which is a temple for the Holy Spirit, to use that body in sexual misconduct is to spit in the face of God. It is to engage in an act of gross ungratefulness. He's given you the Spirit, and yet this is how you behave with the body into which the Spirit has been given. I think that's the sense that Paul is trying to impress upon the believers. But yes, you can. You can reject God's instruction. Or the alternative to rejecting is to repent and to resolve. If you are guilty of sexual sin, then let me just say a couple of things to you. You're not alone, but don't take much consolation from that. More importantly,

I urge you to repent and to resolve to live a holy life pleasing to God and a blessing to others. God has given you, if you are a believer, God has given you His Holy Spirit to enable and to empower you. And with His help, as you rest on Him, as you seek and request His help, you can learn to control your own body and to do so in a way that is pleasing to God, that befits your status as one who has been set aside by God as His own. May we all so seek to live. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You for the instruction that we find in it for our lives.

We confess that often we are foolish. Often our ears are more attentive to the voice of the heathen, the voice of society, the voice of received wisdom. And we are drawn in our thinking in that direction.

[37 : 42] And slowly but surely we begin to adopt opinions and attitudes that are contrary to Your Word. Forgive us for our foolishness if that has been the path that we have been treading. If in beginning to think in that way that has also led for some of us to engage in sexual conduct that is forbidden, that is displeasing to You, we pray that by Your Spirit You would bring us to that point of godly grief, of repenting of our sin and of enjoying the forgiveness that You are ready to give and grant to all who seek it of You. We pray that You would help us to learn to control our own bodies, to exercise self-control in living lives that are holy and pleasing to You. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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