

Battling the Beast Within

Breaking up Stony Ground, Part 6

1 Thessalonians 4 & 5

Just read the letters of the Apostles to the churches throughout the Roman Empire and you can barely finish a chapter without the Apostle Paul or the Apostle Peter dealing with holy behavior by contrasting it with sinful, sexually immoral behavior.

And there were good reasons for clarity and frankness in biblical teaching.

William Barclay includes in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians – a letter where the Apostle Paul really just sort of backs up the truck and unloads on this issue – Barclay comments, “It may seem strange that Paul should go to such lengths to teach [moral] and sexual purity in a Christian congregation. But it must be remembered that these early believers came into the Christian faith out of a society in which sexual purity was an unknown virtue.”ⁱ

He goes on to quote Seneca (the Roman Philosopher who lived during the days of Paul); Seneca wrote of Roman culture that fashionable women identified (or labeled) the passing years with the names of their [many] husbands – one woman had 8 husbands in five years.ⁱⁱ

Even among the Jewish community, Rabbis allowed divorce for anything from a woman caught talking to another man in public to spoiling his dinner by adding too much salt.ⁱⁱⁱ

To those who chose to remain married, their culture in Thessalonica allowed for every manner of the violation of marital fidelity.

Demosthenes, another ancient writer wrote of the kind of culture that Paul’s generation had inherited. He described cultural norms where men kept prostitutes for pleasure; mistresses for the day-to-day needs and wives for the begetting of children and the

managing of the home. So long as a man financially supported his wife and children there was – get this – no shame whatsoever in sexual immorality . . . morality was dead.^{iv}

Add to that the fact that bisexuality in the Roman Empire eventually became the norm – preferred over heterosexuality; abortion was legal, including infanticide, drug abuse was legal and rampant, alcoholism was an epidemic – with that you can understand how Christianity radically changed a person’s life pleasures, relationships and life.

Many of these cities where Paul would plant churches ran their own state-sanctioned brothels. In fact, the profit from Rome’s state-owned and state-run brothels pumped millions of dollars into their building programs.

Can you imagine a state-sanctioned sin? How easy it is to overlook the fact our own State sanctioned gambling program, called the lottery, pumps millions of dollars into their educational programs.

Note those words I emphasized earlier: there was simply no more shame.

It reminded me of Jeremiah, the prophet, complaining of the same issue in his day where men and women, he wrote, no longer even knew how to blush.

Jeremiah weeps as he writes, ***Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush (Jeremiah 6:15)***

Everything sordid was so open . . . so much a part of everyone’s conversation and vocabulary so much so that nothing was shameful – nothing was off limits – nothing was discreet or private . . . and in

the middle of it all, the people lost the ability to blush.

God never intended mankind to be governed by their hormones . . . their desires outside His created permission.

Isn't that the very origin and definition of sin? Men and women and young people reach for something forbidden by God – but argues in themselves that it looks good, seems healthy, promises pleasure and satisfaction and besides, since it's obviously desirable to our senses and God created our senses, it certainly shouldn't be denied.

Mankind thus assumes the place of God, determines right and wrong and proceeds then to corrupt his relationships, corrupt his pleasures, corrupt his mind, corrupt his conscience and even corrupt his very purpose for living.

By the way, this is the end game of evolution . . . any theory that rejects the Creator effectively makes you God.

The trouble is you become a rather self-destructing God – in fact, you never reach divine status – what you really become is just another animal . . . only a little smarter, able to build better weapons and thus remain at the top of the food chain.

But you're really just another animal.

So you really don't rise up to deity, you actually sink lower in depravity.

I had heard about this song before, but I went online and found the lyrics to a wildly popular song several years ago who's explicit lyrics – and I'll only read a couple of lines, trust me, sum it up so well; they sing out, "We're just another mammal . . . so let's do it like they do it on the animal channel."

We're just another kind of mammal – we're just another animal . . . so anything goes.

You reject God and anything is indeed permissible.

The truth is, you were created in the image of God – that is, you were created immortal, with a spirit, capable of self-awareness and self-control; with an ability to know, love and obey God.

An animal is created to be governed by instinct; you were created by God to be governed by Spirit. Your human spirit, cloaked inside a physical body was made to be *inhabited and governed by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16)*.

And when the Spirit of God brings us to spiritual life everything changes.

For one thing, a brand new war begins between your spirit and your flesh (*Romans 7:23*). And the field of battle is your mind. Your spirit and your flesh constantly vie to get permission from your mind to go one way or another.

It was never a battle before, because your spirit was *dead in sin and trespasses (Ephesians 2:1)* and your flesh did anything it wanted and your mind typically agreed. Yes, there was this nagging conscience thingy you were born with, but you learned early on how to reprogram it.

But now . . . you've come to Christ. You have a spirit which is alive and a mind that's being transformed daily by the Word (*Romans 12:2*); in other words, your Spirit controlled mind is learning how to govern your action on the basis of revelation.

And those forbidden desires; along with our pride and our longing for self-satisfaction, daily abdicates the throne and we daily enthrone Him – *presenting our bodies to Him as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1)*

In this particular New Testament analogy, daily sacrifices on the altar were dead . . . trouble is, as Howard Hendricks enjoyed reminding us students, *living* sacrifices have the tendency to crawl down off the altar.

So daily . . . we battle . . . daily we submit our minds and offer our bodies and our emotions and our actions to be governed by the Spirit and not the flesh.

And the secondary benefit to all of this is that we get to present to our culture, a pursuit of purity that boggles their minds.

I love what Barclay concluded as he wrote in his commentary, "One thing Christianity did in Thessalonica was to lay down a completely new [moral] code where Christianity becomes the champion of purity."^v

Now, in your New Testament, you'll find Paul's letter to these believers living in Thessalonica; a letter where he tells them, not just to resist immorality, but to champion purity.

Turn to First Thessalonians and chapter 4.

As we begin over these next few sessions to deal with sexual and moral purity – let's deal with the subject in the broader context.

And as we work through just a few verses, let me give you several commands that Paul delivers to these believers who want more than anything to champion purity for the glory of God.

Paul will give them these commands which effectively serve as warnings, as it relates to not just Christian maturity, but moral purity.

1. First, Paul will tell them, don't become satisfied with standing still.

Notice *verse 1. 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.*

Another translation reads, "*That you excel still more.*"

In other words, keep growing and progressing – don't become satisfied with standing still.

That sense of dissatisfaction you have with your present spiritual condition is actually a good thing – it's the inner voice of the Holy Spirit prodding you on.

The person who says, "I am perfectly content with where I am spiritually" is actually in grave danger.

Take heed while you stand lest you what? Fall. (*1 Corinthians 10:12*)

Paul wrote, "*I discipline my body – literally, I pummel my body –to keep it under control lest after preachin to others I myself should be disqualified.*" (*1 Corinthians 9:27*)

Listen, if anybody should have been somewhat satisfied with where he was in the process of sanctification – or growth in holiness – it would have been the Apostle Paul.

But even he feared becoming a moral failure.

And the solution for Paul wasn't to lock the doors and stay inside to keep from the prospects of sinning. You can sin in solitary confinement.

The solution is to actively pursue holy living . . . wholesome activity . . . sanctified disciplines . . . godly accountability . . . biblical knowledge and application.

In other words, the Christian isn't to just stand there saying "no" to stuff – he's to say yes to everything good and wholesome and godly.

Keep in mind that *Paul is writing believers* he commended earlier in *chapter 1* for destroying their pagan idols and serving with passion their Living Lord.

They aren't exactly laxidazical Christians straddling the fence of moral compromise. He writes

in *chapter 1* that their faith in God had traveled throughout their Mediterranean world.

That's why it's especially significant that says this to *them* . . . and to every one of us – don't stay where you are in your walk . . . you either pursue holiness or you will drift away from it.^{vi}

See that you excel more and more in your desire to please God in the way you walk.

Literally, excel in the *way you walk about*, pleasing God.^{vii}

So, first of all, don't become satisfied with standing still.

Secondly:

2. Don't begin compromising with what remains clear

Notice *verse 3. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus; for this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you abstain from sexual immorality.*

This phrase *sexual immorality* translates one Greek word – *porneia* (πορνεία) – often translated fornication – which serves as an umbrella term for any and all kinds of sexual activity outside the bond of marriage.

Much to the chagrin of Paul's culture and ours, God actually calls all of it immorality – "porneia".

The word *porneia* was a categorical word that applied to adultery, premarital sexual activity – imagine how that applies to the fact that 70% of high schoolers are now graduating with their diplomas but without their virginity – 70%.

According to one statistic I read this week, 29% of first dates now include sexual intimacy.

Porneia refers to premarital sexual activity; this word also applies to extramarital sexual activity; it covers the world of pornography; the practice of homosexuality and polygamy; in today's culture it would refer to sexting; any kind of voyeurism – which is watching someone else involved in real-life immoral or immodest behavior.^{viii}

Today there are thousands of people who've installed web cams in bathrooms and their bedrooms and the public is invited to come and watch. That's voyeurism . . . which is another form of porneia.

In fact, the Thessalonians would have immediately applied this word *porneia* to their current, culturally approved and sanctioned sexual activity associated with temple worship.

Paul effectively writes, there's this new code for you to begin adopting in your pursuit of holy living . . . **this is the instruction from the Lord Jesus** – notice again – **to abstain** from all of it happens to be **the will of God**.

Let me ask you a question; not that I want you to answer out loud; have you ever struggled at some point in your life to know what the will of God was?

“Oh Lord, you pray, please show me Your will . . . please let me know what Your will is.”

Lord, what college should I go to . . . what career should I pursue?

I remember praying this with great intensity as I dated Marsha – thinking about proposing to this wonderful woman. “Lord, is she your will for my life . . . Lord is she Your will.”

I finally figured out that God was in heaven basically saying, “Yes, how obvious can it be? Are you an idiot or what? Marry her!”

Isn't it wonderfully gracious of God, in this area of life – and this is a big area of life – to make His will so crystal clear?!

Which really simplifies it, doesn't it? God in His grace has removed the complications of sexual behavior for the obedient believer.

You don't need to wonder what God thinks about any of it;

- you don't need to pray about it;
- you don't need to wonder if attaching love to it makes it acceptable to God;
- you don't need to have some ecclesiastical or denominational meeting to exegete it and define it;
- you don't need to count signatures on a petition to decide if it's acceptable . . .

It's settled . . . this is the will of God.

But there's that really troubling word – did you see it? **Notice – this is the will of God – for your holy development – your sanctification – that you abstain . . .**

Not take a little taste; not dip your toe in; not explore; not experiment; not manage as much as you think you can handle; not allow it so long as you're going to marry the person.

To abstain – the literal Greek translation of that verb is – to abstain!

It's a really absolute black and white prohibition; it means to have nothing to do with it; to hold oneself from it.^{ix}

Unless it falls within God's creative design.

People around you say, “But isn't sexual behavior a rite of passage? Isn't it what growing up is all about? Aren't boys supposed to be boys?”

Shouldn't we just try to make people discreet . . . or polite; maybe we should educate them to make sure they're safe.

God doesn't command here that we should be careful. He says, we should abstain. It isn't a matter of being discreet – it's a matter of being obedient.

And listen, God never wants anybody to think they can be safe while they are sinning – safe sex is an oxymoron.

If it's outside the parameters of God's design, there is no such thing as safe sex – there's no such thing as safe sin!

No such thing.

And besides, in the area of sexual activity, all the education in our schools has only increased the danger.

One author writes in one of his books – these alarming statistics; every day, more than 4,000 teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease – every day. In fact, while the world pushes for different forms of protection, he writes, the Minnesota Institute of Public Health reported that there are now 21 sexually transmitted diseases which are not prevented by contraception.^x

Today, more than 25 million Americans suffer from genital herpes – an incurable disease.

Bruce Waltke, an Old Testament scholar added in his commentary on this text this statistic from the United States Public Health Service's Center for Disease Control – a statistic that no one will ever see on television or in print, and I quote, “A new sexually transmitted infection is diagnosed every 45 seconds and in its wake are pain, blindness, arthritis, infertility, brain damage, heart disease, and death. In spite of 50 years of penicillin and wonder drugs, millions of people are contracting new generations of incurable, sexually transmitted disease.^{xi}

Another author provided the results of research, finding that 300,000 people contract Hepatitis B every year, globally. It's a virus primarily transmitted through sexual contact including orally. It causes permanent liver damage – and death.^{xii}

According to health experts, many of the victims think they have the flu . . . while in fact their liver is in the process of shutting down.

A little more than 1,000 die from this every day.

Think of the global panic right now regarding Ebola . . . airports are heightening security; travelers are not being allowed in from other countries.

It is indeed a legitimate issue.

In our own country, so far, 1 American has died from Ebola – others who've been infected have survived. Listen, at least 13 Americans will die from a primarily sexually transmitted disease today . . . today!

No news reports . . . no coverage.

Why?

Because it's linked to the refusal of our culture to admit the connection between disease and sexual activity outside the prescribed boundaries of a Creator God; we cannot even dare whisper that God has designed it to get our attention.

It can't be wrong . . . so no articles . . . mum's the word . . . just carry on.

Ladies and Gentlemen, sexual activity outside of marriage is one of the most dangerous things in life. It's a life and death issue.

Which is one of the reasons why Paul tells us never to stand and fight fornication – he says, Run . . . *Flee fornication (1 Corinthians 6:18) – Paul writes, "Every sin that a man commits is outside his body – listen to this – but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body."*

Your body pays a price. That's reason enough . . . run . . . run!

Listen; think of sexual sin as inviting a virus to invade your body.

Don't get near it . . . run.

One author wrote about an interesting problem they were having in a middle school in Oregon. Middle school girls had started a little tradition in the school where they would put on lipstick in the bathroom and before they walked out, they pressing their lips to the mirrors leaving dozens of messy lip prints all over the glass.

The principal warned and warned and warned them . . . to stop. She threatened the students, pleaded with them . . . nothing worked.

Finally the principal decided that something had to be done. She came up with a rather ingenious plan and told her custodian exactly what to do. Then she called each middle school grade of girls into the bathroom and met them there along with the school custodian. She once again explained to the girls that all these lip prints were causing a lot of extra work for the custodian, who had to clean the mirrors every day. It took a lot of time for him and it was

unnecessary and wasted time. She demanded that they stop. In fact, at that very moment the mirrors were once again covered with lip prints.

Of course, the girls just stood there – obviously unmoved and rather irritated by this lecture. The principal told the girls that she wanted them to know just how much time it took to clean the mirrors and that's why she had asked the custodian to join them . . . she then told the custodian, "I want you to show the girls how hard it is to clean these lip prints off every day . . . show them how you do it."

He reached down and took the long-handled brush off his cart; went over and dipped it into one of the commodes and then walked back over and scrubbed one of the mirrors.

Nothing more was said. The lip prints disappeared.

Why? They discovered what they'd been kissing up to . . . dirty, nasty, infectious stuff.

Listen; don't forget what you're kissing up to . . . don't ignore the physical and spiritual and emotional danger when you press to your life and your heart, nasty, infectious sin.

This is the will of God . . . that you abstain from it all.

**Don't become satisfied with standing still
Don't begin to compromise with what remains clear.**

Thirdly,

3. Don't begin impersonating your surrounding culture

Notice again as Paul writes to the *Thessalonians in chapter 4 and verse 4, that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.*

In other words, porneia is the pursuit of Gentiles – a biblical term for unbelievers.

And why not? Their spirit is dead – inoperative – and it can't inform their mind so that their flesh acts at will . . . their flesh is uncontested – it always gets a free pass.

Paul writes that their belly – their appetites – are their god!

To them, sin will make perfect sense simply because their mind is without the Spirit/Tutor – the Teacher of biblical truth.

Paul warns, “Don’t impersonate them . . . notice down in *verse 7, God hasn’t called us to impurity, but to holiness.*”

To the Gentiles, porneia is what life is all about!

You’ve heard their reasoning, haven’t you? That person says to you at work, or at school, or in a dorm room, or in the corporate lunch room, “C’mon: you think that’s wrong? You’re just being judgmental – and that makes you as much a sinner as anybody else; besides: they say things like these:

- How can something that has brought such enjoyment to my life be wrong?
- Or, God’s will is for me is to be happy . . . and this is it!
- Or, God wouldn’t deny me something He obviously created me to want, would He?
- Or, My marriage was never God’s will in the first place; so this isn’t really adultery.
- Or, Marriage is just a piece of paper anyway – God knows my heart.
- The real issue is love – and when I’m with that other person - I’m acting with the highest form of love I’ve ever known.^{xiii}

In my years of pastoring I’ve heard every one of those statements . . . many times over.

To the person controlled by the flesh and not the Spirit, sin makes sense. In fact, it’s exciting.

Which is why immorality only shows you the commercial – never the hangover . . . never the girl sobbing alone after having been used . . . never the man devastated by disease that he can no longer hide from his wife.

The commercial looks great!

Let me refer to a growing trend and a perfect illustration.

Today, more couples in this country are choosing to cohabit – to live together – than to get married.

It makes sense, right? It helps the couple get started financially . . . it gives two people a chance to get to know each other . . . it allows them to make a commitment and get all the physical benefits of a married couple without an expensive wedding right away, etc. etc. etc.

That’s the short term reasoning . . . and that’s the commercial.

One article from the New Oxford Review however stunned its readers with the longer term effects over several years of research . . . here were some of the results – 8 of them:

1. Cohabiting couples are nearly eight times more likely to separate due to discord than married couples in their first year together;
2. Cohabiting couples have a separation rate five times greater than married couples;
3. Cohabiting women contribute more than 70% of the relationship’s financial income;
4. On average, the men in cohabiting households earn far less income than married men with families;
5. Compared to married individuals, those who are cohabiting report higher levels of depression;
6. The poverty rate among children in cohabiting households is five times greater than children living in married couples homes;
7. Children ages 12-17 with cohabiting parents are six times more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems.
8. Cohabitation presents a greater risk for sexually transmitted disease because cohabiting men are four times more likely to be unfaithful than husbands;

And on and on.^{xiv}

So this is going to be good for us financially, emotionally, physically . . . we’re going to be able to live out our love without any restriction.

No . . . you are actually going to be able to self-destruct faster than you expected.

Let me make a couple of closing observations.

a. First, no one ever lived in a generation where holiness came easy.

It was a battle for the Thessalonians and it is a battle today for us North Carolinians.

Let me read you a statement from Pitirim Sorokin, formerly professor of sociology at Harvard as he laments:

There has been a growing preoccupation of our [culture] with the social sewers, the broken homes of disloyal parents and unloved children, the bedroom of the prostitute, a brothel, a den of criminals, a ward of the insane, a club of dishonest politicians, a street corner gang of delinquents, a hate-laden prison, the courtroom of a dishonest judge, the sex adventures of rapists, the loves of adulterers and

fornicators, of masochists, sadists, mistresses and playboys; and it is all seductively prepared and served with all the trimmings.”

He wrote that in 1965!

It's never been easy to pursue purity.

b. No one ever lives a life of holiness by accident

Paul effectively writes to the Thessalonians, “You're doing great! But don't settle there . . . watch out for any tendency to slide toward mediocrity . . . and compromise.”^{xv}

Holiness happens on purpose.

Paul wrote to Timothy and challenged him to discipline himself for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7). The word he used for “discipline” is gymnaze (γυμναζε) from which we get our word gymnasium. He's effectively telling Timothy to go and work up a spiritual sweat in pursuing godliness!

When's the last time you broke a sweat studying the Bible – resisting temptation – pursuing holiness?

Holiness never happens by accident!

Let me suggest 6 habits to form:

1. Don't justify little compromises as innocent (they aren't – think of them as little viruses ready to multiply);
2. Don't wait to fight temptation when it becomes dangerous (it already is!)
3. Don't assume you are beyond the reach of any sin (if the Apostle Paul was concerned about falling morally, so should we be equally concerned);
4. Don't develop close friendships that encourage you to think like a Gentile (friendships yes – close friendship that influence your thinking – no);
5. Be honest when temptation knocks (you can't handle alone – you'll need to

entirely depend on the Spirit of God and the Word of God);

6. One more – keep your running shoes close by . . . in other words, be ready to run at a moment's notice.

I close with this prayer from the *Valley of Vision*:

O God,

I have no merit – let the merit of Jesus stand for me.

I am undeserving, but I look to thy tender mercy.

I am full of infirmities and sin;

Thou art full of grace.

I confess my sin, my frequent sin, my willful sin;

All my powers of body and soul are defiled;

A fountain of pollution is deep within my nature.

There are chambers of foul images within my being;

I have gone from one odious room to another,

Walked in a no-man's-land of dangerous imaginations,

Pried into the secrets of my fallen nature.

Lord, Thou has struck a heavy blow at my pride,

At the false god of self,

And I lie in pieces before thee.

Thou has given me another Master and Lord – thy

Son, Jesus – my heart is turned toward holiness,

My life towards complete obedience to thee.

Help me in all my doings to put down sin and to humble pride.

Save me from the love of the world

And everything that is natural to fallen man, and let

Christ's nature be seen in me.

Grant me grace to bear thy will without complaining,

And delight to be not only chiseled, squared, or fashioned, but separated from the old rock where I have been embedded so long,

And lifted from the quarry to the upper air,

Where I may be built in Christ forever.^{xvi}

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i William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, revised ed. (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 198

ii Ibid, p. 199

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- iii Ibid
- iv Adapted from Barclay, p. 199
- v Ibid, p. 199
- vi Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Stress Fractures (Multnomah, 1990), p. 103
- vii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 596
- viii Charles R. Swindoll, quoting Thomas L. Constable in Contagious Christianity, p. 48
- ix Fritz, p. 597
- x Josh McDowell, Right From Wrong (Word Publishing, 1994), p. 159
- xi Bruce K. Waltke, Proverbs: Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), p. 129
- xii Robert Jeffress, The Solomon Secrets (Waterbrook Press, 2002), p. 118
- xiii Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 27
- xiv Patrick Schneider, "Cohabitation is bad for men, worse for women, and horrible for children," www.lifesite.net (10-4-07), reprinted from an original article in the New Oxford Review;
<http://www.familyfacts.org/briefs/9/cohabitation-vs-marriage-how-loves-choices-shape-life-outcomes>
- xv Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Contagious Christianity: A Study of 1 Thessalonians (IFL, 1984), p. 48
- xvi Arthur Bennett, ed. The Valley of Vision (Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 130