

Pursuit of Holiness*

Սրբութեան Փափարդ

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Have you heard about brother donkey? If you have not, let me tell you that you own one. It is a donkey that needs taming.

“St. Francis, famously, referred to his own body as ‘brother donkey’. It was a beloved part of himself, and yet it often seemed to have a mind of its own. It needed taming, bringing into obedience, as one would teach a large and headstrong animal to do as it was told. The perfect partnership of rider and mount, in which the animal knows what the rider wants and takes delight and pride in doing it, is not a bad image of the perfect partnership between the indwelling of the holy spirit in someone’s life and the body’s recognition of, and obedience to, the spirit’s desires and promptings.”¹

Paul loves the Thessalonians. Paul deeply loves this church and he expresses his love and care in this letter. He is their friend. They are his friend. There is an intimate relationship between them. As I said in previous sermons, this letter is a great one for practical directions for leadership of the church and for the congregation as well.

In this chapter, Paul moves on to practical guidance to live a holy life. He starts the chapter saying:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you (beseech and exhort you *parakaleo*) 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:1 ESV)

Paul urges them to continue living a life that pleases God. He says, “...just as you were doing, continue doing more and more.” How can one please God?

In verse 5 Paul says, “Do not act like gentiles *who do not know God*.” **In order to please God, one should know God.** Gentiles do not know God. These days, I am

not sure how much people do know God, or what it means to know God.** The answer is to have a personal and a collective relationship with God. For example, spending time alone and together in prayer; reading and meditating on His word; applying His will; living a holy life – in other words: knowing God leads us to a **holy life, a transformed life, a Christ-centered life**. NT Wright says: “God longs for us to become the sort of humans who will reflect His image. When God sees this happen, He is delighted.”²

Paul gives practical guidance about what it means to live a holy life, or how to become partners with “brother donkey.” In these eight verses, the word ‘**holiness**’ occurs three times (verses 3,4,7). In the Jewish tradition the word holy is related with the **Temple in Jerusalem**. One would go to the Temple to be in God’s presence. Special purification rituals were mandatory.

Paul believes that through Jesus’ death and resurrection God has purified His people from all their sins. God’s Spirit now dwells in them (and us today). Our bodies are the temple of God. As if we live constantly in the Temple of Jerusalem. Now each of our bodies is the temple of God. Our bodies must be holy. We are called to a holy life. One important area of living holy life is the area of sexuality.

Controlling our desires or taming brother donkey can be done when we allow the Holy Spirit to rule our lives. The rider and the donkey are in a harmonious relationship. In the Bible, we often read about **taming our tongue**, taming or **financial appetite**, taming out **gluttony**, taming our **eyes from the desire of having more** or **coveting** what belong to the neighbor. John writes:

For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:16 ESV)

According to this passage, one important area of a living holy life is the area of sexuality.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one 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. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 ESV)

We are called to live a holy life. We are not called to abstain from sexual life. No, we are called to abstain from sexual immorality.

Let us clarify some points here.

God created us male and female. God created in us sexual desires. Sexuality is a good gift given to us by God that can easily be misused.

This topic is so much misunderstood by the world. We are bombarded everyday by odd sexual behaviors and concepts. I will try to explain the biblical understanding of how God intended for our sexual behavior in our daily lives.

-There is a purpose the way God created us. To honor that body, to keep it holy is an essential part of living a holy life.

My friend Rev. Paul Taylor says about this topic:

Paul's goal is to give a broad guide for sexuality. It's not just about what you can't do. It's not about whether you are single or married, or divorced, or somewhere in between. It's about living out your sexuality in a way that honors God in every season of life. It's finding a steady sense of sexuality—a consistent, honoring, physical, passionate embrace of what God has given us. We're talking about a Steady Sexuality.³

1. Sexual self-gratification

Paul writes to this city where pagan temples were active with sexual practices of all sorts. It seems not much has changed in our lives these days. The young newly established church of Thessalonica was faced with daily challenges to abstain from those immoral activities. Sex is not created for self-gratification. An untamed donkey is a good metaphor for uncontrolled passionate lust.

John Piper writes:

Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God. It's the corruption of a good thing by the absence of honorable commitment and by the absence of a supreme regard for God. If your sexual desire is not guided by respect for the honor of others and regard for the holiness of God, it is lust.⁴

These days pornography is available in our phones, computers, TV and more. These days if one believes that sex is a gift and implemented in married life, they will be ridiculed. The world teaches us very different values about sexual behavior.

2. Sexual Morality

Let me summarize God's intention in creating us as sexual beings:

Sex is meant to be enjoyed in a monogamous, heterosexual marital relationship. This is the biblical norm.

-Sex has a purpose within marriage, within two people who are committed to each other in the bonds of marriage. Steady sexuality, and not a one-night event, if I may say...

-Sex is meant to be an enjoyment and not a cause of guilt and shame. Sex in marriage is a means of expressing love to each other where one has a long term commitment of steady sexuality. **To have sex without the commitment of marriage is to misuse our sexuality.** Basically, it would be self-gratification without any responsibility of loving that person in all stages of life, good and bad, happy and sad, sickness and health...

This means there should be no cheating. It is strange that although the world agrees that cheating in marriage is not right, yet most of the entertainment in media indicates that marital life is boring, and once a while having some kind of affair is fun, or justifiable.

Bill Crosby's "The Cosby Show" was a great example of a family that showed how happy the couple could be in the marriage. Now I cannot use that example

anymore. All the court cases against Mr. Crosby's sexual misbehavior ruined my point to show a positive media entertainment.

Even in church life, sexuality has ruined our Christian testimony whenever sexual misconduct has entered in the leadership. This is a serious issue that attacks our churches, families and society.

Let me open here a paragraph about the worldview on fidelity. The world agrees with us that there should be monogamous sexual life in marriage. The world agrees that sexual behavior must be respectful and consensual and on both sides and not forceful, coerced or fearful. The world condemns minors' sexual behavior. The world condemns sexual slavery, human trafficking...

Yet we differ with the world view about sex in many areas. Such as: with whom one can have sex? When? And Purpose of the sex and more...

3. Self- Control

That each one 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;
(1 Thessalonians 4:4-5 ESV)

Paul is urging the church to control the vessel, control the body, control the lustful desires and appetites that can ruin one's life.

Once I heard from preacher about self-control: Delayed gratification.

Self control (taming the donkey) is useful and keeps honoring God and respecting our bodies and the others' as well. Who is controlling your body and desires?
Stewarding one's sinful desires is good.

Paul is saying steward your sexual life. Being good stewards of lustful desires and appetites is good. Who is mastering us? If sex is mastering our mind, soul and heart, we are in big trouble.

Isn't the world's message to us: **"It feels good, do it..."?**

Paul reminds us that people who do not know God will act like that. Paul is giving a practical way to live sanctified lives, where one will honor God in his or her sexual behavior.

4. So what? What is the big deal with all this?

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. (1 Thessalonians 4:6 ESV)

Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:8 ESV)

Let me warn you. Paul is saying do not take this lightly saying, “So what?”

Our sexual immorality does hurt not just ourselves, but others as well. And it treats the very good gift that God has given us, gift of sexuality and sex, as trash, rubbish. Just think about all the consequences, teenage pregnancies, broken lives, broken marriages resulting in divorces, then the effect of divorce on children... Family life is in danger. Our society is losing the sanctity of marriage and family. We hurt each other and God dislike our behavior. By saying, “**the Lord is an avenger in all these things,**” Paul does not mean that God is waiting to take vengeance over us with each misbehavior, but He allows us to make decisions that have consequences. Watch out for those decisions... whoever disregards this, disregards God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Application:

1. God can heal your past. He can heal any shame or guilt that you are carrying. This morning this sermon is for you if you have had a past life of shame, guilt, or you are in it now and you are in bondage of lust. God is calling you this morning to come out of it. Allow the Holy Spirit to work in you.
2. Know God in an intimate way. It is not just head knowledge. Satan also knows God, but that does not change his life. As Paul writes:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4 ESV)

This is my daily prayer for my life, for my family and for my church: “Oh God enlighten my mind with the gospel of the glory of Christ, enlighten my soul, my heart. Let me know you in every aspect of life. Let me be in relationship with you.”

3. Do not separate your faith in Jesus Christ (justification) from your obedience to Christ, the process of living a holy life (sanctification). They should not be separated. Do not take loosely this command to avoid a lustful life that will ruin your life and relationship with God.

4. What are some of temptations you face every day? How do you deal with them? Let me advise you to have a person that you trust, be accountable to that person. A person who can pray with you.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! (1-2)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12 ESV)

Let us approach the Table of the Lord.

* The title of my sermon is taken from Jerry Bridges’s book.

** Statistics indicate that 89% of U.S. adults believe in God; 63% of Americans are absolutely certain that God exists. (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/04/americans-faith-in-god-may-be-eroding/). In another poll we find that 88 percent of respondents said they own a Bible, 80 percent think the Bible is sacred, 61 percent wish they read the Bible more, and the average household has 4.4 Bibles. If they do read it, the majority (57 percent) only read their Bibles four times a year or less. Only 26 percent of Americans said they read their Bible on a regular basis (four or more times a week). (www.religionnews.com/2013/04/04/poll-americans-love-the-bible-but-dont-read-it-much/)

1. N.Y. Wright, *Paul for everyone Thessalonians*. P 116

2. *ibid*, P 117

3 Paul Taylor, STEADY SEXUALITY , March 22, 2015 PBC

4 <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/battling-the-unbelief-of-lust>