

ABSTAIN

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1–8



For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3 NKJV).

There are not many things from which the Bible tells us to abstain. The word itself is used only 7 times in the New Testament—3 times in the book of Acts referring to temporary restrictions, once in 1 Timothy referring to false doctrine, and once in 1 Peter. The other two times are found in 1 Thessalonians.

Most of us know that the word “abstain” means to “do without.” In our circles it has traditionally been used with reference to alcohol. We sometimes speak of “voluntary total abstinence,” which means a personal decision not to drink alcohol. It may interest you to know that the Bible does not use the word “abstain” with reference to alcohol. While there certainly are good reasons to be cautious about alcohol and good reasons to abstain, the Bible itself does not say, “You shall abstain from alcohol.”

Whenever we see the word “abstain” in the Bible we know two things for certain:

1. It is a command of God
2. It is an absolute prohibition

Therefore, whenever we find a command to abstain in the Bible, we ought to take it seriously. We have come to one such command in our text. It is so simple and clear that there need be no debate about it. God commands believers to abstain from sexual immorality. Period. End of story. We may debate the proper application but the command itself is crystal-clear.¹

¹ Sermon by Ray Pritchard found at <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/abstain/>

OPEN IT

1. What food or activity would you find most difficult to give up?

EXPLORE IT

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1–8

2. What was Paul asking and urging the Thessalonians to do?

3. What does Paul say is the will of God?

4. According to verse 7, what has God not called us to do?

GET IT

*The goal of the instructions Paul had given the Thessalonians was that they might manifest right **conduct** in the midst of a pagan society that had lost all ethical moorings. Paul knew that a Christian's **walk** is a Christian's life. And so he desired that his spiritual children would have a **walk** that matched their **talk**.*

As Richison reminds us... A central characteristic of the Christian life is to please God. Christians accommodate themselves to their God. God never accommodates Himself to us. The idea is not that we appease God or conciliate Him. Christ did that on the cross. We please Him because we honor Him. It is a matter of gratefulness. A holy walk pleases God. We want to walk in a way that puts a smile on the face of God. Many of us make Him frown (1 Thessalonians 4:1).²

5. What does Paul mean when he tells us that we are to “walk and please God”?

² http://preceptaustin.org/1thessalonians_41-2.htm#4:1 — Quoting Grant Richison

6. In what ways can we be sure that we are accomplishing this task?

*The word "ought" is the word "must." There is a logical and moral imperative to walk in order to please God. The Thessalonians lived in a seaport where sin was unbridled. There were many temptations there. No one can be casual about Christianity in the face of temptation. Daily, consistent walk with the Lord is **imperative** if any victory is going to come their way.³*

7. Why does Paul demand that the believers in Thessalonica "please God"? Doesn't that take away the idea of doing something because "we want to" instead of "we have to"?

8. Read Ephesians 5:1-8. What alternative do we have when it comes to walking with God? What comes as a result of this type of living?

9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians in verses 1-2 that he taught them how to "walk and please God." Who has taught you how to walk and please God. How did they go about doing this?

10. Think about your life. What actions or habits of your life are pleasing to God? What actions or habits are not pleasing to God?

1 & 2 Thessalonians:

*... are written to a people living in between the resurrection and the return of Christ. These books help people to figure out **what life is supposed to look like between these two major events**. One of the big issues of daily living in between the times is how to understand our own sexuality. **What does it look like to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, to wait for his return, and to be a sexual person?** How does our sex life relate to our spiritual life? Last week we heard Paul talking about the great value of friendship in describing his relationship with the Thessalonians. This week, we move on to one of the most intimate aspects of relationship: sexuality. 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***

³Grant Richison @ <http://versebyversecommentary.com/1-thessalonians/1-thessalonians-41b/>

*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.*⁴

11. Paul now addresses a specific area of Christian living — sexual purity. Why would Paul need to instruct them on such a basic part of sanctification when the Thessalonians seem to be further along in maturity, given all we've encountered about them thus far?

Do we need more or less teaching today about sexuality and the Christian? What issues or concerns would you focus in on?

*In Rome, for the first five hundred and twenty years of the Republic, there had not been a single divorce; but now under the Empire, as it has been put, divorce was a matter of caprice. As **Seneca** said,*

"Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married."

In Rome the years were identified by the names of the consuls; but it was said that fashionable ladies identified the years by the names of their husbands. Juvenal quotes an instance of a woman who had eight husbands in five years. Morality was dead.

*In Greece immorality had always been quite blatant. Long ago **Demosthenes** had written:*

"We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes."

*So long as a man supported his wife and family there was no shame whatsoever in extra-marital relationships. It was to men and women who had come out of a society like that that Paul wrote this paragraph. What may seem to many the merest commonplace of Christian living was to them startlingly new. One thing Christianity did was to lay down a completely new code in regard to the relationship of men and women; it is the champion of purity and the guardian of the home. This cannot be affirmed too plainly in our own day which again has seen a pronounced shift in standards of sexual behavior.*⁵

The world in which the Thessalonians were living was very immoral, Pastor John MacArthur writes,

*Thessalonica was rife with such sinful practices as fornication, adultery, homosexuality (including pedophilia), transvestitism, and a wide variety of pornographic and erotic perversions, all done with a seared conscience and society's acceptance, hence with little or no accompanying shame or guilt. Unlike people in Western nations today, the Thessalonians grew up with no Christian tradition to support laws and standards that forbid the grosser manifestations of immorality.*⁶

12. What can we learn about our own culture from the historical context of life in 1st-century Thessalonica?

⁴ Paul Taylor Sermon @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/1025/SE_PT_20150322_WEB_Format.pdf?1427151702

⁵ **Barclay, W: The Daily Study Bible Series. The Westminster Press or Logos**

⁶ MacArthur, J. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* Chicago: Moody Press.

13. In what ways was Paul exhorting these Christians to impact the moral culture of their day? How does that differ from many Christians' approach to today's moral culture wars?

14. Look closely at verses 3–6. What is the will of God when it comes to our sanctification? In the ESV translation, Paul gives three aspects to sanctified living. What are they? (Hint: follow the word "that.")

a. In your own words, define the word "abstain." How would you have shared this principle to someone new to the faith coming from such a perverse culture?

b. How does one go about "controlling one's body in holiness and honor"? In other words, how can we remain pure in an impure world?

c. How does our sexual purity, or lack thereof, tell the world about our relationship with Christ?

d. In what ways can sexual immorality "transgress or wrong fellow human beings"? When have you seen this principle ring true?

15. What safeguards or accountability measures can you set in place to avoid sexual immorality?

16. How are we to counsel and encourage those who are falling or have fallen into the snare of sexual sin?

*"It is time for us Christians to face up to our responsibility for holiness. **Too often we say we are "defeated" by this or that sin. No, we are not defeated; we are simply disobedient!** It might be well if we stopped using the terms "victory" and "defeat" to describe our progress in holiness. Rather we should use the terms "obedience" and "disobedience." **When I say I am defeated by some sin, I am unconsciously slipping out from under my responsibility.** I am saying something outside of me has defeated me. But when I say I am disobedient, **that places the responsibility for my sin***

squarely on me. We may, in fact, be defeated, but the reason we are defeated is because we have chosen to disobey. We have chosen to entertain lustful thoughts, or to harbor resentment, or to shade the truth a little. **We need to brace ourselves up and to realize that we are responsible for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.** We need to reckon on the fact that we died to sin's reign, that it no longer has any dominion over us, that God has united us with the risen Christ in all His power, and has given us the Holy Spirit to work in us. Only as we accept our responsibility and appropriate God's provisions will we make any progress in our pursuit of holiness."⁷

17. In what specific areas are you allowing yourself to be defeated because of your disobedience? What practical steps are you willing to take in order that you might walk in holiness?

18. As believers, as we walk with Christ, we steadily grow in experiencing or "knowing" Christ as the satisfier of these needs. Why is the process gradual? How are you beginning to experience Christ meeting these needs in your life?

Take some time to break up into groups of men and women to discuss some of the issues surrounding sexual purity. Spend some time lifting one another up in prayer, asking God to protect us from temptation and to allow us to be honest with one another so that all can be ready to pursue holiness in the days to come.

⁷ The Pursuit of Holiness by Jerry Bridges