



The Battle for Holiness

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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AM Assembly



Introduction:

Start with a question. What are your goals? I hope you have spent time considering this. Goals worth attaining never happen by accident. They only happen with planning and work. Now for another question. What is God's goal for you? We might rattle off that God's goal for us is heaven. While that is our eternal destiny, it is not God's goal for us. Paul explained God's goal in **I Thessalonians 4:3**—"For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." (ESV). He repeated it in **I Thessalonians 4:7**—"For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness" (ESV). Yes, those who are sanctified will spend eternity with God in heaven. But God's goal for you is sanctification and holiness.

This harkens back to the Old Testament sanctification of priests. It means being set apart for holy use by God. **Leviticus 8** reveals the rite of sanctification Aaron and his sons went through. Note especially **Leviticus 8:12-13, 22-24, 30**. Under the New Covenant, there is no special priestly class. According to **I Peter 2:9**, we are all God's royal priesthood. God has sanctified us for His service. Notice how important this was to God. Under the Old Covenant sanctification came about by killing bulls and rams. Men provided those sacrifices. But our sanctification is so important to God He provided the sacrifice—His own unblemished Lamb, Jesus Christ (**I Peter 1:18-19**).

God wants us to be sanctified. He wants us to be holy as He is holy (**I Peter 1:15-16**), and He was willing to sacrifice His own Son for us. Isn't that what we want as well? I hope so. As **Matthew 5:6**, it is only those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who will be satisfied. But there is a fly in the ointment. God wants us to be holy and sanctified. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. What then could possibly keep us from coming together? Satan. Satan is constantly trying to pull us from this path of sanctification. He is a roaring lion seeking to devour us (**I Peter 5:8**). He is a liar and the father of lies (**John 8:44**), and He will stop at nothing to keep us from reaching God's goal for us. He wants us to be impure. In the New Testament times and, seemingly, even more so today he has one amazing weapon that tugs on most of us—sexual sin. I know some people don't like lessons about immorality on a Sunday morning because they want to hear the Gospel preached. But please understand Paul's point in **I Thessalonians 4:1-8**. His claim is that Satan is using immorality to pull us away from the sanctifying message of the Gospel. We must have our guard up or just hearing the core of the Gospel message will not help us. Please, don't look at what Paul says here as merely a list of commands to which we try to measure up. They are not a list of requirements that we can barter about. This is a warning. God wants us to be holy. He is working to make us holy. But Satan is lying to us to keep us from that holiness. If we do not heed Paul's warnings, we will not reach God's goals for us. So, examine with me the four warnings Paul gives us so we can survive this battle with Satan.

Discussion:

- I. Abstain from sexual immorality (**I Thessalonians 4:3**).
 - A. According to **Galatians 5:19**, immorality is a work of the flesh. We are to follow the Spirit. **Hebrews 13:4** provides the rule for sexuality saying, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (ESV). Note also **Proverbs 5:15-20**.
 - B. Sexual activity is any activity which expresses or arouses sexual desire, especially when it involves sexual parts of your body. Certainly, sex itself is included. Regrettably too many think that is where the line is drawn. It is not. Some have the idea that if you are doing something that can't get a girl pregnant, then it isn't sexual immorality. This is patently false. This is a hard point to preach because no matter what I do, I will either offend the sensibilities of some or leave something unsaid that needs to be specified. Perhaps I can accomplish what needs to be said by using the Golden Rule as our guide (**Matthew 7:12**). Treat everyone you are not married to in the way you would want everyone else to treat the person you are married to. On the reverse side, don't do anything with someone you are not married to, that you wouldn't want someone else doing to the person you are married to or will be married to.
 - C. We add one more issue to our list. We must remember that homosexuality, whether our society calls it marriage or not, is immoral. I am not sure how God could have been clearer than He was in **Romans 1:26-27**. Homosexual behavior is sinful. God has called us to holiness.
 - D. Here is a problem. Most of us understand the point I've just made. The problem is the battle is not fought and won here. Paul explains that the battleground for our hearts and our holiness actually occurs long before we get to these lines. Let's examine his further warnings about this battle.

- II. Control your body with holiness and honor (**I Thessalonians 4:4**).
- A. **I Thessalonians 4:4** demonstrates if we want to abstain from sexual immorality, we must control our bodies in sanctification and honor. Our bodies are the Holy Spirit's temple, bought with Jesus' blood, and belong to God. Therefore, we must glorify God with our body (**I Corinthians 6:19-20**).
 - B. Peter demonstrated this in **I Peter 3:3-4**. He addressed wives specifically, but the principle is universal. The way we present ourselves must demonstrate spirituality, not sexuality. We live in a sexually charged society. As such, we may lose sight of how our dress, speech, and conduct affect purity. Because we see and hear blatant lasciviousness on a daily basis we can become desensitized, not recognizing when we conduct ourselves in an unholy way. Look at the standard Paul places on how we use our bodies: holiness and honor. He goes back to that idea of being set apart. Our dress, our conduct, and our speech should set us apart from the world as holy vessels for honor.
 - C. We need to examine the clothes we wear, the words we say, the stories we tell, and the jokes we laugh about. We need to examine how we walk, how we stand, how we sit. We need to make sure our conduct is not about fleshly desires, whether sexual or otherwise. Our conduct must set us apart as instruments for righteousness. We must be honest. How tight are our clothes? How short are our skirts and shorts? How much flesh are we revealing? What kind of movements are we making? I realize I'm sharing this point a bit late this spring for our high schoolers, but I'd like to ask you to consider the sexual nature of holding a member of the opposite gender up against your body as you sway back and forth to the rhythm of the music. Or what message you are sending when you shake and thrust your rear, breasts, and even pelvis for members of the opposite gender to watch. I fear we have bought into the cultural message that things like Homecoming dances and Proms are a rite of passage, that if our teenagers don't attend these social events they will be missing out on a part of normal teenagerhood. I suggest that given our culture there may be a whole lot of things in normal teenagerhood that we want our kids to miss out on. I'm not sure I can make rules for anyone beyond my own family on this issue. But I do ask you to give some serious consideration to what happens on a school dance floor. If Paul or Jesus were there with you, do you think they would call it "controlling your body in holiness and honor"? I don't know if we have any cheerleaders in our midst. But I must admit I have been amazed at some of the things I have seen Christian cheerleaders or members of the dance squads do and wear in the name of supporting their school. The Beach Boys once sang we should be true to our school, but first and foremost we must be true to our God.
 - D. Please understand why we must dress and behave modestly, in holiness and honor. We do not have to dress and behave modestly to keep others from lusting. Sadly, that is the main reason we preachers usually give for being modest. I'll admit it is the main reason I have taught in the past. Certainly, if your dress and conduct is a temptation to sin for someone, then you are sinning (cf. **Matthew 18:7**). But that is not the main reason for modesty. The main reason is found in **II Timothy 2:20-21**. Do you want to be useful to the Master? If you don't dress and behave in holiness and honor, the Master can't use you.
 - E. Examine yourself honestly. Do your conduct, speech, and dress reflect sexual purity, honor, and holiness? God has called us to holiness.

III. Avoid the passions of lust (**I Thessalonians 4:5**).

- A. Not only are we to avoid sexual immorality, not only are we to possess our bodies in honor and holiness, we must control our eyes and minds. **I Thessalonians 4:5** said we must not allow lustful passion.
- B. Jesus made this point in **Matthew 5:27-30**. That old line, "Just 'cause I'm on a diet doesn't mean I can't look at the menu" doesn't work. You are not allowed to look at the menu; you are allowed to look at your spouse.
- C. Most of the time we think of visual stimulations to lust and then we think mostly about men. And we men need to consider this. **Job 31:1** is a great passage to remember: "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?" (ESV). We need to make covenants with our eyes not to look on anyone with sexual desire except our spouse. This completely rules out pornographic magazines and web sites. It rules out Sports Illustrated swimsuit editions. It rules out taking those quick peaks at the Victoria's Secret posters while you walk through the mall. It rules out the covers of a lot of the magazines at the checkout aisle of Kroger and Marsh. It will rule out a lot of movies and tv shows for many of us.
- D. But this isn't just for men. Sisters, this includes the romantic lusting that can be a trouble for you as well. The constant yearning for the knight in shining armor to sweep you off your feet and out of the humdrum of daily living into his romantic arms can be just as deadly for you as the Sports Illustrated swimsuit model can for your husband. Being entertained by a love story is one thing, but wanting to watch a movie because Zack Efron, Taylor Lautner, Mark Harmon, or Denzel Washington is a dreamy hunk is another. Longing

for a man to sweep you off your feet into the heart-thumping romance of your life just like in the movies can be bad for you.

- E. Paul explained our warfare in **II Corinthians 10:3-6**. The battle doesn't begin just when we're trying to decide whether or not to commit sexual immorality. It begins in the heart and mind. We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. We are not to be like the Pharisees who tried to clean the outside of their cup without cleaning the inside (**Matthew 23:25-27**). We must keep the inside clean as well.
- F. We must make a covenant with our eyes and control our minds. God has called us to holiness.

IV. Do so more and more without disregarding God (**I Thessalonians 4:1, 8**).

- A. In **I Thessalonians 4:1**, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to "excel still more" (NASU). That was a blanket statement to all Christians no matter where they were on purity's path. We must do better. Too often we are satisfied with doing better than others, justifying ourselves, "At least I am not doing what so and so is doing." In **I Thessalonians 4:7**, Paul said we are called to holiness, not impurity. Something is impure not because it is wholly bad, but because it has an impurity in it. Until we are completely free from impurities, we still have growing to do.
- B. Further, note Paul's statement that concludes this section in **I Thessalonians 4:8**. "Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (ESV). That is strong language. It is not my language; it is the Bible's. When we think of people who disregard God, we think of idolaters or folks who refused to be baptized for the remission of their sins or folks who disregard God's plans for His church. Do we think of folks who disregard what He says about presenting their bodies in holiness and honor? I don't think I've fully understood this statement in the past. In the past, I've simply used it as a manipulative tool to get people who don't like sermons like this one to leave me alone about it. But that is not why Paul said this. This is actually Paul's ultimate warning. Consider what it says in **II Thessalonians 2:13-15**. Notice the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that we are sanctified. Remember, that is the goal. That is God's goal for us—sanctification. That is our desire. But that is only going to happen through the Holy Spirit. Consider also **Titus 3:4-7**. We are saved by the washing and regeneration of the Holy Spirit—that is another phrase for the sanctifying work of the Spirit. He is washing and changing us, that is, setting us apart. What do you think will happen if we disregard God who gives the Holy Spirit?
- C. Let's examine ourselves honestly and make sure we are not disregarding God, but are growing in this.

Conclusion:

As we close, consider an illustration. My brother in the army told me about a couple of odd rules they were to follow when he was in Iraq. When they were off the base, they were told, "If you didn't drop it or set it down, don't pick it up." That is, if they saw a knife, a gun, or ammunition laying on the ground, if they didn't put it there, they were not allowed to pick it up. Another odd rule was when they were on their patrols and off the base, they were not allowed to take posters off the walls. It seems the soldiers liked to collect things with Saddam Hussein's face on it. So they would take posters of him that they found in the cities they patrolled. To me, those are some pretty odd rules. Who cares? Here was the problem. The enemy used both of these methods to kill American soldiers. They would rig a pressure plate switch to a bomb and then set a knife or ammunition clip on it. When the American soldier picked it up, the bomb would go off. The enemy also would put a hole in a wall, rig an explosive, cover it with a poster that was somehow connected to the bomb. When the poster was peeled off, the bomb would explode. Think about those two really odd rules for a moment. Were those rules put in place to see if American soldiers could measure up to some arbitrary rules? Were they put in place to see how often they could keep it? "Well, you kept the rule 85% of the time so you're better than the guy who only kept it 50% of the time." Of course not. Those were warnings. And soldiers who did not believe the danger behind the warning were playing with fire.

That's what **I Thessalonians 4:1-8** is for us. He is not establishing some arbitrary rules to see how well we will measure up. He is not setting up a barter system and saying if we only do a little bit we'll be alright. He is warning us. His goal for us is sanctification and holiness. But Satan has set some bombs. He's telling us it won't be all that bad. Just a little won't hurt us. Those crazy preachers who warn us about movies, music, modesty, and dancing are nuts. They're just trying to keep you from having fun; they want you to miss out on life. But God is warning us. There are bombs hidden behind those things.

If you don't care about holiness and sanctification, then disregard Paul's warnings. Treat this sermon as if it is preached by some nutball Victorian prude who wants to keep us all in the "Leave It to Beaver" era. But if holiness is what you are striving for, if you hunger and thirst for righteousness, then recognize God's warning. There are bombs out there that will destroy you. Don't let Satan deceive you.