Church in the Wild Devotional
August 12, 2018

Please begin by reading 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8.

This is a pivot point. As with other epistles, today's reading begins a section addressing practical lifestyle issues. During their three weeks in Thessalonica, the apostles "instructed [them] how to live in order to please God." Now the apostles praised the Thessalonians for their faithfulness as they urged them not to slip. At stake is "how to please God," not "how to win God's favor." Christ are saved by grace (not by good works), but f<u>or</u> good works (Eph 2:8).

Included in the "instructions" that Jesus-authorized apostles gave was teaching on sexual holiness. "Sanctification" is a life-long process of becoming more like Christ. We may flinch when we hear the word "holiness." We fear that holiness won't be fun and the possibility of coming across as "holier than thou." Yet the pursuit of holiness is one of the reasons that Jesus redeemed our lives, for "just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15). We must trust that God's righteous intent will be the source of infinite, enjoyable blessings.

Suddenly the letter gets specific (and controversial): "You should avoid sexual immorality" (*porneia* in Greek*)*. This subject was as difficult for them to discuss as for us. The Greco-Roman culture of 50 A.D. literally worshipped sex. Pagan temples covered with pornographic art celebrating the promiscuity of Greek gods. Paul wrote from Corinth, where the Temple of Aphrodite (Venus) employed 10,000 male and female prostitutes for cultic "worship." Many were enslaved. You get the idea…

For Jewish converts, this teaching confirmed that the Jewish Messiah affirmed the high ethical standards that Jews already embraced. For Gentile converts, following Jesus required a radical change in lifestyle. The Holy Spirit's transforming grace made positive life change possible.

Jesus loves us too much not to care if we misuse our sexuality! Instead of "passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God," each of us (whether single or married) "learn to control [our] own body in a way that is holy and honorable." For the Thessalonians, exercising self-control meant setting firewalls to prevent temptation from overwhelming them so that "no one would wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister." While the apostles don't threaten damnation, they acknowledge that the Lord's "punishment" is the consequences that often results from sexual sin (heartache, disease, broken marriages, etc.)

Though much has changed, the righteous use of our sexuality is still one of life's greatest joys. In contrast, sexual immorality is still a source of great suffering. While our culture isn't as decadent as the Thessalonian surroundings, the sexual revolution that took hold in the 70s and the internet explosion of the 1990s have spawned a world that requires Christ-followers to set firewalls if we are to avoid sexual immorality. An adult youth leader once confided in me that after dealing with his own addiction to pornography, he warned the junior high age boys in his church. In response, many of them showed him the pornographic websites saved as favorite places on their own phones. Some far surpassed the filth he had consumed. We grieve how addiction to graphic images will affect them (and the girls though date, cohabitate, or marry).

Blatant pornography is hardly the only concern. Unless we set boundaries, we can slide into virtual pornography via cable TV (beware of premium channels)! God-honoring women ought to "give the brothers a break" when deciding how much skin to reveal. Men and women should set boundaries before they get into risky situations with co-workers. Dating couples must strive to "go slow" lest their physical intimacy race ahead of their emotional and spiritual connection.

Because our family members, friends, neighbors, (and we ourselves) may have been damaged by our culture's obsession with sex, let us be gracious and respectful to all, even as we lift up God's desire for holiness through Jesus' transforming grace!