

HANDLING YOUR SEX DRIVE

by Ray C. Stedman

I must say that 1987 was one of the most depressing years that I have lived through. Looking back, it seems the headlines continually spoke of disasters, murders and scandals. As I reflected upon the year, I wondered if there was not some way to eliminate, or at least cut back, all this evil. I thought of one thing which would certainly reduce crime, bring an end to the divorce scandal, eliminate teenage pregnancies, reduce the prison population, stop the sale of pornography, and decrease poverty. If we could come up with a drug that would remove pleasure from the act of sex, because that is why everybody indulges in sexual misbehavior, we could change the whole moral climate of our country. But I realized we also would lose much color from life. We would forfeit the companionship and fellowship which the sexes have in one another. Life would become very drab and dreary indeed. Since we obviously cannot make that drastic change, the only thing left to us is to learn how to handle our sexuality properly.

When I was a young man, nobody was teaching in this area. Back then, you grew up thinking that your body ended at the waist. If the word *sex* was even used, especially in church, it was usually whispered. The passage from First Thessalonians to which we now come confronts very openly and honestly the whole matter of human sexuality, and teaches us how to handle it. I do not understand why when I was young those passages were ignored. How people can read their Bibles every day and miss some of these great passages that teach so openly about this subject I do not know. Thank God that this is another day.

In Chapter 4, we come to a section in which Paul teaches on some very practical matters. Here we will learn how to get along with one another, how to handle the death of our loved ones, and how to view God's apparent delay in the coming again of Jesus.

The apostle begins this section with a treatise on how to handle your sex drive:

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. 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 immorality;
{1 Th 4:1-3 RSV}

The apostle must have actually held classes on these matters in Thessalonica: "... you learned these things from us," he says. Evidently he systematically taught them on these subjects, beginning with how to handle their sex drive. We may think of the ancients as very different from us, but they really were not. These people who lived in this bustling seaport city of Thessalonica felt the same kind of pressures and drives that we do.

Thessalonica was rather like San Francisco. There was business and commerce and the usual hustle and bustle of a large city; there was culture and beauty and art. But there was also degradation and sin, shame and sordidness. The Thessalonians were driven by the same forces that drive us. In all the realism and wisdom of the Scriptures, therefore, the apostle taught them how to handle life in these areas.

Several things which he taught are mentioned in this first verse:

First, they learned from him how they "ought to live and to please God." That is the number one subject in the curriculum of the Holy Spirit. The Christian's business is to live to please God. The word "ought," which is made up of an elision of the two English words "owe it," reflects that priority. We owe it to God to please him! Paul tells us why, here and in other passages. It is because Jesus has done a great thing for us. In Second Corinthians 5 the apostle writes, "He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised," {2 Cor 5:15 RSV}.

The great truth that every Christian must learn is that, as the apostle says in his Corinthian letter, "you are not your own," {1 Cor 6:19b RSV}. You no longer belong to yourself. You must no longer let your own

desires take first priority in life. Rather, "you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:20a}. Jesus died on your behalf, in your place. You deserved that death, I deserved it, but he took the penalty himself. Now we belong to him. He has invaded our being by the Holy Spirit, and the purpose of our lives has been dramatically transformed. We are to live no longer for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again from the dead.

That is the first priority in the Christian life. Every appeal to the Christian in the New Testament is made on that basis, and that is why Paul puts it first here. The Christian "ought to live and to please God."

As someone has said, "the main thing is to see that the main thing remains the main thing." We ought to remind ourselves every day that our business is not to do what we want done but to please the Lord who has redeemed us at such fearful cost.

Now Paul tells us how to do this. Notice the word "how" there. How do we live to please God? The lessons are very specific, as we shall see. It is significant that he did not merely teach them what they ought to do, but how to do it, especially in this area of handling their sexuality.

Further, Paul exhorts them that, just as they have been doing this, they ought to do so "more and more." The Christian life is one of growth. There is progress to be made. A wider realm of application ought to be visible in our lives. All of us have had some aspect of our lives which we were disturbed about when we came to Christ. Perhaps it was our sex life. It may have been a deep sense of inferiority, or of shame or anger for our inability to be what we ought to be. We came to Christ because we needed help. Not only was that area surrendered to him, but every aspect of our life is to be his to control.

The apostle reminds the Thessalonians of the clear instructions he gave on how to live to please God.

Notice these are given "through the Lord Jesus." This is not just Paul's advice as a religious leader. These are the words and desires of our Lord Jesus himself:

First of all, says Paul, it is that "the will of God is your sanctification."

I am sorry that the word *sanctification* appears here because I find a lot of people have very confused ideas as to what constitutes sanctification.

- Some think it is a kind of a religious sheep dip that they are put through; an experience of cleansing and commitment entered into once for all. Once they have been dipped, they feel, everything is fine.
- Others think that sanctification is an extraction process. God uses a kind of sin magnet to extract all the sin and then from then on they can live to please him. Some people actually think they have not sinned for years. Obviously, nobody has told them the truth yet. A little deeper investigation would reveal how wrong they are.

Actually, the word *sanctification* is really almost the same as the word that is translated *holiness* in this passage. It comes from the same root. But again, I find that many are confused about holiness.

When I was younger, most people thought of holiness as grimness. I did not like "holy" people. They looked like they had been soaked in embalming fluid. They were grim and dull; they frowned on anything that was fun or pleasurable. But that is not holiness. I like the good English word *wholeness*, which also derives from the same root. Everybody wants to be a whole person. The Old Testament speaks about "the beauty of holiness" {1 Chr 16:29, 2 Chr 20:21, Psa 29:2, 96:9}, the inner attractiveness that is apparent when someone begins to function inwardly as he or she was intended.

What this says is that God is designing beautiful people! That is what he wants. And not merely outwardly beautiful people like those we see on television, but inwardly beautiful people. He is more interested in inward beauty, in making admirable, trustworthy, strong, loving, compassionate people -- having all the qualities which make for inner beauty. That is what God calls *wholeness*, and that is his will for you.

Isn't it exciting that God wants to make you a whole person?

The second thing Paul says about such wholeness is that it includes moral purity. "... abstain from immorality," says the apostle in the very next sentence. Moral purity is part of wholeness. You cannot be a whole person if you indulge in sexual immorality. We need to be very clear about these words. Words like immorality do not seem to register with many people. Let us put it plainly:

- Immorality means no sexual wrongdoing;

- No pre-marital sex; no making out in the back seat of the car with somebody you hope to marry someday, or maybe not; no pre-marital sex (no fornication);

- No extra-marital sex (no messing around with someone else's wife or being faithless to your own husband or wife);

- No homosexual sex (that is very clear in Scripture in many places);

- No pornography (no standing in the news section at the airport and flipping through Penthouse or Playboy magazine and getting yourself turned on by looking at the pictures; that is sexual fantasy and that is wrong, too, as Jesus pointed out).

So to "flee immorality" means to have none of those things going on in your life.

The reason is, it destroys the wholeness that both you and God want. There is nothing more beautiful than a young person who has his or her life in order. At times I have been saddened to watch beautiful young men and women, who have been raised in godly homes, who reflect moral beauty in their lives, but they begin to let their standards go when they get out into the world. Watch them a year or two later and you will see the hardness in their faces, the slovenly habits that they have picked up. Things have begun to drift. There is a downward slant to life. They are beginning to lose the beauty of wholeness that God has in mind.

In this day in which we live I know that probably many of you are thinking that it is too late for you; you already have messed up your lives. But the glory of the gospel is that the word is not that we must never do this; rather the word is, "Do it no longer." That is what you find all through these passages. Let us live no longer for ourselves but for "Him who loved us" and "gave himself for us," {Rom 8:37, Tit 2:14}. All of us have messed up our lives in one way or another; we have destroyed the wholeness already. But the glory of the good news is that in coming to Jesus, through his work on the cross on our behalf and his raising again from the dead, he can actually give us a new start. All the past is wiped out and forgiven. We are restored. As Paul wrote in Second Corinthians, "I have espoused you [I have betrothed you] as a chaste virgin unto Christ," {2 Cor 11:2 KJV}. The Corinthians had already messed up their lives in many sexual ways, yet Paul declares that because they had come to Christ they were now a chaste virgin.

If, even as a Christian, we have messed up, the Word of God makes very clear that we can be restored. If we acknowledge that we have done wrong, and accept God's forgiveness through Christ, we are a chaste virgin again in Christ. What glorious good news that is!

In his instructions to these Christians in Thessalonica, Paul had evidently given them two major steps to take to achieve moral purity. If you are serious about being a whole person, about wanting to find the wholeness, the inner beauty that God provides for you, listen to these two steps:

The first one is, learn to control your own body.

... that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself [how to control his own

body] in holiness and honor, {1 Th 4:4 RSV}

The Revised Standard Version actually renders this, "learn how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor." I am sorry that the RSV, which is normally an excellent translation, does not include the margin reading ("how to control his own body") in the text because it is more accurate. The reason for this disparity is because neither the word "wife" nor the word "body" appears in the Greek text. "Vessel" is the word that is used there: "that you may know how to handle your vessel in holiness and honor." People differ as to what Paul meant by "vessel." It may be that it means a wife, although I doubt that. It is clear from the context that he is talking about our bodies. They are the vessel, as he tells the Corinthians, "the temple of the Holy Spirit," {1 Cor 6:19a RSV}.

But learning how to handle our bodies properly is not always easy. God gave our bodies to us. We did not design them ourselves. We would probably change a lot of things if it were up to us to invent or even rearrange our bodies. Included in the gift of our bodies is a remarkable capacity to churn out certain hormones that pour into the bloodstream. Those hormones have a profound effect upon the way our bodies function. At puberty, new hormones pour into the bloodstream and we experience sexual changes, along with which come very powerful drives that urge us, and almost seem to compel us, to certain sexual activities. Society tells us that those urges that boys and girls feel in their bodies are natural and therefore ought to be satisfied whenever opportunity affords. They argue that the sexual appetite should be satisfied just like the urge to hunger, thirst, sleep, or any other natural function. By extension, this argument says that there is nothing wrong with the fulfilling of sexual desires.

Now they are right in saying that sex is a natural function, but what they are not saying, and what the Scriptures reveal, is that all natural functions need certain degrees of control. Take hunger, for instance. You do not eat anytime you feel like eating. You learn to restrict your eating for certain reasons. If you do not want to put on too much weight, or if you want to enjoy your meals better, you do not eat between meals. Certain aspects and habits of control must be learned to handle the hunger function. The same rules apply to sleep. You do not go to sleep whenever you feel like it. (At least, I hope you do not, not now.)

I watch every Sunday morning out there to see who is sleeping. They say that preaching is the art of talking in somebody else's sleep, but I do not like to preach to sleepers. I do not mind people nodding their head when I speak or even shaking it, because at least they are awake, but when they get out of control, that is very difficult to handle from up here. You folks are kind enough, most of you, to avoid sleeping at the wrong time and place, which is church, and you control yourself. At least you have learned to keep your eyes open and your head looking at me and it looks like you are not asleep.

But all of these functions must be controlled. Control increases the enjoyment of a natural function. When a flooding river is controlled by banks, its intensity is increased. Many young people are discovering that in these days when the moral restraints have been removed from sexual practices, that it results in a kind of listless flood in which you wade continually with no enjoyment whatsoever. But God has designed sex to be stimulating and arousing. That is why marriage constitutes a kind of channeled control for sex. There is ample provision made for the stream, but the limits increase the intensity and enjoyment. That is what God has in mind as part of the process of producing a whole person. Anything that tears down those boundaries destroys the beauty of wholeness.

So Paul says that we are to learn how to control our bodies in holiness -- wholeness -- and honor. Control contributes to that sense of wholeness. You are in charge of your own body. You are not bound to it. You are not a slave to it.

On the other hand, he puts it negatively:

... not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; {1 Th 4:5 RSV}

In order to learn control you must avoid the slavery of lust.

A young man told me once: "I got into messing around sexually right out of high school and I have been doing it ever since. In fact, I would have to say that I am nothing but a male whore!" What he meant is that he is a slave to lust. He has allowed his sexuality to get out of control until it possessed his life and he is no

longer a free person.

That is what Christians must avoid. Paul taught these Thessalonian believers not to give in to the sexual pressures of that lustful city. They should restrain themselves and learn how to handle their bodies rightly and thus reflect the beauty, orderliness and glory of a life that is whole. That is the first thing he taught them.

Secondly, they should learn to respect the rights of others.

... that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. {1 Th 4:6 RSV}

What does it mean to "not wrong his brother"? Let me put it plainly: It means

- No adultery;
- No haunting the houses of prostitution;
- No getting involved sexually with anybody else but your mate in marriage;
- No affairs with your neighbor's wife or husband.

All such behavior wrongs others. It steals the property of others and destroys their rights. The tenth commandment says, "Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's wife nor his ox nor his ass nor anything that is his," {cf, Exod 20:17}. That perhaps is what some of the Thessalonians were doing. Their conduct destroyed the wholeness of their own lives, and it also hurt and impacted upon others.

In counseling, we pastors hear seemingly endless stories of damaged families, of children's lives being ruined by the adulterous affairs of their parents. There is enormous misery and heartache that goes along with this passion after adultery and sexual affairs.

God also takes action about this, says Paul. God so loves this race of ours and so longs to see beautiful, whole people emerging from it that he will take drastic action when men and women violate his will. Silently, invisibly, his judgment falls. Believer and unbeliever alike cannot escape the painful results of sinful choices. That is the law of inevitable consequences. If we choose to sin, there will be evil results. We cannot avoid it. We can be forgiven, but that does not change the evil results. Forgiveness restores the broken relationship and gives us strength to walk on in freedom in the future, but it does not change or eliminate the hurt of the past.

Every believer must face that. God tries hard to teach us this. All through the Old Testament he sought to impart to Israel the fact that if they violated what he told them was right, if they refused to hear his word, ugly and terrible things would happen to them. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 31 where God is speaking to Israel about their disobedience:

"Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they shall be consumed and many evils and troubles shall come upon them, so that they will say in that day, 'Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?'" {cf, Deut 31:17 RSV}

That discipline took the form of famine, war and diseases. The final judgment would be a break-up of families:

"Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people while your eyes shall look on and yearn for them continually but there shall be nothing you can do." {cf, Deut 28:32}

That is what has happened here in the United States, where one half of all children today live with single parents. Families have been broken and children parceled out to strangers.

The final step, God said, would be "despair of soul," that awful depression of spirit that makes one want to commit suicide rather than to go on living. As a faithful father, Paul solemnly forewarned the Thessalonians that this would happen. God's standards cannot be violated. He has ways of bringing to pass his judgments and nobody can evade it.

The apostle recaps this teaching in two wonderful verses:

For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness [wholeness]. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. {1 Th 4:7-8 RSV}

These solemn words of warning are set against the background of the yearning of God for a whole people. God has called us to wholeness. That is what he can create if we obey what he says. If we disregard his instructions, says Paul, we are not only turning our back on what man has said but on God himself, and, furthermore, on his supply of power to enable us to do it.

In the campaign against drug abuse we are being told that what we need to teach children is to "just say 'No.'" But those who are already addicted to drugs tell us that that is very difficult to do. When the terrible passion for a drug is throbbing through every vessel of the body it is very hard to "just say 'No.'" The will is not strong enough, and they give in again and again. Now God knows that. He knows how we function. That is why, for believers in Jesus, he has provided a new resource, the Holy Spirit.

Remember the wonderful promise of Ephesians 3:20, "Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that is at work within us," {cf, Eph 3:20 KJV}.

No believer can give the excuse that he could not do what God told him to do. If he offers that excuse, he is but kidding himself; or else, he is forgetting that he has been provided with an extra resource. He may need to exercise his will to "just say 'No,'" but then he must immediately cast himself upon the Spirit of God within him, the Lord Jesus made available by the Spirit. Then, resting upon that presence, he must turn and walk away. And he can do it. He has the power to do it. There are millions that can testify that what they could not do by their will they were able to do by relying on the power of God.

We are living in an immoral world.

Our young people are under pressures that I never faced as a young man, but these pressures can be resisted.

God has told us we can live a holy life. The words of a great hymn say what we need to hear today:

Rise up, O men of God,
Have done with lesser things.
Give heart and mind and soul and strength
To serve the King of kings.

Lift high the cross of Christ,
Tread where his feet have trod.
As followers of the Son of man
Rise up, O men of God.

God wants a community of beautiful people whose lives are under control and kept so by the Holy Spirit. Such a people will constitute an island of refuge and resource for the drifting multitudes, the slaves of lust, who are damaging and wrecking their lives all around us.

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