

Six ways to stand firm: maintain sexual purity

1 Thess 4:1-8

I've recently discovered that one of the benefits of moving to Waitara has been that I'm now doing a lot more walking! This discovery has been made via a feature on my phone that I didn't even know was there. Since last October my phone has been recording my daily tally of steps. It has an inbuilt pedometer which I only discovered about a month ago, but it's been on since I got this phone last year and I can see that during my time living in Balmain I was averaging 6000 steps a day, but since moving to Waitara my average has increased to 8000 steps per day. So I am doing more walking than what I did before.

However, you may have heard various health experts talk about 10,000 steps as being the magic number. Apparently 10,000 steps is the amount we need to be walking each day in order to get the appropriate amount of exercise, and so this pedometer has shown me that I'm not quite walking enough. What I'm doing is good, but the iPhone is telling me that I shouldn't become complacent and that I should keep on walking.

In our passage today Paul is writing to the Thessalonians about their walking, not their physical walking but their spiritual walking. Although you wouldn't know it from the translation we use here in church.

Here at Waitara Anglican we use the New International Version NIV, and in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul reminds the Thessalonians about the instructions he'd given them as to how to *live* in order to please God. Other translations like the King James Version and the English Standard Version have Paul reminding the Thessalonians about how to *walk* in order to please God. I think that's a much more engaging image when speaking about the Christian life. The Christian life is a walk where some parts are easy and other parts hard. It's a walk where we are meant to make some progress, moving from one point to another. It's a walk that involves the need for discipline and fitness. And like my iPhone is reminding me to keep walking, so too Paul is encouraging these Thessalonians to keep walking, end of v1: Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. "You're walking well", he says, "but you're not finished yet, keep walking!"

And then at the beginning of verse 3 we get a sense of our destination: It is God's will that you should be sanctified. To be sanctified means to be set apart from the world around us; to have a distinguishing set of values and behavior. Our Christian walk sees us walking away from the standards and expectations of unbelievers and walking towards God and what he expects. The other way of describing this journey is to talk about the path of holiness; to be sanctified, to be set apart, is to be made holy. What Paul wants to see in these Thessalonians is a desire to keep on making those steps towards God's pattern of living, to not be satisfied with small gains, with small journeys into holiness.

And so even before we get into the particulars, we have a challenge here don't we? How much walking are we engaged in? Are we concerned with seeking out sanctification more and more, or have we become complacent with taking small steps in holiness. In our Christian walk are we still within arms length of the world's standards, or are we keen to stride out and truly seek out God's way of living?

The particular aspect of sanctification that Paul turns his attention to becomes apparent from the second half of verse 3. Paul wants his friends—and by implication us as well—to be holy in their sexuality. It's not the only area where Christians are called to be different—holiness covers all sorts of different aspects of life—but it is true that a Christian's approach to sex will be different to the approach held by others in the world.

In verses 3-6 I see at least three behaviors that mark out Christian sexuality. If we are interested in walking according to God's standards then these are three things that must characterize our approach. The first is there in the second half of verse 3. You should avoid sexual immorality Paul says. Sexual immorality is a broad category. It includes every form of sex outside of God's design of a man and woman who've committed themselves to each other with the promises of marriage. This includes gay sex, de-facto relationships, casual sex between men and women, and adulterous sex. It also includes those types of sex where, thankfully, our wider society agrees with us as to their immorality: things like pedophilia and incest. But from the full list that I've just mentioned you can see that our world's standards are very different to God's. Christian sexuality is much more narrowly expressed.

And when we do encounter sex as it is practiced by the wider world, how is the Christian meant to react? Paul has a simple instruction for us: he tells us to *avoid* it. "Give it a wide berth," he says, "have nothing to do with it, do what you can to not get tempted by it. You've got to avoid it" he says. This isn't the only time Paul gives us this advice in his letters. 1 Corinthians 6.18. Flee from sexual immorality he says. Again in 2 Timothy 2, Flee the evil desires of youth. "Run away from it, get far beyond it before it damages you".

A few months back Jas and I spent a Sunday afternoon going on a behind-the-scenes tour of the disused power station down at White Bay near our old home in Balmain. While we lived in that part of the world we would often drive past the old power station, which is this huge old rusty monstrosity on the harbor's edge. I often wondered what it would be like to have a look inside and so when we heard that there was going to an open day I said to Jas "Guess what we're doing this afternoon!" So we went down there and had a walk around with all the other interested locals, and I remember turning one corner to see a gate blocking our entry into one area, and the gate had big sign on it: "Danger, do not enter, high levels of asbestos!" At that point everyone turned on their heels and walked very quickly the other way, they knew the danger, and so they did the sensible thing; they fled!

And this is exactly the advice the Bible gives us. Sexual immorality is a dangerous thing; Proverbs chapter 2 says that sexual immorality leads down to death, its paths to the spirits of the dead. So when the temptation entices you to throw caution to the wind, flee from it. Do everything within your power to avoid it; to walk in a big arc around it.

Now Paul knows that sometimes this is easier said than done. Paul seems to understand that given we are sexual creatures and given we find ourselves in an oversexed culture, it's not always easy to simply avoid sexual immorality. This leads us to our next marker of Christian sexuality there in vs 4-5. Not only is it God's will that we avoid sexual immorality, but also That each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God. Part of the walk of holiness is the task of learning to control our own bodies; learning to control when and how we express our sexuality, and not to give in to this idea that sexual desire is uncontrollable.

In many ways it can appear that sex controls everything. It seems to have control over our marketing. It seems to have control over our popular culture. It dictates not only what musicians and artists write about but also what they wear. And of course, sex can also control our personal lives as well, can't it? It can control our thought lives. It can control those times when we are alone with a computer screen. It can control our relationships. It can control our wallets. But if this is the case, if we have given everything over to sex, then it's not because sex is all powerful. It's because we've given up our authority over it. We are not slaves to sex, rather sex is our servant, we are sexuality's master, we control it. Sex is a tool for *our* use.

Science is able to tell us what it does as a tool. When two people make love, two hormones are released—oxytocin and vasopressin—that help the two people make an emotional bond. Sex is a tool that helps marriages stick together. You see why having multiple partners is a misuse of this tool; you're forming bonds and attachments only to pull them apart again. So a Christian sexuality is marked by self-control, and we exercise that self-control because we recognize that sex has a place; its place is *in* marriage because it's a tool *for* marriage.

But Paul does say that we have to *learn* this self-control. It doesn't come automatically, and if we don't work at it then we won't be able to control ourselves. Some key steps in learning this discipline—First, watch what you watch. The evidence is in, feeding our brains junk can change our sexuality. Neural pathways can alter, changing what it is you need to get turned on. I know I've already mentioned this to you before, but one of the most important things I was ever told as a youth was to beat a wide path around pornography, to flee pornographic material. Why? (1) Because of its addictive nature, and (2) because it would only serve to ruin real-life sex; it would change what it was that I found attractive. Watch what you watch.

Secondly, if you or someone you know is finding it difficult to control their sexual behavior, then it might be worth asking “What emotional need are you/they trying to fulfill with this behavior?” Even though sex is good and pleasurable, often there is something else that is driving uncontrollable behavior. Perhaps it might be worth seeing a mental health professional to help you uncover what is going on. If we are serious about walking in holiness, then leaning to control our desires will be a big priority.

As will be the priority of keeping our church an immorality-free space. In verse 6 Paul presents our third marker of Christian sexuality: and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister

I remember once watching an episode of family feud, and the survey question on this occasion was “name a place where you might meet your future partner”. Top response: “at work”, another top response: “at the pub”. One woman said “at church”. Cue laughter from the audience. But she got some points for that because it did appear on the board. Now it’s not a perfect answer as meeting someone at church isn’t everyone’s experience, but church is a place where significant relationships can form, and so it ought not be a surprise when the temptation arises to use someone at church in a sexual or romantic way; to lead a person on when in fact you’re not that serious, or in extreme cases to take someone’s spouse. We are brothers and sisters, and so that’s how we treat each other. We’re close, as members of the same family are close, but we’re not sexual.

When I was studying for ministry I was a resident in a Christian university college. I remember hearing an outsider assume that we must all be sleeping with each other, because that’s what university colleges are like. But that’s not how we treated each other. We treated each other as brothers and sisters, and in that way we were walking away from the standards of the world.

What if we don’t want to walk that way? It can be tiring and it takes lots of effort to walk in God’s ways. Do we really need to be that different? Well, what does Paul say? The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before.

We’ve heard what the expectation regarding our sexual holiness is, but the Bible isn’t simply a book of rules, it also gives reasons as to why we ought to walk in holiness. Some of those reasons are positive. A big factor in the Bible’s presentation of holiness is that it gives us a chance to imitate something wonderful about God himself. Men and women are asked to be faithful because it reflects God’s own faithfulness towards us. We stay committed to the one person, because God stays committed to us. That’s a wonderfully secure and comforting thing to know and so it’s a security and conform we offer those we are married to and it’s a security that each and everyone of us in the church seeks to protect and promote.

But the bible also speaks about the negative consequences of rejecting this walk.

One of them is that God will punish sin; he will punish sexual immorality, so flee from it.

Why is it any of God's business what we do in our bedrooms? Well, there's a couple of reasons. First, v7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God. Paul presents God as someone who has a call upon our lives. God is the one who has authority over us, God is the King, God is the master and ruler. Often churches are guilty of presenting God as merely the one who helps us, the one who is there to serve us. And this is true, he does help, he does serve. But don't let God's graciousness overshadow the fact that he is still your God. The call to walk in holiness is not simply an invitation to embark on an interesting trip, it's a command of God.

And secondly we have a very interesting comment there in v8. Paul speaks of God who gives us his Holy Spirit. This is both a frightening concept and an encouraging one. If our bodies are playing host to the Holy Spirit, why are we fooling around with sin? Paul asks this question explicitly in 1 Corinthians 6. If we are happy to welcome God into our bodies, then it makes no sense to be welcoming sin into the same vessel. No wonder God gets a bit upset when we ask him to become room-mates with an enemy.

However, the presence of the Holy Spirit is also the power to overcome. A new life is possible, as the Thessalonians would have well known. Greek culture was possibly even more 'liberated' than our own, these Thessalonians would have had lots of baggage and sin in their lives, but, they knew the forgiveness of Christ and the Holy Spirit's power to live differently, as Paul says in verse 1, they were already walking in a way that pleased God. So as hard as this walk may be, it's not impossible.

And if we do live in this way then we can become a beacon in a really broken society. You may have caught in the news the story about a website that was hacked. This website was specifically designed for people looking to commit adultery. People already in relationships would register their details and be introduced to others who were also looking to have an affair. The website was hacked and the details of its users were made public. Now, people in the media argued about the ethics of this action. Was it moral to expose people who themselves were being immoral? But the detail that caught my ear, which no one else seemed to pick up on, was the vast number of users that this site had attracted. Over 30 million people worldwide and around 1 million Australians. Now, the last census counted 9.1 million Australians who are either married or in a de-facto relationship. So roughly 1/9 Australians are actively looking for an affair. 1/9 looking to either break their vows or simply be unfaithful. That's a lot of broken people.

If we take our walk of holiness seriously, then we can offer something different: Faithfulness, security, respect, genuine love. It's a good walk to be walking this walk, because not only is it pleasing to God, it's good for our community. It's funny how God actually knows best, isn't it?