A call to holiness 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

At the end of chapter 3, Paul prays that God would establish the hearts of the Thessalonian believers in holiness, and in chapter 4 he spells out what that looks like in practice. He makes it clear that he is confident that their way of life is already pleasing to God; he just wants to remind them of what he said to them when he was with them and to exhort them to please God more and more. God wants them to be holy, and this means refraining from sexual immorality.

A rough and ready definition of sexual immorality could be any sexual activity outside of (heterosexual) marriage, but we can’t simply assume that this is Paul’s meaning here: the scope of the vocabulary of sexual immorality is broader than that, and the meaning of language is always determined by the context in which is it used. So, for example, Esau is described as being sexually immoral in Hebrews 12:16, and yet we have no record of him having extra-marital affairs: the problem lay in his marriage to Canaanite and Hittite women (Genesis 26:34-35; 28:8-9; 36:2-3). The NIV tries to hang into the idea that sexual immorality must refer to sex outside of marriage by inserting a comma into its translation of Hebrews 12:16, so that Esau is described as godless, but not sexually immoral. This, however, is a strained reading of the text. It is far more likely that ‘sexual immorality’ could, on occasion, denote marriages forbidden by God (1 Kings 11:1-2; Ezra 9:1-4). How might this understanding of sexual immorality affect our interpretation of Matthew 5:32? It is unlikely that Paul was referring to this kind of sexual immorality when he was writing to the Thessalonians.

Paul gives us some indication of what he has in mind in 4:5, where he contrasts the holy conduct of the Thessalonians with the passionate lust of the heathen Gentiles who do not know God. If we want to know the kind of behaviour he had in mind, we need look no further than Romans 1:24-27. Here, as part of his larger argument that Jews and Greeks alike are subject to sin (Romans 3:9), Paul sets out a typical Jewish polemic against Gentile sexual excess, portraying such behaviour both as a direct consequence of the pagan worship of idols, and also as a manifestation of God’s anger against idolatry (Romans 1:18-25). Sexual immorality was so closely associated with idolatry in the Jewish mindset that the vocabulary of sexual immorality is used to portray idolatry in Micah 1:7, and this is probably also the case in Revelation 2:14, 20. So, we can understand what Paul is getting at in 1 Thessalonians: those who have turned from idolatry (1:9) must, of necessity, also turn from sexual immorality (4:3).

Let me invite you to imagine a scenario in Thessalonica. A woman, who left her abusive husband five years ago, now lives in a faithful, committed, loving relationship with another man, and they are expecting their first child. They cannot get married, because her husband refuses to divorce her. She comes to Christ: what does refraining from sexual immorality look like in practice for her?

1 Thessalonians 4:4 is a tricky verse to understand. As ever KJV stays closer to the original than do most modern translations: ‘That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour.’ Most translations see a reference to sexual continence here – each person should learn how to control their own body, and that makes a lot of sense. Yet the verb used here typically means ‘to acquire’, or ‘to get’, rather than to keep, possess, or control, and it is used with reference to taking a wife in the Greek translation of Ruth 4:10; this is why some Bibles have marginal notes suggesting ‘each man should acquire his own wife’ as an alternative reading. But if that were Paul’s meaning, he could have made it a lot clearer. Others plausibly suggest that the language of ‘taking possession of his own vessel’ could be a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

Whatever the precise nuance of Paul’s meaning, it looks like he has sexual continence in mind. What kind of behaviour does that entail for someone who is single? What about for someone who is married?

The Jewish historian Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.199), and the Jewish philosopher Philo (*On the Special Laws* 3.34) both condemned sexual intercourse where the begetting of children was not the aim. Let Philo speak for those who held this view: ‘But those people deserve to be reproached who are ploughing a hard and stony soil. And who can these be but they who have connected themselves with barren women? For such men are only hunters after intemperate pleasure, and in the excess of their licentious passions they waste their seed of their own deliberate purpose. Since for what other reason can they espouse such women? It cannot be for a hope of children, which they are aware must, of necessity, be disappointed, but rather to gratify their excess in lust and incurable incontinence.’ For Philo, the only right purpose of sex is fathering children: what is your reaction to this?

Philo’s view arguably has some biblical basis: Malachi 2:14-15 suggests that the purpose of sexual union is the begetting of godly children. The first commandment given to Adam and Eve was, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28), and you only need to look at God’s promises to Abraham to see that his blessing was associated with having lots of children (Genesis 22:17). We may also find an echo of this in 1 Timothy 2:15, which talks about women being saved through childbearing. Some would go so far as to suggest that the reason why Leviticus forbids homosexual intercourse and intercourse with a woman who is having her period is that in neither case is there any possibility of having children (Leviticus 18:19, 22; 20:13, 18). Again, how do you respond to this? If, in your view, sex is not just about having more children, what is its wider (and maybe greater?) purpose? Can sex be holy and honourable? If so, in what way?

There is some uncertainty as to whether Paul changes the subject in 1 Thessalonians 4:6. If he is still talking about sexual morality, how do you suppose that his reference to wronging and exploiting or taking advantage of a (male!) brother fits in with this theme? If he is talking about sexual morality here, how come women (female sisters) don’t get a mention at this point, since presumably they would play a part in any sexual misconduct? Or maybe Paul has changed the subject and is reminding his readers of what he told them earlier, about making sure they acted with financial integrity – after all, money comes hard on the heels of sex when it comes to sending people off the ethical rails. No one knows which option is the right one, so you can make your own mind up – but don’t be fooled when the translations draw a link between 4:5 and 4:6 by talking about ‘this matter’: Paul refers to ‘the matter’ and the word has connotations of a legal dispute when Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 6:1.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:7, Paul makes the point that God has called us in holiness; he has not called us to impurity, and that principle applies in the bedroom, the boardroom and in every area of our lives: the call to holiness is all-encompassing, and we are accountable to God, who gives us his Holy Spirit.

‘Lead us into holiness, O God, by making our minds one with you in peace. You have made us body and soul, each fitted to its task. Let not our bodily desires war against our souls. Deliver us from unhealthy enticements that we may come to freedom and peace of mind; that we may not be overcome, fill us with your own strength. Amen.’

(Mozarabic Sacramentary, from *The Hodder Book of Christian Prayers*)