

Aim for holiness

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. Certainly welcome everyone who's online and very refreshing to preach to people instead of a camera. Now before I start, on behalf of Gospel City Network, I would like to extend thanks to people, all of you here at KAC, who, especially some of you, who have been supporting our endeavors to plant a church in BDC.
- And as people come out of their homes, we have a lot more ministries that are coming up, and we are excited to announce more in the next year and for KAC to rally behind us as we seek to plant another Gospel-centered church.
- Now, let's prepare our hearts to receive the Word of God. March 16, 2021.
- In Eckworth, Georgia, clouds loom over the horizon, covering the sun that would otherwise give warmth to an early spring day.
- On this day, people were going about their businesses, working, shopping, running errands. Around 2.30 in the afternoon, a Hyundai SUV drove into the parking lot outside a massage parlor, and its engine stayed on for an hour.
- [1 : 3 9] An hour later, a young man came out of the vehicle and walked into Young's Asian Massage, and stayed there for an hour.
- This man, later identified as Robert Aaron Long, left the building at 4.50 p.m., and that's when things took a wrong turn.
- Long went into his car, grabbed his 9mm handgun, stormed into each room of the parlor, and shot anyone and everyone he found in sight.
- Screams. Anxiety. Terror. Before anyone could do anything, Long drove 48 kilometers south to two more spas, and there he opened fire.
- Eight people were killed. One was heavily injured. Three days later, the police announced the identity of the victims.
- [2 : 5 5] Six of them, women of Asian descent. The aftermath of the Atlanta spa shootings left much of the world confused.
- Secular commentators characterized the incident as an act of violence against Asians. In cities across the world, crowds marched and protested against anti-Asian violence.
- The church, however, struggled to process the investigation results. Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old Caucasian male, was reportedly someone who was heavily involved with a Southern Baptist church not too far from his hometown.
- Robert Long grew up under the purity culture and saw his struggle with lust as, quote, a torture to his well-being.
- Long frequently described his visits to massage parlors as relapses and explicitly stated to the police he wanted to, quote, remove these sources of temptation.
- [4 : 1 0] How should Christians respond to such a testimony? For some of us, our immediate thought is to deny the Christian involvement of someone like Robert Long.

Josh Booth, the founder of G3 Ministries, came on and said, I would reject him as a Christian altogether. We think to ourselves, how could someone who has grown up under the church turn out like this?

We stand on a moral high ground and say, surely there's something wrong with the teaching of his church. If only he came to my church, BMKC, nothing like this would ever happen.

Oh, the irony. Friends, each one of us know, behind closed doors and within the deepest, darkest alleys of our hearts, how destructive lust can be.

In fact, the Asian church still has a long way to go in openly addressing topics of sexuality and appropriately teaching sexual holiness. In his letter to Thessalonians, Paul gives us a new framework to guide our thinking of holiness.

[5 : 36] Please turn with me now to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. In the first three chapters, Paul describes his relationship with his readers.

Even though the apostles had to suffer persecution in bringing the word of God to the church, Paul rejoices that the local believers have actually held on to their faith and they have continued to bear fruit.

Paul's friendship with his readers now formed the basis of his exhortations in the second half of this letter. On top of speaking to them as a friend, Paul now assumes an authoritative apostle.

He assumes the voice of a messenger of God. According to Paul, holiness is a life that pleases God.

So let's jump in. First one, as for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God as in fact you are living.

[6 : 58] Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we give you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lusts like the pagans who do not know God, and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being, but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. Now about your love for one another, we do not need to write to you.

For you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.

And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, you should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

[8 : 22] Our text today contains three movements. Pursue holiness as God's command. Pursue holiness in sexual purity.

And pursue holiness with familiar love. Let's pray. Amen. Holy God, before whom the slightest trace of sin appears as the largest irremovable mark, we plead your mercy.

Cleanse our hearts of impurities and rid our minds of distractions as we approach your sovereign word. Empower your servant to proclaim your truth in boldness, clarity, and reverence.

Amen. Pursue holiness as God's command. Pursue holiness as God's command.

Paul starts off in verse 1 like this. As for other matters, brothers and sisters. Now, while you and I are accustomed to calling each other brothers and sisters, Paul's usage of the term is intentional here.

[9 : 37] To a new Thessalonian church filled with Jews and Gentiles, educated and manual laborers, wealthy and the slaves, Paul uses the term brothers and sisters to portray them as a new family.

Now that you're part of the family, Paul says, there are family rules that you have to learn as children of God. Now as it turns out, the Thessalonians have already received the family rule book and they have been practicing it.

Notice the verb tense in verse 1. Notice the verb tense. So, we instructed you how to live and then as in fact you are living.

So, after their conversion, the apostles gave the Thessalonians teaching on how to restructure their work, their life, their family and their social life.

These instructions are meant to help the Thessalonians learn what it means to live a life that's pleasing to God. And to be honest, they've been doing a pretty good job except on some issues.

[10 : 52] But before Paul can go into what those issues are, he has to first reestablish his tone. So far, Paul has been speaking to his readers as a friend.

When he touched on how they, when he touched on his ministry among the Thessalonians and how he misses, he wishes to visit them, Paul's voice is that of a brother who misses the local church family.

But now, from here on, Paul assumes a more authoritative voice. The second half of verse 1 says, now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

Right out of the gate, Paul makes it clear that what he is about to say, the authority behind his words is not himself but the Lord Jesus.

In other words, Paul's not just giving some friendly advice or some good suggestions. No, they are direct commands from God himself.

[12 : 08] And he continues here, for you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. So the problem with the Thessalonians is not so much that they failed to understand Paul's teaching or that they simply forgot what's going on.

No, there was a conscious rejection of the life that pleases God in favor of the life that suits their own pleasures. There was a deliberate choice of disobedience, a purposeful resistance to the word of God, and a stubborn persistence in sin.

What exactly is Paul referring to here? Pursue holiness in sexual purity. Pursue holiness in sexual purity.

As it turns out, Timothy's report to Paul is not all rainbows and sunshine. During Timothy's visit to Thessalonica, he found out that some members of the church continue to indulge in sexual passions like the pagans.

Now, anyone remotely familiar with Greek and Roman mythology can tell you that Zeus, Aphrodite, Osiris, and Isis weren't exactly the best examples of sexual restraint.

[13 : 42] But even if we take religion out of the equation, if we just consider the social factor, it was common for a man in Greek society to use female slaves or prostitutes to satisfy his sexual desire.

against this backdrop of sexual liberty, the apostles taught strict sexual ethics that the Thessalonians struggled to practice.

But in the next few verses, Paul ties holiness with sexual purity. First, Paul states that sanctification is God's will for everyone.

Verse 3, It is God's will that you should be sanctified. Now, sanctification refers to the ongoing process in the Christian life where we, with the help of the Holy Spirit, turn away from sin and immorality.

Sanctification starts right at our conversion. The Holy Spirit helps us to turn away from sins and to love God.

[14 : 57] And in verse 3, sanctification is specifically defined as purity in sexual relationships. Paul says that you should avoid sexual immorality.

That you should avoid sexual immorality. So even in the days of Moses, God has commanded the Jewish people to practice sexual holiness to separate themselves from the neighboring pagans like the Moabites and the Canaanites.

Acts such as homosexuality, incest, prostitution, adultery, were all strictly forbidden. The irony is that this same disapproval of these sexual activities is shared by morally sensitive pagans, but unfortunately not by the church.

Next, Paul defines what he means by sexual purity. Verse 4, that each one of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.

Now, the Greek is actually rather confusing, some of you might notice a footnote next to verse 4 that says, learn to live with your own wife or learn to acquire a wife.

[16 : 30] The problem has to do with the word body, control your body. Now, outside of Paul's writings, the word body, the same Greek word, can be translated as vessel, which means tool, and at times can metaphorically refer to one's wife.

So, the solution to sexual immorality is marriage, which does align with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7. That said, the dominant teaching throughout all of Scripture against sexual immorality isn't so much to get married, but to exercise self-control.

The dominant teaching isn't to find a spouse, but to exercise self-control. And Paul here, the closest parallel that we would have is 2 Timothy 2, verse 21.

It says here, therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

So, likewise, here in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 4, what Paul has in mind is a sexual purity that abstains from immorality, but receives its honor from God.

[18 : 09] Verse 5 goes on to state that self-control is actually a defining mark of all who are in Christ. Paul explicitly calls out the pagans and their indulgence in passionate lust.

Now, passionate lust is a strong sexual desire that says, I want it, and I want it now. In Bible College, I had a friend called Noah Reynolds who was always very diligent on the way we use social media.

I remember Noah and I once had a conversation on how social media has bred in us a need for instant gratification. Sitting at the restaurant waiting for your food, perfect time to pull out Facebook.

on top of the toilet, not sure what to do, why not squeeze in a sports article? Wondering whether it's going to rain later? Just take your phone out and ask Google.

And the result is that our minds need to constantly be simulated. We simply cannot stand boredom. Perhaps that explains why you and I are most vulnerable to temptations when we are bored.

[19 : 34] The truth is, our need for stimulation bleeds in to our thirst for sexual fulfillment. After all, sex is just another desire, another appetite that begs to be filled.

verse 6, and that in this matter, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

Apparently, the Thessalonians have been holding intimate meetings within the house of a church member. Dinners and parties, fees and alcohol, all it takes is just a few sips of cocktail and a few flirty comments for things to escalate beyond control.

To wrong a brother means to overstep boundaries between genders, single or married. Even in a patriarchal society, Paul argues that sexual advances from a man or a woman can lead to injuring the other party and can hurt the whole church community.

Both men and women can be victims and both men and women can victimize others. Granted, crossing boundaries is not a problem unique to the first century church.

[21 : 10] In the Asian church today, someone in a leadership position could abuse his or her authority to gain sexual favors. More subtly, an older person could groom a younger person's trust through compliments, gifts, and acts of service.

Compared to the Western church, our motto of respect the elders maybe makes it even more challenging for a no to be taken seriously, or even for a no to be said out loud.

In the same vein, our honor and shame culture makes it difficult for victims to have a voice in the church. Rachel Dan Hollander, a Christian attorney and one of the first women to file a sexual abuse report against USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar laments the way her church process her abuse.

Quote, it is the denigration, it is the unwillingness to believe, the refusal to engage with experts, the denigration of those who do, and harsh secrecy to preserve the pristine image of the gospel, when justice would demonstrate the love of Christ much better.

If sexual abuse can happen in America, the country that prides itself on human rights, can you imagine how much it's buried here in Asia, the land that holds face and reputation as its number one virtue?

[23 : 04] you? It's not that sexual abuse doesn't happen, we just do a good job at covering it. Paul illustrates the seriousness of adultery and sexual immorality in verse 6, in the next verse, second half of verse 6, the Lord will punish all those who commit such sins as we told you and warned you before.

In light of chapter 5, which talks about the day of the Lord, there is certainly an apocalyptic tone here. Jesus is the ultimate judge who will come and render justice on earth.

Every account of wrongdoing, every violation against the law, will be laid bare before the throne. And again, this warning is not new to the Thessalonians.

No one could claim that they were unaware of the negative consequences of sexual immorality. But at the same time, Paul gives a positive reason.

Verse 7, for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. God calls every Christian to holy life, to a sanctified life.

[24 : 36] The gospel call doesn't just stop the moment you've become a Christian. The Christian life begins with a secure, eternal hope that transforms, that continues with the transformation of our moral conduct to holiness.

day by day, we learn what it means to reject sin completely and to love God wholeheartedly. Perhaps this is why Paul warns against complacency and stubbornness in the Christian life, as it says in verse 8, therefore anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being, but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

As it turns out, some members of the Thessalonian church have made this divide that many of us are guilty of doing today. The initial gospel call is from God, but the subsequent apostolic teaching is from man.

It is today's equivalent of saying I can be a Christian without going to church or giving weight to what the preacher says, and I say this as a preacher. But according to Paul, to reject the apostle's teaching and to continue in sin is to reject God himself.

For God has given all who are in Christ the Holy Spirit, a helper, one who conforms each part of our lives to the will of God, one who effectuates a change in our hearts so that we can obey God and serve him more.

[26 : 24] And it's through him that we can live a life that pleases God. Now, I could very well end the sermon here. In fact, you might think it's a pretty decent message.

we touch on the God's call for us to be holy. We touch on the seriousness of sin and we finish with a command that the Holy Spirit helps us be holy.

And you might even feel determined to take things seriously and pursue holiness with all your life. God's love. But if all I've done is stir up a moral change in your heart, then I would have failed in presenting the gospel.

Because all I would have suggested is it is up to you and your willpower, you and your efforts to reject sin and change to be holy.

all I would have suggested that this is something, a recipe that you can discover on your own. Now you might actually change for the better as a result of this sermon for a week or two, but eventually you'll bounce back.

[27 : 44] Perhaps that's why Paul doesn't end his teaching here and why we should value the importance of the final section. Pursue holiness with familiar love.

Pursue holiness with familiar love. Verse 9 and 10. Now about your love for one another, we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more. So even though sexual immorality has caused a deep wound in the Thessalonian church, Paul doesn't just say, hey, here's five quick steps to fix your sexual brokenness.

Instead, Paul takes the Thessalonians a step back to focus on the divine teaching of love. Now throughout this letter, Paul has commended the Thessalonians for the love that they have shown each other.

despite differences in their social class. And outwardly, the Thessalonians also welcome other believers throughout Macedonia who come there to trade with great hospitality.

[29 : 09] So Paul's saying, now that you have lived, you have shown that you know and you have lived the holy life, why are you rejecting God? Why are you giving in to sexual immorality knowing that it will hurt those you treasure?

Why are you rejecting the word of God, understanding that it will cause a great harm to those you love? Abound in love, do so more and more.

at the same time, Paul is aware that there are people who could exploit his teaching of familiar love.

That is why Paul insists in the final two verses that love should also drive one's work ethic. What happened is that when Paul's readers converted to Christianity, some of them had refused to work, instead remaining as patrons that were economically dependent on their clients.

Disagreements rose between those inside and outside the church, and disputes were taken to public forums, which resulted in outcry and oppression of the local Christians.

[30 : 32] Therefore, Paul says, love should drive their work. He says, you should mind your own business and work with your hands.

A love for God should motivate them to work and to be a good witness to outsiders. My first year in Bible College, I had a roommate whom we call Hans.

Hans came in dead set on becoming a missionary in Japan. He loved everything about the Japanese culture, their language, their cuisine, their animated works.

But Hans also had a little bit of a problem with video game addiction, specifically with the game Super Smash Bros.

Melee. Now, anytime he was not in class, he was practicing his combos on his Nintendo or watching tutorial videos on YouTube.

[31 : 42] All that began to change, however, in our second year when Hans met a girl from Wisconsin, Emily. They began to date, and when things got more serious, it was clear that Hans would soon have to make a difficult but necessary decision.

You see, Hans was, sorry, Emily was allergic to soy. Yes, soy sauce. Not only could she not eat anything with soy sauce, but the smell of it made her uncomfortable.

Well, Hans wanted to go to Japan. eventually, Hans gave up his dream and settled to do ministry locally.

But that's not the end of the story. A year later, when I met Hans, I was surprised to hear him tell me that he sold his video game console because it was simply not worth it.

It was taking too much of his time. friends, Hans didn't change because he took a class on how to be more disciplined. He didn't change because he suddenly had the willpower out of nowhere.

[32 : 59] He changed because he saw that which is worth pursuing more, loving Christ and loving his would-be wife.

I sense that this morning, many of us want to change for the better. Many of us want to pursue sexual holiness with all our heart.

But like the Thessalonians, we are confronted by our brokenness. We are confronted by a sexual brokenness that takes many forms. For some of us, it is a strong desire to have sexual relations with another person.

We chase after the dopamine of being physically intimate with someone else. For others, it is a strong sense of emotional attachment.

We pursue the feeling of being wanted, validated, and treasured. love. Lust also takes the form of jealousy and comparison.

[34 : 12] Someone else always has a prettier body. Someone else always has a happier family. Someone else always has a more thriving love life. Lust then leads us to covet.

We want what they have, and we want it now. this twisted desire leads us into the holes of pornography where either in books or in videos we are, for the moment we are consuming the material loved in this neatly packaged, watered down version of intimacy sexual fulfillment comes at us at no cost it requires no sacrifice, no effort for you are the Lord and your needs are at the front and center and you get to satisfy them with whoever you want however you want against such a ruthless assault of lust it is no wonder that many Christians see their sexual brokenness as the number one obstacle to holiness we've tried installing filters on our web browsers we've tried finding accountability partners we've maybe even sought counseling and all of them bringing short-term change at best we feel dejected we feel dejected crushed suffocating and hopeless in 1 Thessalonians 4, 1-12

Paul gives us a new paradigm he tells us that the remedy for sexual brokenness and the recipe for holiness lies not in what you can do what steps you can take but in the virtue of love the truth is the pandemic has formed habits of self-absorption in us the media constantly bombards us with messages that tell us what matters most is your need your security your comfort in this climate people become means to an end those around us are just tools to help us accomplish our purpose the cashier is just there to take your order the server is just there to bring you food your family member is just someone who's there to make life easier both inside and outside the church we have a lot of work to do in learning what to love what selflessly if the solution is not within us where then can we go to learn how to love from which strength from which source can we draw strength to say no to sexual immorality to pursue holiness and to love from which source can we find the empowerment john 15 13 greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends brothers and sisters the greatest act of love came nowhere other than on the cross when jesus the son of god was nailed on that wooden tree to purchase freedom and security for us all the recipe the remedy for sexual immorality and the recipe for holiness lies in grasping what it costs to bring you home what it costs god to build a relationship with you jesus saw you in your most horrendous sinful repulsive state doomed for eternal destruction and burning in the lake of fire he says let me take your place let me die for you and today he says to you my child i have paid for everything you are enough you are enough no longer do you have to settle for love in its cheap and unsatisfying form no longer do you have to find validation from those whose love is imperfect and conditional no longer do you have to wander this world finding a place to belong in christ you are love what more do you need in christ pursue christ whose glory whose glory far outshines the sun pursue christ whose beauty surpasses the most precious piece of jewelry on earth pursue christ the genuine

product next to whom all counterfeits appear worthless and let the love of christ drive your walk walk with him and with others such that love abounds and overflows to your relationship pursue him with all your worth that by the holy spirit you may be conformed to the holiness to which god has called you for let's pray lord this is a heavy topic a personal issue that only you lord know the extent to which every single one of us here in the room and watching online have felt the blows of lust you know the feelings of shame and guilt that our sexual brokenness have brought us you know the points where we have walked towards despair and hopelessness but yet lord in spite of our ugliness you sacrifice yourself for our sake you say to us we are enough so lord may you shine above all things that whatever attempts to rob us whether that's lust in its many different forms or other things that pleat that promises fulfillment that next to you they all hold no value help us lord to grow in holiness in self-love love and in purity in the name of jesus christ amen a i like to what