

A lot of this talk comes out of my own struggle to "get dating right." It was actually a few years after I was married that I started to see how flawed my whole approach to it had been from the start. Several people helped me to see that I had accepted a model for relationships that came from the world, not God.

I'm not going to tell you that dating is bad and courtship is good, or answer the "How far is too far?" question. That's not the point. Both ignore the importance of our intentions toward one another in relationships, and whether our freedom is creating a stumbling block for our brother or sister.

I'm not naive, and I know full well that teens often feel love (or something like it) long before they are ready to think about marriage. So how can you honor your brother or sister, with Godly intentions, in the time between childhood and marriage? We'll explore that question from a Biblical perspective.

Let's start in 1 Thessalonians 4.

At the end of 1 Thessalonians 3, after writing about Timothy's encouraging report from his visit to Thessaloniki, Paul prays for them.

In Thessalonians 4:1-8 Paul deals with sanctification and sexuality. He unfolds the prayer he prayed for them in 3:11-13, where he asked God to "make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Making their love increase and abound is a means by which God is establishing their hearts blameless in holiness. What does that look like? It means getting into each other's lives, bearing with each other, helping each other through tough times – it's messy, it's hard, it's beautiful. And this love for one another (that's other Christians) and for all (that's everyone) is the arena in which we are sanctified, made blameless in holiness. But for what end? So that we can stand before our God and Father, and so that we can be made ready for our Lord, the head and husband of the church, when he comes again.

OK, heady stuff. Now Paul urges them in 4:1 to abound/exceed/excel still more in their walking so as to please God. Paul says (and Timothy confirms) that they're already walking this way, already abounding in love for one another. Paul urges them to go further. He just prayed for them that God would cause this overflowing in them. Now he's encouraging them to reach for it too. Sanctification is not passive! God wants us to be engaged; praying, learning,

trusting, walking. And sanctification is not solo. It happens in relationships. It happens as we love one another.

In verse 3 he starts with "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" – he just prayed that God would establish their hearts blameless (that's sanctification), now he's pointing out that it is in fact God's will for them, not just something Paul is asking for on their behalf. God has purposed that they be made blameless. Jump forward to Chapter 5:23-24 and you'll see it spelled out more clearly: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." Sanctify you *completely*. That's God doing the sanctifying (not us), and he sanctifies us in every aspect of our being, spiritual and physical, all the way. And it depends not on our faithfulness, but God's faithfulness.

So Paul's prayer for them that God may establish their hearts blameless is not just a good wish for them. It is God's will, he purposes to do it, he is faithful, and he will *surely* do it.

And we still are called to walk the walk. So let's go back to 4:3. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality..." *hang on a sec – why does Paul put our sexual behavior forward as the first big thing in our sanctification? Why is it so central?* I would have thought it would be something like idolatry or pride. Why sex?

I think a close reading of the next few verses will show us that our sexuality is a much bigger deal than many of us realize, and that Paul is talking about more than just erotic love.

The word he uses for sexual immorality in Greek is *Porneia*. It means illicit sexual intercourse, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, incest; or metaphorically the worship of idols

OK, we're supposed to avoid that. **What is given as the opposite of sexual immorality in verse 4?**

"...that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;"

that passage is also translated in the NASB as "...know how to possess his own vessel.."

There are 4 words here that I want to explore in detail.

- know = *eido*; to see or perceive with the senses, to know or understand, to have regard for or to pay attention to.
- control/possess = *htaomai*; to acquire, get or procure a thing for one's self, to possess.
- holiness/sanctification = *hagiasmos*, consecration, purification; the effect of consecration.
- honor = *time* (tee-may); a valuing by which the price is fixed; honor which belongs or is shown to one, deference, reverence.

So Paul is talking about having some practical knowledge, based on things we can see or perceive with our senses, about how we are supposed to control or possess our own bodies. We'll come back to the idea of this knowledge. But let's look first at the manner in which we are to control our bodies – in holiness and honor.

Where does our honor or value come from?

As a Christian I often think of my only merit or value coming from the fact that I am united to Christ, that I have received his righteousness in exchange for my sin. **But if my value comes from my being in Christ, then am I more valuable than those who don't believe? Do I have greater honor?**

I don't think this is true, and we'll see from later verses that it can't be true or Paul's argument would break down. There has to be another basis for our honor/value as men and women, a basis that applies to believers and non-believers alike.

As believers we are united by faith to God who is infinitely valuable. But we are not inherently more valuable than non-believers.

Rather, our value comes from the fact that we are made in the image of God. We are his image bearers.

You find this idea all over the Bible, but a good example is Genesis 9:6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Murder is wrong no matter who you kill, whether they are a believer or a non-believer, because every person has inherent value as an image-bearer of God.

You see it again in James 3:9, where he talks about how no one can tame the tongue: "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God."

So why is it important for my sexual purity that I have a clear sense of my own honor as a person made in God's image?

We find a clue in the next phrase in verse 5

"...not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God,"

So if I don't know how to control my own body, and I live in the passion of lust, it has something to do with me not knowing God.

Let's consider why. To do so we'll take a look at a passage from Romans 1.

Romans 1:18-25

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Notice where you see the word *know* and *honor*.

For although they knew God, they did not *honor* him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

...therefore God gave them up... to the *dishonoring* of their bodies among themselves...

It seems from Paul's progression in verse 21 that when people stop honoring or thanking God, they eventually lose their knowledge of him. Jesus challenged the Jews on this in John 8:19, saying "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

What happens to our view or value of man when we no longer honor God?

We see that our basis for honoring one another rightly, as image-bearers of God, is grounded in our honoring of God. Without one we lose the other, and we look for another value system to determine our own and others' honor. That system is usually based in either 1) merit or 2) "What can you do for me?" The selfish, lustful desires of our hearts take over and we dishonor each other as we take advantage of one another to gratify our desires.

Let's look at one other passage that helps us understand the vital connection between our sexuality and our relationship with Christ. The "knowledge" that Paul refers to in Romans is not just a head knowledge of God, it is an intimate, personal knowing of God in Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:13b-20

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

So again, why is our sexuality so important to our sanctification?

- We are united with Christ in our bodies, and when we sin sexually we "make the members of Christ members of a prostitute"
- This refutes the idea of Gnosticism - trying to separate the physical from the spiritual
- our sexuality is a representation of the union, intimacy, love between Christ and his bride the church
- our sexuality shows what we believe about God
- our sexuality shows whether we *know* him.

OK, back to 1 Thessalonians 4, continuing in verse 6.

"...that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter..."

- transgress = *hyperbaino*; to step over, beyond, to transgress, to overstep the proper limits, trespass - as one who defrauds another in business.
- wrong/defraud = *pleonekteo*; to have more, or a greater part or share, to gain advantage of another, to overreach.

So this means that when we get involved in sexual immorality we are transgressing and wronging our brother or sister. **How? In what way do we transgress, wrong, or defraud our brother or sister in a sexual relationship?**

What does it mean to transgress or defraud someone in general?

It means to treat someone unjustly or unfairly, to take advantage of them in some way. In this context it implies taking something without paying the proper price for it, that is not "honoring" or setting the proper value upon that thing - or person!

So if Paul is talking about taking a person without paying the proper price, **what is the price of a person?**

The only price of a person, made in God's image, is another person, made in God's image. Two people *give themselves* to each other and each becomes the possessor of the other, in love, until they are parted by death. Scripture tells us that in some amazing way the two actually become one, not just spiritually and emotionally but also physically. We call it marriage. And it's *fair* – no one is cheated or defrauded of their proper worth.

The popular view today is that two people can enter into a consensual sexual relationship and it is an even exchange – each giving affection and pleasure to the other.

But if I ask someone to give themselves to me sexually without promising my life in return, I'm effectively saying to that person - "You have less honor than me. You're not worthy of my life in exchange. You're not worth it."

Whether we want to say it or not, whether we are even aware of it, *this is what we are saying*. Each is saying it to the other. It's not an even exchange between two lovers, it's two thieves stealing life from each other. Each is dishonored.

And inside each person feels it. We bear the effect of our dishonoring and being dishonored.

So that brings us to the question of our relationships before marriage, and the importance of our attitude and intentions in those relationships.

It used to be that when a young man wanted to take a girl out on a date, he would go talk to her father first. Some still do. Fathers would ask the question “What are your intentions towards my daughter?”

It’s still a great question. Both the boy and the girl should have to answer it. What are your intentions in this relationship?

What are some of the reasons why people date?

Some honest answers include:

- To be popular
- Because we have fun together
- So people won’t make fun of me
- Because he/she makes me feel special or loved
- Because he/she is hot
- Because I’m crazy about him/her

But how many people do you know that would give this answer?

- Because I really like him or her and I want to see if this is the person I would like to marry someday.

The fact is, if you’re...

- a. not ready to consider someone as a possible husband or wife
- b. years away from even thinking about marriage, or
- c. the person you want to go out with is someone you would never think about marrying

then how is it honoring them to pursue a romantic relationship with them?

The only true intention you can have at that point is to have fun and satisfy your own desires, no matter how much you feel like you love the other person. And you set yourselves up for dishonoring, transgressing and defrauding one another – physically and emotionally.

The Bible has no category for two people in a romantic relationship where marriage is not the end game. Call it dating or courtship or whatever you like - what matters is the intention of your heart.

My call to each of you is to take one another *seriously*. Don’t treat anyone, friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, as a throwaway person. We are God’s image-bearers and we are called to love and honor one another. That means *everyone*, not just the person you will someday marry.

So what if you’re in a relationship and you’re not sure what each others’ real intentions are?

It might seem scary, but *ask*.

Not sure how? Try “Why do you want to go out with me?”

Guys are notorious for dodging the question, “Where do you see our relationship going?” It’s funny when I think about it, but if a guy squirms and tries to wiggle his way out of this question, it’s time to reconsider.

Sometimes you haven’t really thought about it honestly until you have to answer the question.

Parents should ask too. It’s not old-fashioned. It’s love.

And if you’re in a relationship where you both have good and Godly intentions, realize that the call to honor one another is just as important. Just because you *might* get married doesn’t mean that sexual intimacy is any less a defrauding and dishonoring of one another. You haven’t made the promise yet, you haven’t given your life to him or her yet.

Show her you love her above yourself. Show him you cherish and respect him, and would never consider him unworthy of your life in return.

God’s warning in 1 Thessalonians is real - “because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

God takes each of you seriously, he honors you even if you don’t honor yourself or the other person. He will avenge the dishonor and transgression.

What if we’ve already blown it?

There is healing. God is merciful and ready to give grace super-abundantly where sin abounds. That doesn’t mean you won’t bear the consequences of your sin in this life, but Jesus took your death sentence on himself at the cross.

We’ll talk about this more later, but for now it’s important to know that it starts with remembering who you are in Christ, that you’ve been forgiven, and recognizing what it means to truly love and honor one another.