

Jeremiah 2 is one of many passages in the prophets that connect sexual immorality with idolatry.
Adultery and idolatry go hand in hand.

Why is that?

Why do the prophets talk so regularly about worshiping other gods
in the language of sexual infidelity?

The simple answer is because sexual union – the two becoming one flesh –
is supposed to be a picture of Christ and his bride – the church – us.

There is no human relation more intimate.
And God made us for himself.

Paul will say that the body is not made for sexual immorality, *but for the Lord*,
and the *Lord* (the Lord Jesus!!) for the body.

It’s not just that worshiping other gods is “spiritual adultery.”
It’s also that worshiping the true God is the true fulfillment of our sexuality!

We saw this when we went through the book of Leviticus last spring.

The rules about clean and unclean – holy and profane – particularly in sexual matters,
all surround Leviticus 16 – the Day of Atonement –
the one day when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies –
where – through him – the people of God ascend the hill of the LORD
and dwell (momentarily) with him.

What we’ll see in 1 Thessalonians is that while the OT rituals are no longer in force –
the whole point of clean and unclean – holy and profane –
has found its glorious fulfillment in Jesus Christ!

Indeed – that is why we need to read Jeremiah 3:1 before we move on:

“If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife,
will he return to her?

Would not that land be greatly polluted?

You have played the whore with many lovers;
and would you return to me? declares the LORD.”

A man would have to be crazy to take his wife back after that...

But thanks be to God – he is that crazy!

And he has brought us back to himself!

Psalm 36 reminds us of the steadfast love of the LORD –
and that “in your light do we see light.”

Sing TPH 36A
Read 1 Thessalonians 4

We have seen throughout this series that Paul is centered on the themes of faith hope and love.
We are to keep believing God in our work of faith.
We are to keep loving God and neighbor in our labor of love.
And all of this because of our steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

What is lacking in our faith is endurance.
What is lacking in our faith is simply that our faith has not *yet* persevered to the end!

That is why *hope* is so important in Paul's letter.
Even though he doesn't use the *word* "hope" in chapter 3,
the *concept* of hope was very much the whole point of verses 11-13:

And this hope is spelled out in verse 13:
*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.*

Paul thinks the Christian life as a life lived at the intersection of the cross and resurrection of Christ.
We share in the sufferings of Christ – we share in his trials and tribulation.
But we also share in his resurrection glory –
not just "someday"!
But already – by faith – we see *him* sitting at the right hand of God.
Already – by faith – we have been *raised* with him and are seated *with him* in the heavenlies.

That is our present identity.
I have been crucified with Christ (there is the suffering with him),
and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me –
and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20).

This is our present reality *in Christ*.

Our understanding of this – and our experience of this – is still pretty fragmentary!
It's the "already" and the "not yet."

We are already sanctified in Christ Jesus.
But we are not yet what we shall be!

Over the next couple weeks, we'll look more at what Paul means by this –
because chapter 4 fleshes out what he means by being 'blameless in holiness' –
and what he means by "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

As we'll see next time, "blameless in holiness" is connected to "abounding in love."
Francis Schaeffer used to say that you could counterfeit holiness –
that's called legalism.
And you can counterfeit love –

that's called permissiveness.

But you cannot counterfeit holiness and love together!

Holiness and love.

Justice and mercy.

Holiness is not cold and rigid – but warm and *beautiful!*

(Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!)

Justice is not harsh and cruel.

Neither is mercy a license to get away with anything.

1. How to Walk and to Please God (v1-2)

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

In chapter 4, verse 1, Paul signals a new section with the phrase, “Finally then.”

It communicates the idea that Paul is shifting gears and moving towards his conclusion.

Particularly, Paul is going to give a number of exhortations to the Thessalonians – key points that he wants them to remember.

And the first point is a basic summary of Paul’s doctrine of sanctification.

“We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus,
that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God,
just as you are doing,
that you do so more and more.”

Notice that Paul speaks of our sanctification as including both an *already* – and a *not yet*.

a. “Just as You Are Doing” (v1a)

You are doing this – but we urge you to do it *more and more*.

Our Shorter Catechism says it this way:

“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace,
whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God,
and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.”

Notice how we say it: “*we are renewed in the whole man* after the image of God.”

Our Confession of Faith says this more clearly:

*They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated,
having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them,
are further sanctified, really and personally,
through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection,
by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them:*

How does this sanctification work out in our lives?

Well, listen:

the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,

This is the definitive break with sin that Paul speaks of.

Sin no longer has *dominion* – lordship – over the Christian.

Jesus is Lord – not sin, not death, not the devil.

Jesus is Lord!

The dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed!

The old man is dead!

But that doesn't mean that the struggle is over.

As our Confession of Faith puts it:

and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified;

and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces,

to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. WCF 13.1

Or, as Paul says it here:

“we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us
how you ought to walk and to please God,
just as you are doing,
that you do so more and more.”

b. “Do So More and More” (v1b)

The Christian life – and particularly, our sanctification –

includes both the definitive break with sin – we are no longer who we once were –
but also a progressive “more and more.”

And that “more and more” is what Paul focuses on in verses 3-5.

2. God's Will for Your Sanctification (v3-5)

a. Abstain from Sexual Immorality (v3)

³ *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;*

In some of his epistles, Paul will cast a wider net,

and include a broader array of topics under the heading “sanctification.”

But here he has only one.

For this is the will of God – your sanctification –

namely, that you abstain from sexual immorality;

and conversely, that you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.

There is both the negative: don't do the bad thing!

And also the positive: instead, live as a person of holiness of honor!

Why does Paul focus on sexual immorality?

There are two reasons.

First, it was a major problem in his day!

But as we listen to what Paul says – and indeed,
as we listen to the OT – and as we look around us today –
we realize that this has *always* been a major problem.

Why is it a major problem?

Because it has always been a major problem!

You see this everywhere in Scripture:

the prophets – like Jeremiah – talk about idolatry as a form of spiritual adultery.

Why?

Because God created us after his own image.

And he created us male and female.

So that we might be like him!

In Genesis 5:1 we are told this:

“When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.

Male and female he created them, and he blessed them

and named them Man (Adam) when they were created.

When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness,
after his image, and named him Seth.”

When we have children, we reproduce the image of God!

The sexual relation is how humanity continues to reproduce the image God.

And so not surprisingly, holiness in our sexual relationships
is at the very heart of sanctification.

Now – I realize that sometimes this can sound like we’re just saying,

“You shouldn’t have sex!”

But that’s not what we’re saying.

We are saying that the sexual relation is holy and beautiful and good!

So let’s look at what Paul says here.

We should start with the meaning of the word.

When Paul says that we should abstain from *sexual immorality*,

this is the word *porneia* – which, in Greek, refers particularly to fornication
(sexual relations outside of marriage).

He does not use the word “adultery” because adultery has the specialized meaning
of sexual relations between two people,
at least one of whom is married to someone else.

Sexual immorality – *porneia* – is a broader term that refers to sexual relations outside of marriage.

This is the word used in Acts 15,

where the Jerusalem Council decided that Gentiles do not need to keep the whole Mosaic law. Instead, they wrote to the churches:

²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality [*porneia*]. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Paul's visit to Thessalonica was in Acts 17 – shortly after the Jerusalem Council – so it appears that Paul is focusing on the same theme.

If you are going to turn from idols to the living God –
then you need to turn away from the sexual idolatry that used to control you!

And that's just as true for us!
What is it that fires your imagination?
The gods of the nations want you to fixated on sex –
because sexual images will distract you from the one true God!

One of the main things that distinguished the early Christian from Roman culture
was their sexual ethic – the sexual holiness of the early Christians.
One of the most important reasons for the conversion of Europe –
was the holy sexual ethic of the monastic missionaries.

Here are men and women who are more passionate about Jesus than they are about sex!
Because a holy sexual ethic is not repressive!
A holy sexual ethic burns with a holy fire –
a fire that does not consume and destroy –
but gives life and joy and peace!!

Because, for the Christian, a holy sexual ethic is not fixated on my wife.
Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:13 that food is for the stomach and the stomach for food;
then he adds that
“the body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord,
and the Lord for the body.”

I suspect that most modern Christians would have said,
“if food is for the stomach and the stomach for food”
then “the body is not for sexual immorality, but for marriage!”

But that's not what Paul says.
Paul says that the body is not for sexual immorality (*porneia*) but for the Lord.
And the next verse explains: (1 Cor 6:14-15)
“And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.
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?”

If sexuality was “for marriage” then the single person would have no purpose for their sexuality.

But Paul says that the body is not for sexual immorality – but for the Lord Jesus!

We must see that our sexuality is for the Lord Jesus!

A holy sexual ethic is not repressive – but *expressive*
of our longing for Jesus Christ himself!

Because Paul’s point is *not* simply that we *abstain from sexual immorality* –
but that

b. Possessing or Acquiring a Vessel in Holiness and Honor (v4)

⁴ *that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,*

The translation of verse four is difficult –
because the Greek could mean at least two distinct things!

A wooden translation might read,
“that each should know how to acquire/or possess his vessel in holiness and honor.”

What does that mean?

Vessel could mean your body – or a certain part of your body.

So, for instance, tonight we will be looking at 1 Samuel 21, where David says,
*“Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition.
The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey.
How much more today will their vessels be holy?”*

In the LXX translation of the OT, it’s the same word that Paul uses here.

(In Leviticus, even ordinary, lawful sexual intercourse with your wife rendered you unclean,
not because of anything sinful about sexual relations.

Actually, it’s the opposite.

The sexual relation – the two becoming one flesh –
is a picture of the union of Christ and his bride.

It’s a holy thing!

And the proper use of the seed is for the womb.

So the fact that there’s a bit of a mess afterward is where the idea of uncleanness comes from.)

[There is more in the sermons on Leviticus if you want to know the details!]

The other possibility is that “vessel” could refer to your wife –
as in 1 Peter 3:7, where Peter refers to the wife as the “weaker vessel,”
also in the context of the importance of *honoring* her!
And how you interpret the noun (vessel) will affect how you translate the verb!

The main meaning of the verb is “to acquire” or “to obtain” –

So, for instance, in Ruth 4:10, in the LXX translation,
Boaz says “I have obtained a wife” (same verb as here).

So Paul could be saying, this is the will of God – that you abstain from sexual immortality –
That each one of you know how to obtain a wife in holiness and honor –
(like Boaz, not like the Gentiles
who take concubines and slave girls [or boys]
for their own selfish pleasure).

Or Paul could be using the secondary meaning of the verb:
“that each one of you know how to control his own vessel in holiness and honor” –
practicing chastity – which includes both sexual faithfulness within marriage
and continence in singles.

This is probably one of those cases where Paul had one of the two in mind –
but if you said, “Oh, I thought you meant the other” –
he would say, “Huh, yeah, I can see how you got that. Good point! I like that!”

Because look at how Paul continues:

c. Not in the Passion of Lust like the Gentiles (v5)

⁵ *not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;*

In other words,
whether Paul is talking about marriage (how to acquire and live with a wife),
or whether Paul is talking about sexual self-control in any situation,
the same point works!

You are not supposed to think about marriage “in the passion of lust like the Gentiles.”
And you are not supposed to think about your own sexual desires
“in the passion of lust like the Gentiles.”

There are two words for lust in Greek – and both of them are used right here!
pathos – which refers to an *inordinate* passion – never for a proper affection:
Romans 1:26 – God gave them up to dishonorable passions
Colossians 3:5 – where Paul uses it in his list of inordinate desires
and here – where Paul speaks of the passion of lust.

And that second term is *epithumia* – which is most often translated “desire” –
and out of the 38 uses in the NT, only three are positive!

It ordinarily refers to our *disordered desires*.

I know – since I mentioned the three positive uses, you want to know what they are!
It’s Luke 22:15 – where Jesus tells his disciples:
“With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you.”
With *epithumia* I have desired to eat this Passover with you.”

So what is *proper* desire?
Jesus’s *proper desire* is to eat the Passover with his disciples.

Then in Philippians 1:23, Paul says,
“I have a desire [epithumia] to depart and be with Christ”

Paul’s *proper desire* is to be with Jesus!

And where is the third use?

We just heard it a few weeks ago at the end of chapter 2, verse 17 –

“we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire [epithumia] to see your face.”

What are *proper desires*?

To be with God.

And to be with his people.

What are *proper desires*?

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength –
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Everything else is leading you away from God!

Think of how John says this in 1 John 2:16 –

“For all that is in the world – the desires [epithumia] of the flesh
and the desires [epithumia] of the eyes
and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.
And the world is passing away along with its desires [epithumia],
but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

The desires of the flesh refer to our bodily desires (food, drink, sex, and such).

The desires of the eyes refer to our intellectual desires (knowledge, understanding, etc.).

Pride in possessions refers to our desire for stuff and status (reputation, fame, etc.).

And John says that these things are all passing away.

These things are *not* from the Father.

What is from the Father?

What does God say that we are to be about?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.

Love God with *every part* of you.

Love God so entirely that everything you do is done out of love for him!

And thus, because you love God, you love your neighbor –
who is made in the image of the One you love!

Jesus says the same thing in the sermon on the Mount –

“do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’
or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

Jesus says that even your basic bodily desires for food and drink and clothing
are going to lead you astray – unless you seek *him* first!

What’s happening here in 1 Thessalonians 4 is that Paul is applying the same principle to sexual desire.

You live in a sex-crazed culture.
Just like Paul did.

The Roman author, Cicero, who lived shortly before Paul,
said that in his day, women often counted the years by which husband they had.
The way you got a divorce in Paul’s day was simple:
you walked out the door and said, “I’m not coming back.”
In those days, there was no such thing as “common property.”
If you are married, your property belongs to you individually – not to your spouse.
The emperors issued a decree that spouses were not allowed to give major gifts to each other,
because your property was supposed to be given to your *heirs* –
and since divorce was so common,
if you gave your property away, you might wind up doing harm to your heirs.

Oh, and if you weren’t ready to get married yet –
you could always take a concubine –
a lower class “wife” (we might call it a “live-in girlfriend”)
whose children would not qualify as heirs –
and therefore would simply be “got rid of” when you got married...

And then we need to say that prostitution was not only legal, but encouraged.
It was largely assumed that young men would practice on prostitutes,
whether male or female...

If you are thinking, “That sounds messed up” –
you’d be right!

And that’s why Paul says that he is saying this to warn us

3. God’s Warning for Those Who Transgress (v6-8)

a. The Lord Is an Avenger (v6)

6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter,

The word translated “wrong” means to defraud, exploit, or cheat.
And the masculine singular “brother” refers to any brother or sister.

Sexual immorality – fornication or adultery – in other words, sexual relations outside of marriage –
are not only a transgression against God,
but they also wrong/defraud our brothers and sisters.

And just to be clear, when you look at porn,
you are not only transgressing against God,
but you are also defrauding your brother and sister –

because you are paying for them to do this.

Don't make excuses!

“I didn't pay anything!!”

If nobody's eyeballs were watching, they wouldn't be in business!

We need to be serious about sexual holiness.

We also need to be serious about Paul's *more and more*.

We know from Paul's letters that sexual ethics were a mess in the first century!

And that even in the churches, things were not the way they were supposed to be.

And Paul's response is both serious – and gracious.

He is both just – and merciful.

Holy – and loving.

I spoke recently with a young bachelor who has reached his thirties.

He has had several sexual partners –

and now he regrets all those memories –

all those complications of the two becoming one flesh –

and then pulling back apart again!

And now he wants to get married – but he's got so much baggage,

he's not sure who would take him.

And Paul makes a pretty strong statement of how God looks at this:

because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

Why does God care so much about our sexual practice?

Because he made us for himself!

The body is not for sexual immorality – but for the Lord Jesus!

And the Lord Jesus is for the body!

There is a wholeness and a beauty and a richness in knowing Christ Jesus!

Yeah, the sexual relation is supposed to be a *picture* of that!

And it's a beautiful picture!

But the Lord wants *you* for himself!

Verse 7 is really the heart of the point:

b. God Has Called Us in Holiness – Not Uncleanness (v7)

⁷ *For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.*

The word translated “impurity” is the word translated “uncleanness”
all through the OT.

So, for instance, in Leviticus 15, where it talks about menstrual uncleanness,
and how uncleanness defiles the tabernacle –
that’s this word.

And then in Leviticus 16, where it talks about the high priest making atonement for the holy place
“for the uncleanness of the children of Israel.”

Sexual holiness and right worship are connected in Leviticus.

That’s the reason why Jeremiah weaves together adultery and idolatry.

God’s purpose in history is to join humanity to himself in a holy union.
The sexual relation was given to Adam and Eve as a picture of this!

And when we distort that, we transgress against God – and we wrong our brothers and sisters.

I want to be clear.

The sexual relation is *good*.

It is beautiful.

It is true.

The problem – as with all our desires! –

is that we have perverted something that is good, and true, and beautiful –
and made it into something selfish and twisted and ugly.

But God has not called us for impurity – for uncleanness –

he has not joined us to himself so that we might gratify our sinful lusts.

Rather, he has called us in holiness.

Not just “for” holiness – he’s not just talking about something “someday!”

But *in holiness*.

God has called us out of darkness into light.

We are no longer who we once were.

After all – how are we to walk “more and more” in a way that pleases God?

Because we have not just been called “to holiness” –

we have been called *in holiness*.

c. To Disregard This Is to Disregard God (v8)

⁸ *Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.*

The Holy Spirit – the third person of the Holy Trinity – now dwells in us.

The church is the bride of Christ – we have been joined together in one body,

so that we, as the bride of Christ, might be fruitful and multiply

with our heavenly bridegroom!

The Lord has not called us for impurity – uncleanness –

but in holiness!

Any sort of sexual impurity is entirely inconsistent with this glorious, beautiful calling!

It's important to say also that this means that sexual impurity *within marriage* is also transgression!

Remember, whether Paul means how we obtain a wife, or how we conduct ourselves sexually, the point is that we are to do so "in holiness and honor."

The way I treat my wife sexually must always be "in holiness and honor."

If I am selfish – if I simply seek my own pleasure –
that is not holiness and honor!

Holy sexual conduct means that I engage in marital sexual relations
not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles.

If I lust after my wife, I am not loving her.

Holiness in the bedroom is very difficult.

Keeping my eyes fixed upon Jesus when I am with my wife is a challenge!

But this is what it means to control my vessel in holiness and honor.

It's not just – "don't do the bad things" –

it is every bit as much, be holy in all your conduct!!

But I'll give you a little encouragement!

In those rare moments when I kind of, sort of, approach what Paul is saying...

I catch a glimpse of the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of holiness!