

Guard Your Purity, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 5:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:3

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You probably hear a lot about how much our society has progressed. Whether it's technological or scientific advancement, breakthroughs in medicine or manufacturing, or any other area where progress can be measured, we're eager to see how far we've come.

At the same time, the culture is willfully blind to how it's *regressing*. Sexual perversion and deviance run rampant, and all kinds of immorality are promoted and paraded as if they are something to be proud of.

Our society looks more and more like the no-shame culture of the ancient Roman world—a world devoted to fulfilling perverse lusts and deviant desires. Believers in the New Testament world faced the same kinds of daily temptations we face—perhaps even worse.

But in the midst of that wicked society, Paul gave believers a clear command to abstain from immorality and live holy lives. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, he wrote, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”

People often say they're confused and frustrated with the struggle to find God's will for their lives. In this passage, Paul spells out God's will in no uncertain terms. His will is for our sanctification, our spiritual growth. He wants us to be separate from sin—and specifically, sexual immorality.

Those basic instructions would have flown in the face of the common sexual mentality in Thessalonica, just as they contradict the mindset of our modern culture.

Today we're told that people are basically good, and since they're basically good and sex is a part of being human, sex is an acceptable way to seek pleasure. We're also told it's a fundamental part of our humanity—that it's a biological need that we shouldn't deny ourselves. By that skewed definition, casual sex isn't just a legitimate recreation—it also fulfills our needs.

The same kind of reasoning gave endless license to the no-shame culture of Paul's day. Prostitutes, concubines, mistresses, homosexuals, transvestites, temple harlots, adulterers, and adulteresses—even pedophilia was permitted in the Roman world. That was the perverse and deviant culture in which Paul commanded believers to “abstain from sexual immorality.”

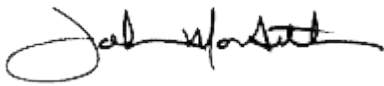
It's not a flexible command, either. There's no room left for interpretation. It's not a question of “How close can I get without sinning?” You can't afford to play those kind of games with temptation.

It's a command for *total* abstinence from all immorality—not just physical. “But I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). We've got to be vigilant to stamp out temptation, even if those temptations are never

consummated. The point isn't to get as close as you can and still avoid it—it's to stay far enough away that you can be completely separate from it.

And it's not as if God hates sex—He designed it. Hebrews 13:4, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." There is no defilement or immorality in that relationship in all its God-intended design. But apart from that, abstinence is what God commands. As the writer of Hebrews makes clear at the end of that verse, "Fornicators and adulterers God will judge."

It's a difficult command, especially in a culture so given over to pleasure seeking and shameless excess. But it's a command that comes with built-in encouragement. The Lord wouldn't order us to abstain from sexual sin if we weren't able to obey. Next time we'll look at Paul's instructions for following God's command.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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