

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
June 27, 2010

Demonstrated in Action

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Key verse: “Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

Do you know what the United Methodist Church believes about sex outside of marriage? “We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.” (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, parag. 161f)

Sexual relations, says our church, should be practiced only within the boundaries of a committed marriage of one man and one woman. Does that sound hopelessly unrealistic for people in 2010? It is interesting to know that, in the first-century world of the New Testament, this sexual ethic seemed equally unrealistic to many people.

Bible scholar William Barclay writes of that period of history: “In Greece, immorality had always been quite blatant. Long ago Demosthenes had written, ‘We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.’ So long as a man supported his wife and family, there was no shame whatsoever in extra-marital relationships.” (*The Daily Study Bible*)

In the first-century world of the early Christian movement, not only was adultery widely accepted. The idea of abstaining from sex before marriage was considered an unreasonable restriction. To Christ followers living in this culture of sexual permissiveness, the Apostle Paul echoed God’s call to a higher standard:

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you” (vv. 3-8).

Here the Bible gives at least four reasons why Christians should avoid sexual immorality:

1. Sexual sin harms others (v.6a). Adultery always wrongs the spouse and children. Premarital sex not only opens the door to unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. It also wrongs the future marriage partner by unlawfully taking something that ought to be given only in the marriage bed to one's husband or wife.

2. The Lord is “an avenger” of sexual sin (v.6b). To willfully and persistently live in sexual immorality invites painful consequences, even God's punishment, according to Scripture. Often, God's “punishment” of sexual sin is to let the offenders suffer the natural consequences of their wrong behavior.

3. God calls us to holiness (v.7). Christians are to be “set apart” unto God for His purposes, not to live according to the morals of a secular culture.

4. Sexual sin is against God (v.8). To live in sexual immorality is to reject God and grieve the Holy Spirit.

If all of this sounds too harsh, we should always remember that God can forgive any and every sin. God will forgive sexual sin when a person turns from it and receives God's forgiveness. To be forgiven, however, does not automatically mean to be exempted from the consequences of sexual sin.

So, in a culture that mocked the Christian sexual ethic, Paul held God's standards high. So should we.

In the sexually permissive culture in which we live, it is always encouraging to hear the testimony of young people who, by God's grace, are finding victory over sexual sin. “Saving sex for marriage,” some would say, “That's just unrealistic!” Tell that to Shaun Alexander. The NFL running back and former football star for the University of Alabama has shared openly his struggles to save sex for marriage:

At the University of Alabama, I was meeting women from a lot of different backgrounds. My mother had taught me never to exploit women—that sex was meant only for marriage—and to treat women with respect. I knew the boundary lines it wasn't right to cross. I knew if I didn't keep my focus, I could fall. And it could occur at anytime.

One time it almost did. It happened the first year of college when I'd gone home for a visit. To protect her privacy, I'll call her Sherron. One night we were alone in my room while my mom was gone. We were kissing, and I thought seriously about having sex with her. But something in me kept whispering, This isn't right.

Just then the phone rang. It was my mother, and she asked, “Is everything good, Shaun?”

“Uh...yeah, Mom,” I said. “It's good.”

“What's going on?” she asked.

"Oh, nothing," I answered. "Sherron is here and we're going to go out and eat and probably go to a movie. Something like that."

"OK, that's fine," Mom said. "I'm going to stay in Covington with your grandma, so I'll call you tomorrow."

As I hung up, thoughts raced through my mind. What am I doing here? Something isn't right about this. This is so easy and nobody else will know. But I'll know, and God will know. It was more than wrestling with my thoughts. I was in a full-out fight. I had to decide who my body would serve.

Just then, Sherron leaned close to me and whispered, "I've brought condoms."

My thoughts were racing. Mainly I was thinking. Am I one of those guys who says he loves Jesus but folds when it's easy or when he won't get caught?

"No, we can't do this," I finally said.

"Why not?"

"We're not supposed to."

"What does that mean?" Sherron said.

I jumped up and pulled her to her feet. "It means we're going out."

I hurried her out to the car, and we drove to the mall. That was the closest I ever got to having sex before marriage. Mom's phone call had kept me from making a big mistake. Many times I've been grateful to my mother for calling exactly when she did (from Shaun's book, Touchdown Alexander).

No, it's not easy to live God's way. It never has been. But it's worth it!

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication." (Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)