



Transforming our Desires (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

The Apostle Paul likened marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church, teaching that a husband desires respect from his wife, and a wife desires to be loved by her husband (Ephesians 5:31-33). Still, our culture is performing an all-out assault on this covenant, exploiting the desires of both genders. Since a man is attracted by sight, he risks falling prey to the pandemic of porn that is infiltrating western males, both young and old, at an unprecedented rate. Because a woman is attracted by what she hears, she risks an attraction to chat rooms or another male who will listen intently to her feelings.

Paul taught that desires are not for our gratification, nor our elimination, but for our transformation. God's design is that we would experience His desires: holy, sanctified, and fully surrendered to Him (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8). This transformation process begins by fully surrendering our desires to pleasing God with our lives: "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2).

(1) Desires are not for our gratification: Avoid sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). "Avoid" meant "to empty out." "Sexual immorality," *porneia* in Greek, implied both fornication prior to marriage and adultery during marriage. In essence, it is any sexual gratification outside marriage. The writer of Hebrews reminded his readers to keep the marriage bed pure, free from sexual immorality, meaning no foreign substance would be brought into the holy place of intimacy (Hebrews 13:4).

The Greek sex culture was perverted, especially in Thessalonica, even at its religious sites. Marriages were arranged between girls 13 to 14 years-old and men in their mid-twenties. Often times, they never had met. Consequently, it was expected that married men would have sexual relations with prostitutes, female slaves, or mistresses outside the marriage. Demosthenes (384-322 BC) wrote, "Mistresses we keep for our pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day physical well-being, and wives to bear us legitimate children and to serve as trustworthy guardians over our households." The Stoic philosopher Cato (95-46 BC) praised men who gratified their sexual desires with a prostitute rather than another man's wife. As a result, income from prostitution was substantial for the economy, especially for innkeepers and cook shop owners.



Judaism struggled with sexual immorality as well. In first century Judaism, women were stereotyped as instigators whenever sexual sins were committed and were labeled as lacking the spiritual and moral fiber needed to uphold the law. See the absence of the woman's lover in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Allowances were made for men who experimented with sexual adventures, but this was forbidden for women. Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) Emperor of Rome instituted the "Julian Laws" in a failed attempt to reform sexual misconduct.

For the purpose of illustration, let's examine the process of an electrical transformer. An electrical transformer either steps down or steps up the voltage it receives as determined for its use on the other side. This is a picture of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who either steps down or steps up the electrical current that we bring to Him. "Sanctification," or "holy," *hagiasmos* in Greek, is used four times in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. Therefore, Paul is communicating that, in order to be holy, we need to take sexual temptation to the Holy Spirit who will step down the voltage and transform it to empower us to avoid sexual immorality. To believers in Rome, Paul taught that they should not conform to the world, but be transformed to God's holiness (Romans 8:29). This has always been in the heart of God for His people. Peter referenced the Old Testament law when he wrote: "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16; cf. Leviticus 11:44).

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Is there any sexual temptation at the forefront of your life? Are you clicking where you shouldn't? Do you take extra time with a co-worker that's leading to more and more of a physical attraction and an emotional connection? Surrender that temptation to the Holy Spirit who will transform your desires for your spouse, or future spouse if you are single, and empower you to avoid sexual immorality.

(2) Desires are not for our elimination: Control your body (1 Thessalonians 4:4-5)

"That each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:4-5). "Control," *ktasthai* in Greek, meant "to acquire," or, in our illustration, "to step up," in a manner to honor God through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. What separates the



fully surrendered from the partially surrendered is not superior self-control, (single phase electricity for the sake of our illustration), but intimacy with God. In other words, we do not pretend that we do not have the desires; rather, we humbly submit them to the Holy Spirit. Paul said that the heathen lust because they do not know, or experience intimacy with, God in their hearts. Jesus preached that sexual immorality flowed from one's heart (Matthew 15:19).

God's design is for a husband to leave, cleave, and weave his life with his wife's (Genesis 2:24). During sexual intimacy, endorphins and enkephalins rush to the excitement and risk center of a man's brain, the preoptic neuron, filling it to the highest possible level. A man's brain glues what he sees during sexual intimacy to what he is experiencing. God's idea is for this to be only his wife (Douglas Weiss, *Sex, Men, and God*, Lake Mary, Florida: Siloam Press, 2002, 15-16).

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What would it look like if the Holy Spirit would step up your desires to honor God? How could you learn to control your body with a heart that is intimate with Christ?

(3) Desires are for our transformation: Live a holy life in the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:6-8)

“And that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 4:6-8). Paul called believers to love others by not harming them through sexual sin. He warned of God's punishment for sexual immorality and called the church to love God and live pure and holy lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice the present tense, “Gives you his Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 4:8). Paul tied this giving to his original thought of living in order to please God (1 Thessalonians 4:1). The Holy Spirit is our spiritual transformer, empowering us to live in a manner that honors God with our bodies.

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Are you ready to move from a single-phase life, going it alone, to a three-phase life that experiences a fully surrendered relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Make a commitment today to tap into the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who will step down



sexual temptations, helping you to avoid sexual immorality; step up holiness to help you control your body in a manner pleasing to God; and be transformed to loving your spouse, loving God, and loving others. God will use three elements to make you new again.

(1) The Spirit of God

Pray. Confess any temptation and seek His power to transform every temptation into obedience (2 Corinthians 10:5). Ask Him to redirect your desires to your spouse.

See or hear everyone at the heart level. Men, refocus your eyes from any temptation to your wife. Become an active participant with your wife and daughters when it comes to dressing modestly. Ask the question, “Is it too tight, too short, or too revealing?”

Couples, pray audibly together to increase your intimacy with each other and Christ.

(2) The Word of God

Quote Scripture to battle temptation, just as Jesus did (Matthew 4:1-11).

Couples, study the Bible together to grow in wisdom.

(3) The People of God

Experience authentic community within a small group of believers who can provide a safe place to confess and restore.

Conclusion

Desires are not for our gratification, nor our elimination, but for our transformation. The result of surrendering to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit will be wives who respect their husbands; husbands who intimately love their wives; and marriages, families, and communities who love God.