

3b – *that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;*

Having begun this pericope with the general exhortation to become more and more set-apart to God, i.e., to excel in living out the life of faith in Yeshua by keeping the commandments and instructions which Yeshua Himself gave to the apostles, Paul now emphasizes several primary and foundational aspects which will inevitably characterize the life of the believer who is truly committed to Yeshua as Lord and Savior. In the ancient world of Greece, the pagan culture was characterized by open sexual immorality. What is more, even “marriage” itself was heavily influenced by the culture, for in the Greco-Roman society, marriages were usually family arrangements rather than an attachment fostered by the wife and husband. Typically men in their middle twenties were paired with young women barely in their teens, whom they usually had never met. So it was expected that married men would have sexual relations with other women, such as prostitutes, female slaves, or mistresses from lower social classes. Note what Demosthenes, (384–322 BCE), who was clearly one of the most favored of the Greek orators and a prominent citizen of Athens, wrote in describing the “marriage relationship” between husband and wife:

Mistresses we keep for our pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day physical well-being, and wives in order to bear us legitimate children and to serve as trustworthy guardians over our households.¹

In a society marked by such decedent perspectives, one can only imagine what an entire “turn-about” needed to be undergone by those whom God saved through the message of the Gospel and the gift of repentance and faith.

Thus, Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonian community of believers were so very pertinent in order to show them that God’s perspective of marriage was far different than what they had grown up with in their pagan society. Unfortunately, we see a growing deprecation of marriage in our own society and we must, therefore, be diligent to teach our children God’s definition of marriage and we do so first and foremost by living out a God-given form of marriage for them to see. This means committing ourselves to love our spouse with the same kind of love with which God has loved us. And the more we realize,

¹ *Orations*, 59.122.

understand, and recognize the love of God in our own lives, the more we are strengthened, encouraged and enabled to love each other in our marriages.

One of the most important avenues to strengthening a marriage is to be diligent in applying the Scriptures to all aspects of one's life. This means not only being faithful in reading and understanding the Scriptures, but also by lovingly applying the God's truths to our lives and genuinely caring for each other in all of life's issues.

Note the inspired words of Peter:

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any [of them] are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. Your adornment must not be *merely* external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. You husbands in the same way, live with your wife in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. (1Pet 3:1–7)

Of course, Paul's words in our text, are for all believers in Yeshua, whether married or single, for his inspired words are exhorting all believers to abstain from sexual immorality. This means keeping oneself from anything that would condone sexual immorality, which, in our modern society includes all manner of things: immorality portrayed in magazines, on the TV or movie screen, etc. It is not required to "escape" society and sequester oneself in a so-called "safe place," for wherever we are, we bring our sinful nature with us. Rather, to live a sanctified life as a shining witness in a fallen world, we must consistently "put on the armor of God" to be strengthened in our faith and walk with the Lord through prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and regular fellowship with other believers (Eph 6:10–18, Heb 10:25).

4 that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

In dealing with the blatant and societal “acceptance” of what God considers “immoral,” believers living in that ancient Greco-Roman culture needed to understand and affirm that such immorality is entirely contrary to God’s holiness and His will, as made clear in the words of scriptures. Such a turning from the widely accepted “culture” was (and is) a most difficult reality for many new believers in Yeshua.

This particular text has been noted by many commentators as one of the more difficult to clearly understand and explain. The first major question is how to understand the word “vessel” (σκεῦος, *skeuos*). The question is simply this: does “his own vessel” refer to his own body or to his relationship with his wife? But while the answer to the question is somewhat elusive, it seems that the context would favor understanding the phrase “his own vessel” (τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος) as referring to his own body and that he “give himself” fully and only to his wife, within the loving and giving aspect of marriage.

But what does Paul mean by “possess his own vessel”? While the commentators admit that this verse is difficult in fully understanding Paul’s meaning, it seems best to take “possess his own vessel” as meaning that a man of genuine faith must recognize and be grateful that his own body is the “temple of the Ruach.” Therefore the true believer in Yeshua must be committed to living a life that honors him and which therefore stands against and forgoes participating in any aspect of sexual immorality, whether in actions, thoughts, or what one allows to come into one’s life. Paul uses the phrase “sins against his own body” in connection with his exhortation to men of genuine faith that they live a sanctified life, maintaining sexual relations with their wife only. While the term “vessel” is not used, the picture of the body being a “temple” in which the Ruach HaKodesh abides, offers a similar metaphor.

Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body *with her*? For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1Cor 6:16-20)

...*in sanctification and honor* – If we understand the phrase “to possess his own vessel” to mean “to guard one’s own self” and thus to grow in one’s ability to “say no to sinful passions” and to submit to the leading of the Ruach, then growing in one’s desire and ability to please the Lord in all things not only honors Him, but also honors one’s wife. Thus, in like manner, a marriage in which husband and wife honor each other as God intends, also honors the Lord, for such a marriage extols the very design of God, that the two should be one, and models the eternal reality that all who are brought to true saving faith have a unity with God that is eternal.

Thus, Paul’s words, *in sanctification and honor*, must ultimately be understood to mean that when the marriage relationship is lived out as God intends, not only have the man and wife come to enjoy a relationship that is set apart for them alone, but is also sanctified unto God, for in that marriage relationship the wonder and glory of “two becoming one” is seen and realized. And it is in the God-given blessing of marriage that “oneness” is both portrayed and experienced, thus offering a picture of the eternal oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For in the Creation narrative of the Scriptures we read:

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Gen 2:23–24)

Such “oneness,” of course, is seen in children of the marriage. Such “unity” described as “becoming one” is not only the reality of marriage as God intends it, but also a revelation of the mystery of God as well. For Yeshua states: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). True unity is seen when the design and purpose of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior is realized in the lives of those whom He has redeemed.

5–6 not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is *the* avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*.

... *not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God*; – Here Paul uses the term “the Gentiles” (τὰ ἔθνη, *ta ethnē*) to describe “un-

believers,”¹ i.e., people who have no sense of worshipping the one true God of Israel. Moreover, Paul characterizes the unbelieving Gentiles as “those who do not know” God (τὰ μὴ εἰδότες τὸν θεόν, *ta mē eidota ton theon*). The use of the word “know” in this context means “to have a covenant relationship with God,” a relationship that only comes by exercising saving faith in God and the payment for sin procured by Yeshua, administered by the work of the Ruach.

In fact, all pagan worship, while being unknown to those who engage in it, is actually the worship of demons.

They made Him jealous with strange *gods*; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known... (Deut 32:16–17)

Indeed, it is the goal of Satan, the enemy of mankind, to trick them into thinking that the “gods” they worship and serve are really there to help them and give them what they want. Adhering to such deception leads to an eternity apart from God, as subjects of His holy wrath.

Some might think that in our modern world, there are none who actually worship demons, but we know that this is not the case. While many may not call it “worship,” they nonetheless have their lives filled with entertainment, awe, and admiration for the things they experience through “connections” with the unseen realm of the enemy, even if they never consider it as such. Let us never forget what the Scriptures teach us about the enemy:

Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1Pet 5:8)

...*that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter* – Commentators take varying interpretations of this phrase, but generally there are two possibilities in defining what Paul means by “defrauding his brother.” Some take it to refer to business dealings, that among the believing community one should “pay what is owed” or “do what has been promised in a business transaction.” Another understanding of this text, however, seems far more in line with the overall context,

1 Cf. *BDAG*, ἔθνος, 2. the nations, gentiles, unbelievers (in effect=‘polytheists’).

which is that Paul is still referring to matters of immorality and has not changed his focus to business dealings. This would mean that he is referring to either a man or woman who is seeking sexual relations with someone who is already married. Hendriksen gives good reason to take this understanding of our text.

Our reasons for adopting the rendering, “that no one go beyond what is proper and defraud his brother in this matter” are as follows: When a subject is introduced with so much feeling, an abrupt change to something quite different (like “in business”) is not to be expected. Paul is speaking about sanctification, and in that connection, about abstaining from immorality and uncleanness.¹

We should note that the phrase “that no man transgress” employs a term found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures, i.e., *ὑπερβαίνειν* (*hyperbainein*), which means “to go beyond a high point, to transgress by going beyond proper limits in behavior, to trespass.”² It would appear, then, that Paul is talking about someone who seeks to have a close, conjugal, relationship with a person who is already married. The “high point” to which Paul is referring here is that God ordained the sanctity of marriage. Thus, when Paul writes of “defrauding” one’s brother, it seems most likely that he is not referring simply to “stealing” an object but rather to seeking a relationship with a married person and thus attempting to destroy the bond of marriage which is highly sacred in God’s eyes.

... because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. – In the pagan world in which the Thessalonian community resided, the common and acceptable view of “marriage” was in no way aligned with God’s divine teaching regarding marriage. Polygamy was common and fully accepted in the pagan world, along with all manner of impure and debased aspects of sexual practices. What Paul is emphasizing in this text is that the relationship of husband and wife within their marriage is to be a living picture of the relationship that Yeshua has with His bride, the *ekklesia*, which is a relationship that cannot and will not be broken nor in any way torn asunder by an enemy.

These strong words of Paul, given to the Thessalonian community, are just as pertinent to believers in all ages, as well as in our modern

1 *Hendricksen-Kistemaker NT Commentary*, 1Thess., (Baker, 1955), p. 101.

2 *BDAG*, p. 1032.

world. One of the prime motivations all of us who are married should have well in mind, is that ultimately our marriage relationship should portray the eternal love of God for all who are His through faith in Yeshua.

the Lord is the avenger in all these things – That Paul emphasizes the fact that the Lord is the “avenger” (ἐκδικος, *ekdikos*) of all things includes the fact that anyone, and particularly someone who professes to be a believer in Yeshua, who seeks to disrupt the bond between a married couple, can expect to experience the wrath and/or discipline of God. This is because the marriage bond is a sacred covenant, and even if in our modern society a great many have jettisoned such a concept, the truth remains. Here is another time the scriptures emphasize the very high value of marriage. This does not mean that those who have experienced divorce, or a break-up of their marriage, are outside of God’s ability and desire to forgive. No! When true repentance and a heart that seeks God’s grace approaches Him to be forgiven, the answer is always “Forgiven!” Yeshua died to pay for all of the sins of all those He would save eternally. But the point still must be emphasized: marriage is to be viewed as being for a lifetime and thus both husband and wife ought to strive to make this the reality.

... just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. – This indicates that when Paul was there in Thessalonica, he taught God’s perspective on marriage, and undoubtedly made it clear that marriage as God intends is far different than the pagan practices. Once again, this reminds us, even in our modern world, that we must constantly go to the Scriptures to learn, be reminded, and practice God’s commandments and His desire for us as we live in this fallen world.