

Holiness

1Thessalonians 4:1-7

The Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Let us talk about fornication.

Fornication is any sexual relation outside of marriage.

If two people are dating and they are engaged in sex, that is fornication. If two people date only one time and have sex that one time, that is fornication. If two people are living together, but are not yet married and they are engaged in sex, that is fornication. If two people are engaged to be married and they are engaged in sex or have sex, that is fornication in our culture.

Our culture is not like medieval cultures or ancient cultures where an engagement was tantamount to being married. That is why when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit he resolves to divorce her even though at the time when he resolves to divorce her she is only his fiancée and not yet his wife. In their culture and society engaged people were considered married. Our culture and society does not consider them married. When a couple breaks off an engagement they are simply breaking off an engagement. They are not getting a divorce. Therefore in our culture and society if two people are engaged to be married and they are having sex even if it is only once, it is fornication.

Homosexual unions no matter what their circumstances are not marriages. It is a lie to call them marriages because under no circumstances are they marriages. Therefore any homosexual union is fornication.

By the command of the Lord given by the apostles lust, this time understood narrowly as sexual desire, is also fornication. Use of pornography or even having a simple nude or swimsuit model picture at your disposal is lust. It is therefore fornication. Looking at anyone under any circumstances other than your spouse for sexual desire is fornication.

Adultery is fornication. Adultery is a subset of fornication.

Now that we know what fornication is abstain from it. That is the instruction the apostles gave through the Lord Jesus. Abstain from fornication.

I realize that the translation says, "Abstain from sexual immorality." The problem with that translation is that "sexual immorality" means immorality that has to do with sex. Therefore once you figure out what the words mean you are no more enlightened about what it is talking about than before you considered what the words meant. Fornication has a definition. I have given it to you. Abstain from it.

Do not live like the Gentiles do in the passion of lust. They do not know God. That is why they engage in the passion of lust. It is because they do not know God. Therefore if you are engaged in fornication, you do not know God. It doesn't matter if you attend Divine Service every Sunday, if you are engaged in fornication, you do not know God. You are no better than the unbelievers. You engage in all of their passionate lust.

I will give you one caveat to the statement I just made. The reason that you do not know God is my fault. I am your pastor. God has called me to instruct you about Him. I have failed to do so. You do not know God. You engage in fornication in the passion of the lust of the Gentiles. I don't know what else to do except to repent and instruct you on God.

God is holy.

The holiness of God is that quality of God that God is in and of Himself. We have knowledge. God is all knowing. We have strength. God is all powerful. We live for a period of time. God is eternal. There are many things about God that resemble us in one way or another except that He is perfect at it and we are not.

Holiness is that quality of God that He is in and of Himself. He only is holy. If we are holy, it is only because He has bestowed His holiness upon us.

God is life. Therefore God's holiness and life go together. God is perfect in morality and goodness. Therefore God's holiness and perfection or goodness go together.

Because of this God's holiness will mean life and perfection. A lack of God's holiness means death and sin.

When God met us at Mount Sinai, He put His presence in the tent in our midst. When He put His presence in the tent at Mount Sinai, He put His holiness there. It is not like God could leave it behind. Once God put His holiness in the tent at Mount Sinai, anything that came into His presence had to be holy or it would die. If something could be holy and be in His presence it would live and be perfect also. Those are qualities of His holiness.

Therefore God arranged the creation around the tent when He deigned to dwell in the tent in our midst when He met with us at Sinai. And folks lest your minds drift in this sermon: You are Israel. You are sons of Abraham through faith in Christ Jesus. I don't want to preach a whole separate sermon on that today. We have a lot to take in as it is. Since you are Israel, it was in your midst that He placed His presence when He put His presence in the tent at Mount Sinai. He arranged the creation around this tent.

Those things which were holy were permitted to approach Him in the tent and be in His presence. If anyone or anything was holy, they were filled with life and perfection also that came from God. God's holiness will not be without His life and perfection.

Those things which were of death or of sin were not permitted to approach His presence. They were not holy. If the things of death and of sin were in His presence, they would die in His presence immediately. They would not have life.

So God gave us all of these instructions which we had to follow so that we would not find ourselves in His presence with any of the things of sin and death upon us. And these makes sense because when God commanded us in the Garden not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He told us that on the day we ate of it we would surely die. Therefore a lack of communion with the word of God and death go together. One cannot have one without the other. Therefore sin and death are two facets of the same thing. They are inseparable. Neither of these or the things of them may be in the presence of God or the thing or person who has such unholy things upon him will die in the fire of God's wrath.

Take Nadab and Abihu as your examples. They offered unauthorized incense before the Lord in the tent. It was a simple little matter. But by doing so, they were living outside of the word of the Lord and by doing so were not holy. They did this in the holy presence of the Lord in the tent and so fire came out from the presence of the Lord and killed them.

The Lord gave us all kinds of laws and regulations when He put His presence in the tent in the wilderness. He told us to keep all of the things of sin and death out of His presence lest His fires should consume us.

His rules were very comprehensive. He told us not to eat vultures and come into His presence because vultures deal with the things of death. If we were to eat a vulture and then come into His presence the things of death would have been upon us and His fires would consume us.

He also told us not to come into His presence with certain sicknesses upon us. Sicknesses are preludes to death. Those sicknesses which linger were not to be brought into His presence. If they were then we would be bringing the things of death into His presence and His fire would consume us.

He also told us to avoid sexual immorality. He took the time at the time of the tent in the wilderness to outline all of the sexual immorality that would bring the things of death upon us. It would bring the things of sin upon us. But then the things of death and the things of sin are the same things. They are not different things as we learned when we ate of the fruit of the tree in the garden.

The Lord told us not only to avoid fornication, but also bestiality and incest. If anyone stepped into the presence of God with those things on him, in other words while he was committing those things, the fires of God would consume him.

Who could do any of this? Who could keep any of these commands? These are simply some of His commands. I have not given the chief commands which were required to be kept in order for any of us to stand in His presence. For in the exact same law in which He told us to abstain from eating vultures and from fornication of all kinds, He also commanded us not to take revenge and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And the heart of this law is this command: Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also told us that from Sinai. If these were not kept and we stepped into His presence in the tent, His fire would consume us.

In fact from His law it was evident that if we did eat vultures or commit fornication or did take revenge, then we were not loving Him above all things because these are things that He desired for our lives.

Without His mercy, we would never have stood in His presence in the tent or anywhere else. But God is not without grace. Back when He set up the tent and put His presence in it, He gave us a system whereby we who were unholy would become holy. It was all of the sacrifices that He instituted. By the blood of those sacrifices anyone who was sick or who had eaten a vulture or who had fornicated or who had taken revenge or in any way did not love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, was forgiven and permitted to enter into the presence of God without God sending His fire to consume them. And of course once a person is in the presence of God a person is in the presence of life and perfection and life and perfection come to them.

Therefore God's forgiveness was not merely God overlooking our sins. God's forgiveness was the impartation of His holiness. You cannot fool God. You cannot hide yourself under cover of righteousness and expect God to be fooled by that. If you are a sinner and you try to hide under the cloak of righteousness, God's holiness will still send fire to consume you. You actually have to be righteous in His presence. Therefore when the sacrifices that God instituted among us at Mount Sinai forgave us of our sins, they were actually in fact imparting God's holiness to us. When they imparted God's holiness to us, they imparted His perfection and His life as well. We stood in the presence of God and we rejoiced.

But then remember we did that for hundreds of years. Remember that? We offered those sacrifices for hundreds of years. Some of the wiser among us began to question how this could be possible. Oh to be sure, the animal sacrifices imparted holiness because God said that they would. No one questioned that. What was questioned was how animal sacrifices in and of themselves could impart holiness. There had to be something behind these sacrifices that made it all work. And remember what God did? He sent us the prophets and the prophets told us that there was something behind these sacrifices that made them all work. It was the sacrifice of His Christ, His Son.

The prophets spoke of His sacrifice. They predicted its coming. It made sense. The sacrifices worked when they worked because they were pointing ahead to Him, but when the Christ, the Son of God came, He blew our minds away. His sacrifice was so complete and so total, that the animal sacrifices paled in comparison. And they were just pointing to Him anyway.

The sacrifice of the Christ, the Son of God, therefore was so perfect and complete that it brought holiness not only to us, but also to all of the creation. Everything that the sacrifice of the Christ, the Son of God, touched became holy. Anyone that His body and His blood touched became holy. Through His body and blood He sustains us in that holiness just like He did the consumption of the animals sacrifices of old. Because His sacrifice exceeded theirs in an extraordinary way, it gave us holiness and by giving us holiness gave us life and perfection. It fitted us to stand in His presence wherever He decided to put it and so God no longer kept His presence in the tent or in the temple in Jerusalem. He put His presence where His Christ, His Son, was and is. People are in that presence and stand in that presence and His fire does not consume them. When they stand in His presence, they stand in His holiness and therefore in the presence of life and perfection. When this holiness is imparted to them, they are alive and perfect. The fires of God cannot touch them.

Not only did the Christ, the Son of God, do this for humanity, He sanctified the entire creation. Death and imperfection were purged clean out of the creation. We could tend to the sick without any violation to the holiness that He had given to us and impart life to them. We could eat vultures if it suited us. Most of us were content to start eating pork and call it good. In fact we could do anything that the law at once had forbidden because the holiness of God had so transformed us and fitted us for life in His presence that all things became lawful for us by the sacrifice of the Christ, the Son of God.

But in spite of the fact that all things were lawful, we found that not all things were beneficial. We found that while the holiness of God was not violated by the consumption of pork, it could be violated by other things.

The profound difference was that now that the creation had been sanctified for the presence of God, God no longer limited His presence to the tent at Sinai or the temple in Jerusalem. We found that the presence of God went wherever His Christ went because wherever His Christ went the sanctifying power of His sacrifice went. Therefore wherever the Christ was, that is where God was with His holiness. But Christ was in us and we were in Him! Christ was in us as soon as we ate of His sacrifice. As soon as we ate of His body and drank of His blood Christ was in us. Therefore God placed His presence in our very bodies. Our bodies became temples of His Holy Spirit. We found that when we assembled our bodies together into congregation that became also the place where the Christ was and therefore God put His presence in the midst of the congregation. When His presence was there so was His holiness. When His holiness was there so was His perfection and life! Everlasting life and perfection were and are there being given out by God constantly in the sacrifice of Jesus.

So while eating a vulture and touching a dead body and eating pork no longer defiled because the creation had been sanctified, we realized that our bodies were different in the sanctification. They were different because we were now the tent. And while all things were lawful for us in the holiness which God had imparted not all things were beneficial.

Fornication is not beneficial.

Fornication does not benefit the neighbor. Fornication harms the neighbor. Fornication brings death. In fact the whole point of fornication in all its forms brings death.

Homosexual unions bring death sooner to those engaged in such unions and they bring forth no new life and in fact are by definition incapable of bringing forth new life.

Sustained fornication as we practice it in the United States brings forth no new life. Those who engage in fornication do so for the selfish enjoyment of pleasure and make sure that no children come of it by contraceptives. And if a child should come of it because of the failure of the contraceptive such children are considered to be mistakes or surprises to their parents who because they are not married are not prepared to bring forth the fullness of life for that child.

Countless studies even by our modern science have proved the unsurprising and obvious result that children have the best life possible when they are being raised by their birth parents who are married to each other for their entire lives. Fornication then does not give any child conceived the fullness of life. It gives them part of a life. It is therefore unholy and not beneficial. Anyone who engages in it does not know God.

Adultery is the same. It shakes the one union foundation of mother and father thereby giving the children less of a life. Divorce is the same. It gives the children less of the fullness and the goodness of life. It is not beneficial. Anyone who engages in these things does not know God.

God did not call you simply to be spared His consuming fire.

God called you in and to holiness.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.