

Wednesday, July 15, 2020

SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE

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TITLE: Choosing Control Pt. 1

Isn't it amazing, how in one moment, life seems normal? It seems status quo. Everything is good. And then you just turn your eyes for a moment, only to come back, and it is pure chaos. You have lost control. Well, it's kind of funny, because most of us, when I think about it, we're not prepared to respond properly, are we? We tend to react when life goes crazy.

When it's crazy, we tend to freak out and yell. For some of us though, when life is out of control, it becomes so overwhelming that we become plagued with fear and anxiety. And all we want to do is sit down and give up, because we've lost all hope. Yet, for others, I've found that when life seems to be out of control, that's when we make an excuse to sin. It's not uncommon for us at the church to hear something like this, "You know, you just don't understand my spouse. They don't respect me. They don't love me. They're so controlling, so pornography is the only way I can cope." Sometimes we hear something like, "You just don't get my boss. My workplace is always putting more and more responsibility on me, yet they take away all my resources. The only way I can get just a little bit of peace and relaxation is by drinking." It's not uncommon for us to hear something like this, "You just don't understand my situation, that we just don't make enough money. The only way that we can have the things that we really want is by having credit cards. I mean, that's why God gave us credit cards, right?"

Do you hear what each person is saying in their statements? What they are really saying is this: "I know what I'm going to do, or am doing, is wrong, but I'm going to do it because of life's circumstances." In other words, they feel it's okay to lose control, when they have lost their control, but it's not just them. Is it?

We are all guilty of sinning and making bad choices every day. You and I are tempted to lose control because of life's circumstances. But I wonder, isn't there a better way to live? Is this the way a Christian should behave? Is there a way to walk through life, maintaining control while pleasing God? Well, that is exactly what we want to figure out today.

In case this is your first time listening to the Bible teaching here at Back to the Bible, we're in the middle of a series called Character Over Compromise. We're trying to look at the way the Bible prescribes for us to live, because we are all going to have to choose either character OR compromise. In other words, will you choose to live by God's best standards, or will you compromise and choose your *own* way?

Today we're going to focus in on the Apostle Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, and find three ways that we can walk through life with control, regardless of what happens to us, or what is happening around us. So let's turn to First Thessalonians, beginning in Chapter Four, verse one.

Now, before I read this Scripture, let me give you some context. In Chapter three, Paul was simply telling his Thessalonian brothers and sisters that he really loves them and he really cares for them. He misses them, He prays for them, and he prays for them fervently. Then, at the end of Chapter three, he closes with a prayer. That prayer goes something like this: God, I miss them. Please help me be reunited with them soon. But also, I pray for the Thessalonian church, that their love would overflow; in fact, I pray it would abound, so that people who don't know you as Savior would come to know you.

Now, let's pick it up in Chapter four, verse one (ESV), "Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (Vs. 1-8)

In verse one, Paul says, "Church, you're doing a really good job of walking with God. You're doing a good job, but don't stop walking in such a way."

Many of us, we get to a point in our life where we feel like we're doing pretty good, don't we? And then we can tend to become complacent and let it ride. Paul is telling the Thessalonian church, don't do that. You're walking with God. You're pleasing God. Keep doing it. Do not become complacent, keep improving. But then Paul really gets to the main point of the section. He says that the will of God, for the believer back then, and the will of God for the believer today, is our ongoing sanctification.

Now sanctification isn't a word we usually use in modern jargon, but what it means is, simply to be set apart or to be made Holy. As Christians, we are meant to be set apart and to walk in a certain way. So that's the first way Paul says we should walk – we are **to walk in holiness**, a way that is pleasing to God.

DISCUSSION:

N: Let's talk about that walk with Cara Whitney and Arnie Cole. How did you learn to walk in holiness? In other words, what led you to live and behave in a way that was different than when you were lost?

C: Well, I made the decision to follow Jesus. He tells me how to live. I try, I fall short. I try again and I keep doing that. And then the Holy Spirit smacks me upside the head continually. That's how I do it.

A: Yeah. And do you really think of yourself as walking in holiness though, Cara?

C: No. Never. Never holy enough. I, it's...Never... Ugh, I'm so disgusting, but I'm doing the best that I can, most of the time.

A: And I remember as a nonbeliever, I would always think about my family who were strong Christ followers. And I would always sing that song, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, “*Only I am holy*”, because I felt like they were throwing the Bible at me, and condemning me, and they thought they were so holy. And now that I'm a Christ follower, this holiness thing is a tough concept, at least for me to grasp, who is kind of sometimes a spiritual loser.

C: Yeah, that's right. Falling down, getting up, falling down, getting up. I think you fall down less, and especially, if you're in the Word. Every day, just do your best, but then you just, you get in situations and you lose your patience, or you say something stupid, or you've just got to start over. And each day you wake up and it's a new day, right?

N: And thank God it is. But I'm curious from both your perspectives, because there's no doubt we will struggle. We will fall. And by God's grace, He picks us back up to try again. In your process of walking in holiness, walking in your faith, how much has discipleship played a factor in your growth?

C: I joined a Bible study group and I made sure it was with mature believers. And they even asked me, they said, “Don't you want to be around women your own age, who are experiencing the same things as you?” But I really took a lot from my group of women that had already experienced it, and had moved onto the next phase in life. So a lot of them were getting hip replacements, and their spouses had passed, and they had unbelieving kids, but I thought, “Hey, I want to know what's around the bend and how they're handling it”. And they're prayer warriors. You know, if I asked them to pray, they're going to pray for me. And then, you know, too, they just had enough faith and wisdom and maturity, that they could say, “You know what? I'm messing up right now. Pray for me, because there's a lady in my assisted living I do not like”, and I would always get such a kick out of that, because no matter how holy they appeared to me, they were still just people. And I just really love my Bible study group.

Today you have the choice: Will you live by God's best standards, or will you compromise and choose your *own* way? In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul urges Christ followers to walk in holiness – to be sanctified.

Now, Paul gets even more specific as to what sanctification looks like, and how we can walk in holiness. And he says it in verse three: he says that you abstain from sexual immorality. I'll just put the target on my back now, right, because this is a hot topic issue!

The world in which Paul lived in then, was really not that much different than ours today. In fact, many historians would say the world in which Paul lived in, was far more messed up than ours is today. The Greco Roman world was full of sexual immorality. Thessalonica, where Paul was writing to, they had endorsed the act of having an affair. That was an “everyday” endorsed practice. Thessalonica had endorsed homosexuality. Thessalonica had endorsed pedophilia. Thessalonica had endorsed transgenderism, and so on.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the people of Thessalonica also had a daily ritual of having sex with the temple prostitutes. In fact, their religion was tied to having sex with the temple prostitutes. It sounds like quite the sight. The temple prostitutes would be dressed up and parading as deities. So the culture in which Paul lived was messed up.

Yes, today in 2020 in America, and around the globe, we're messed up too. But many people would say that in Paul's time, it was far worse. So what does Paul say to do? He says [abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness](#).

You see Paul addresses a very real issue for the Thessaloniki church, and one for us today. And that is in the issue of sex. Now, for sure, sex is natural. Sex is beautiful. As humans, we were made for intimacy. And I can't think of anything more intimate than sex, but even though sex is natural - though, sex is beautiful, though it is intimate - it is also *sacred*.

Sex is sacred. How do I know? Well, the Bible says so. We know from Genesis and the Creation account, that God made what? Man and woman. And He made them so that they would leave their father and mother and come together as one flesh. Not only that, but Jesus spoke about this. Jesus says, *you shall not commit adultery*, but beyond that, that if you even have the thought, if you lust after a woman in your heart, you have committed adultery with her. Yes, your thoughts count!

The book of Hebrew says that marriage is to be held in high esteem. And the marriage bed is meant to be undefiled. The Apostle Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthian church, he said to resist sexual temptation, that a husband is for a wife, and a wife is for her husband.

You see, here's the deal: According to God, sex and sexual expression is between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. But I get it. I get it. Some of you today are thinking to yourselves, "But Nat, you don't get my situation. You don't understand my spouse. I cannot get sexual fulfillment from my spouse. So I have to go out and I have to have an affair. No, I have to go out and I have to use pornography. It's the only way." Friends, not according to God. Some of you might be thinking, "But you don't understand my husband; my husband is a louse. He's not romantic. I have to use my romance novels to get some type of fulfillment, some type of romantic love." Remember what Jesus said? The thought alone, the fantasy alone, is condemning. That is sin.

Some of you might be thinking, "But it's 2020 brother. Don't you get it? This is the culture of, *try it before you buy it*. What we're doing is natural anyway." Well, friend, you'd be right about one thing. Yes, it is natural. But God said that it is sacred. Sex is sacred. And it's meant only for marriage. Friends, let me just say this: If you really do love somebody, if you really love somebody, you are not going to encourage them to sin. You are not going to manipulate them. You're not going to coerce them. You're not going to guilt them into engaging in activities that are displeasing to God. That is not love. That is abuse.

You see it doesn't matter who I've talked to. When I talk to a couple and they've had multiple sex partners before getting into marriage, they do have this mindset of comparison and of worry. Am I truly good enough for my spouse? Or are they thinking of someone else when we're being intimate together? I have yet to find a couple who started their relationship by an affair, who don't worry in the relationship, thinking, "Is my partner going to cheat on me next?" In other

words, will this relationship work? I have yet to find a couple who – If they're engaged in sexual expression outside of marriage – don't worry about getting an STD. You see friends, sex and sexual intimacy outside of the context of what God has designed, is sinful, and brings worry. It brings fear. It brings comparison. It brings physical illness. It can bring mental illness. It can even bring abuse.

So Paul says, *friends, abstain from sexual immorality*. And what does he say in verse eight? *Look, you can reject this message, but if you reject this message, you are not rejecting my message, but you're rejecting God's message. And you therefore are rejecting God*. Friends, do you really, really want to take on God? Because I don't. Do you really think that you know more than the One who knows it all? Because you shouldn't.

Verse six gives us a very serious warning. He says that God is the avenger in all these things. What that means is this: If we, as Christians decide to step out of bounds and not listen to God, He is going to discipline us. There are natural consequences for our decisions. That is true. But as children of God whom He loves, He will discipline. Now I am aware that yes, here, he is purely speaking about the idea of sexual morality. But if we are to walk in holiness, we are going to need to abstain from many more things. Aren't we we're going to need to avoid stealing, lying, cheating, violence, manipulation, and so on? There are many things we will need to avoid, but we cannot also forget the positive aspect of walking in holiness.

You see, when we walk in holiness, we will be walking in the fruit of the Spirit – in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. So yes, there are things we need to avoid. And there are also things that we will need to do.

So the first way that we can walk, as Paul said, is in holiness.

N: Now, let's go to Arnie and Cara and talk a bit about what holiness looks like.

So walking in holiness means living by God's standards, not the world's. Arnie, there was a time when the world's standards and Christian standards in this country looked a little more alike; Not anymore. You've seen the change; give us a little history on what's happened.

A: Well, and it depends on your perspective. The perspective that I have is really how you measure Bible engagement. People know less and less about God's Word, and I'm not speaking from a legalistic standpoint. I'm just saying the standard of Bible literacy from the sixties, the seventies went down, eighties went down, nineties went down. And then I think it was around 2000 - it wasn't Jay Leno - maybe it was Jay Leno, that did the interviews of the guy on the street and asked them about how many books are in the Bible, or what are the, you know, all of these just basic questions. And the vast majority were just clueless, as to simple, simple questions. And I think the further you get away from God's Word - and that's a love letter He left for us - the further away society goes.

N: Yeah, it's a hard reality to see. But I think in some ways, it provides greater opportunity for us to get out there, because a lot of people are blank slates when it comes to Christianity and what the Bible says. So in some ways, it's better soil, because we don't have to reconstruct what they may have misunderstood or been misinformed about. And so I think the opportunity is still a challenge, but the opportunity is great. Cara, Paul emphasized sexual purity. You see it a lot in

Paul's letters. Why is that so important?

C: Because it's important to God first and foremost. Paul just loved people so much. He just had a true heart for the lost, and I think much like us, we see he saw the damage that sex outside of God's design causes. And when you love someone - we're called to love everyone - and we should always desire sexual purity for them. I think we've got to be gentle in how we respond to things, but it's what we want for people, because life is hard, but to do it God's way, it's just going to be a little bit easier for them.

N: Well, and sin impacts more than just the person committing the sin, and sexual sin has a very great consequence to those involved. And I think that may be part of the reason. The other thing I really appreciate about the Bible in general is, you know, a lot of people today will say, "Well, the Bible is irrelevant. You know, it was written 2000 years ago. It has nothing to do with me today." Think about the world that Paul was writing to in this letter. I mean, it was messed up, and you compare them to now. Yeah, it's arguable, which one was worse, but man alive, we are kind of mirroring the situation. And so Paul, his call for purity has great implication for then and today. And I think that's why we need to keep talking about it. Well, speaking of sexual purity, I think there's a lot of confusion today on right and wrong. And even within the Christian community - Arnie even brought this up earlier - if you talk about certain things, that's legalism. So how do you walk in holiness in times like today, when there seems to be a blur between right and wrong, holiness and not holiness, how do we do this?

C: Well, you have kids today that are going through a school system that's teaching them about sex, and things like that. And you know, to a kid, these are trusted adults. So the world is, man it's got a pull, but as Christians, we try to maintain holiness. We try to promote God. I think just gentleness and kindness, but also holding firm to God's Word and His design. But I mean, we just have to be very gentle. I think we have to ask questions, so they start to question, enough so they are recognizing that they're being lied to, that they're being manipulated.

N: It could be like putting a pebble in someone's shoe, right? Arnie, what do you think about this?

A: There is definitely a cost. Is it worth it? It depends how much you value eternal life. And if you can even get that concept, if you will, but there's definitely a cost to live a life that is on fire for Jesus. And there's a worldly cost, that's for sure.

N: Yeah, there is no doubt. Our salvation is free, but there is a cost to following Christ. That cost may be great. But when we have the right perspective, an eternal perspective, a Heavenly perspective, that cost is worth it all.