

People Get Ready  
Sunday School Lesson  
I Thessalonians 4  
February 8, 2026

We often judge scriptures concerning sexuality by our own twenty-first century standards but if we are to read Paul correctly, we must understand the sexual norms in the first century roman Empire, especially since Paul was establishing his churches outside of Palestine. This is from Wikipedia:

*Some sexual attitudes and behaviors in ancient Roman culture differ markedly from those in later Western societies. Roman religion promoted sexuality as an aspect of prosperity for the state, and individuals might turn to private religious practice or "magic" for improving their erotic lives or reproductive health. Prostitution was legal, public, and widespread. "Pornographic" paintings were featured among the art collections in respectable upperclass households. "Homosexual" and "heterosexual" did not form the primary dichotomy of Roman thinking about sexuality, and no Latin words for these concepts exist. No moral censure was directed at the man who enjoyed sex acts with either women or males of inferior status, as long as his behaviors revealed no weaknesses or excesses, nor infringed on the rights and prerogatives of his masculine peers. While perceived effeminacy was denounced, especially in political rhetoric, sex in moderation with male prostitutes or slaves, usually documented in the form of pederasty, was not regarded as improper or damaging to masculinity, so long as the male citizen took the active and the slave or prostitute the receptive role. Hypersexuality, however, was condemned morally and medically in both men and women. Women were held to a stricter moral code, and same-sex relations between women are poorly documented, but the sexuality of women is variously celebrated or reviled throughout Latin literature. In general the Romans had more fluid gender boundaries than the ancient Greeks.*

Ancient Rome's beliefs about life after death were deeply intertwined with their mythology, rituals, and daily practices which led to a complex understanding of existence beyond the grave. These beliefs shaped their funerary customs and their philosophical perspectives on mortality. Many ancient Romans viewed death as a transition to the underworld where the soul would continue its journey. Since those in Thessalonica no longer believed in the Roman gods, you could see why their concern for an understanding of death and resurrection were so important.

**Purpose Statement: To prepare and look forward to Jesus' return.**

In the fourth chapter of Thessalonians, Paul is addressing two main subjects – how we live now and what we can expect after our death. He addresses the Roman practices of sexuality directly, trying to make clear that they just because you can, you shouldn't. He knows this will be a change for some since the practices of one who follows Christ are

clearly different from what is allowed in society, especially for men of status. While he does not address fidelity in marriage specifically, he does address exploitation. If you read the introduction on Roman sexual ethics, you notice wide permission was given for men having relations with men or women of lesser status. When Paul says in verse 6, "No one should mistreat or take advantage of their brother or sister in this issue," he seems to be telling us that forcing yourself on someone is not permissible under any circumstance.

How differently would our lives be if we heeded his words, "Aim to live quietly, mind your own business, and earn your own living." There have been many cases in which if we minded our own business, so many misunderstandings and problems might be avoided. Some in the church had become so obsessed with Jesus' return that they quit their jobs and hung around the gathering place starting gossip and asking the church to feed them. When Paul later says, "If you do not work, you do not eat" he is addressing this specific problem in this specific church that is happening because people believe the end of the world is imminent.

There were many in the first century (the Stoics) that did not believe in the immortality of the spirit or the resurrection of the body (the Gnostics). The Thessalonians had abandoned the Roman and Greek gods and the stories of immortality there. That left a curiosity and a skepticism about Paul's teachings on the resurrection. Paul addresses this in verses 13-18. Paul did not have any special revelation about what happens when you die nor did he have a special revelation about Christ's return. He is not describing the "rapture"; he is reassuring the Thessalonians that Jesus will return and both the living and the die will live with him for eternity. We die as people with hope.

Paul is not recommending you go get the "Left Behind" book series and read it as non-fiction to encourage one another. We do not have all the answers as to when or how but we do know for certain the what – we will be with Jesus. That alone should be enough. That gives us comfort and gives us hope in the death of a loved one. It also gives us hope and reassurance as we face our own mortality. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, believed that the best way to prepare for Jesus' return is to continue to devote your life to actively loving God and doing good works.

Let us pray:

**Loving God, help us encourage our relationships and seek new ones that will bring you glory. Encourage us to wait actively by sharing your Son with others; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**