

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 31, 2016)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Building Faith at Home

Building a Wall to Protect Something Precious

(1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

Introduction: A very ugly wall...

Not to date myself, but I saw the wall. And it was ugly.

I was in Germany for the summer, serving with Greater Europe Mission, working at a Bible School near the city of Darmstadt. One summer weekend, a group of us decided to travel by train from Darmstadt (near Heidelberg) to Berlin.

It being 1976, this meant that we had to take an interesting, but uneventful trip through Soviet-controlled East Germany to get to West Berlin. We arrived in the beautiful city of West Berlin and spent a day touring.

The next day we decided to go over to the other half of Berlin, the Soviet-controlled East Berlin. That meant crossing the Berlin Wall - and the Berlin Wall wasn't just a wall.

On one side was a twelve-foot-high concrete wall. Beyond that wall was a thirty-yard-wide no-man's land called the "death strip." At the end of the death strip was a tall barbed-wire fence, along which had been placed guard towers.

The men in the towers had guns and were under orders to shoot to kill anyone who entered the death strip. On the other side of the barbed-wire fence was another thirty-yard-wide death strip and another twelve-foot-high concrete wall.

It was an ugly thing, but it did its job, which was to keep all East German citizens in.

That's what walls do. They keep in or they keep out. Today I'd like for us to think about building a wall.

Building faith at home...

For the last several years, we've taken time near the beginning of the year to emphasize the theme of "building faith at home."¹

We're doing that this year, too. For the three Sundays after today, Pastor Jeff will speak about home life in some of its various forms, focusing on marriage, singleness, and parenting issues.

Over the years we've addressed the challenges and blessings of being a mom and of being a dad, of "home" being a center for ministry, the sanctity of all human life, homosexuality, and more.

Today, the part of the "building faith at home" theme we're considering is wall building. This wall, unlike the Berlin Wall, is not about keeping *in*. It's about keeping *out*. I believe God wants you and me to build a wall to protect our home's and our family's and our own sexual purity.

A word about the good gift of sex...

Now, of course, God created sex. He thought the whole thing up. In the beginning, He created Adam and Eve and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth - which required that they have sex with each other.

The Bible tells husbands and wives throughout to enjoy the pleasures of sexual union. One entire book of the Bible is dedicated to physical, marital, sexual love. (The Song of Solomon)

¹ Our "core values" are: Building faith at home, masks-off relating, bringing our friends to Jesus, living and giving generously, loving and living the Bible, and depending on God to do what only He can do when we ask Him.

The Apostle Paul told married couples to not have sex with anybody else AND he told them to have sex with each other.²

But, in the same way that fire is a tremendous blessing in a fireplace and terribly destructive in other places, sexual intimacy is a wonderful blessing of God in marriage and is terribly destructive elsewhere.

Let me be clear. Love is a gift we can all give to each other. Personal intimacy is available to everyone. But sexual intimacy is to be reserved for the covenant relationship of marriage.

For that reason, building a wall that protects sexual purity is a good thing. The Apostle Paul wrote about protecting sexual purity in a letter he wrote to the church at Thessalonica.³

The Need for a Wall of Sexual Purity (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

The Church at the City of Thessalonica

Tracing the second missionary journey

After their time in Philippi, Paul and his traveling partner, Silas, went to Thessalonica where, by God's grace, they established a thriving, healthy church. They only stayed there a short while and went from Thessalonica to Berea to Athens and then to Corinth.

Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica

While Paul was in Corinth, he received a report about how things were going for the church in Thessalonica. Something in that report prompted him to sit down and write a letter.

² 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. See also Hebrews 13:4.

³ Paul's usual MO was to seek out strategic population centers from which the faith might radiate out to surrounding districts - and Thessalonica, the capitol city of Macedonia, was a very strategic population center in ancient times.

Paul wrote to address a couple of challenges the Thessalonian Christians were facing, and at least one of them was a challenge with which you and I can sympathize.

The whole first half of the letter is nothing but a really friendly greeting. It's clear that Paul loved these people and he affirmed them for their faithfulness to Jesus.

But, at the beginning of the fourth chapter, he got down to business. His first area of instruction and exhortation had to do with sexual purity.

A Life of God-Pleasing Sexual Purity (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

[1 Thessalonians 4:1] Finally⁴ then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought⁵ to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. [2] For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. [3] For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; [4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, [5] not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; [6] 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.

[7] For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. [8] So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.⁶

⁴ Paul starts chapter 4 with "**Finally.**" Don't believe him. This "**Finally**" is a preacher's "**finally.**" :-). He's still got a long way to go.

⁵ Paul says that Christians OUGHT to live in a certain way. There are some contexts in which "ought" is nothing but narrow legalism. "**Ought**" sometimes ought to be avoided. But, there are times when "ought" is a great word and concept, such as here. A Christian has been bought with a price. And Christian living is not an optional extra, reserved for those who are drawn to that sort of thing. It is a compelling "ought" laid on each one who has been saved by Jesus.

⁶ The man or the woman who continues in a life of impurity is not simply breaking a human code, nor even sinning against the God who at some time in the past gave him or her the gift of the Spirit. That Christian is sinning against the God who is present at that moment, against One who continually gives the Spirit.

A gracious "ought"

Here, Paul reminds them that having been saved by God's amazing grace through faith alone in Christ alone, they were to lead lives that were marked by sexual purity.

He wasn't saying that they were NOT leading such lives. In fact, he wrote that they WERE leading God-honoring lives. But he is also saying that there is progress to be made - **"...excel still more."**

The bar is set high. God has called His people to sanctification. To spiritual growth. To be set apart wholly for His purposes.

A sober warning

And the particular arena of sanctification Paul is highlighting is the arena of sexual purity. We are to abstain from sexual immorality. Paul's not rebuking. He's warning. His words warn us, today, as much as they did them, then.

There were then and there are now plenty of ways to trip and fall into sexual sin. And the word that my Bible translates **[3]...sexual immorality**⁷ was a word that covered all the possible manifestations of sexual sin.

An umbrella term

It was an all-inclusive word that brought all forms of illicit sexual activity under one umbrella. The word is *porneia*.⁷

Sexual impurity is one of the great speed bumps to Christian sanctification.

So, Paul warned the Thessalonians to stay away from all forms of sexual sin. Today, he is warning you and me to stay away from all of it, too. God's will for us is sexual purity, so we are to run as fast as we can away from anything that would lead us toward sexual impurity.

Purity "know-how"

Paul wants us to have the *"know-how"* to build sexual purity into our lives. That is exactly what he says - **[4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.**

In Paul's day, one of the chief ways to sin, sexually, was by participating in the rituals of pagan temple prostitution. So, he wrote about that problem in several places. He warned his first century readers to stay away from that.

Today, temple prostitution isn't much of a problem. I could rail about it, but the chances aren't great that you're struggling with it.

However, in speaking about the need for sexual purity, if Paul was writing to us today, I'll bet he would speak about pornography. It's a pressing issue in 2016 and this morning we're going to spend a few minutes considering the problem of pornography.

Our aim is to think about how we can build a wall that keeps pornography *out* and that will free up our lives and our homes to be bastions of purity.

An Aggressive Assault on the Wall

The Pervasive Presence of Pornography

It's everywhere

Without saying too much, pornography is everywhere. It's been around for a long time, but in previous decades it had to be sought out. Now, it seeks us out.

With the digital universe at our fingertips, pornography invites us to take a look. The pervasive presence of pornography would have been unimaginable even twenty years ago.

The arrival of the Internet has led to an explosion of pornography. I have found articles with titles like, "Porn drives the Internet" dating back to at least 1996. It is also true that porn has led to the explosion of the Internet.

⁷ Obviously, the word from which we derive our English word "pornography."

It is widely understood, for instance, that the movement toward increased bandwidth was largely due to a demand for online pornographic videos.

The porn industry has led the way in new technologies that you and I now take for granted. We now have streaming video, online credit card transactions, 3D video, and mobile apps like Snapchat that allow someone to take a picture, send it, and then have that image self-destruct in a few seconds, thanks to the appetite for pornography.⁸

It is available on our computers, laptops, and phones. You'll find it on social media and it will find you on innocent Google searches.

About three weeks ago I was driving to meet a friend for an early morning breakfast and found myself stuck at a light behind an SUV with a dashboard mounted monitor that was playing a pornographic video.

It's everywhere.

It's reaching for everyone

The Barna Group has recently published new research about porn habits in America. This research tells us that pornography is not only widely available, it is very widely viewed.⁹

It is very broadly viewed within the Christian community by people of all ages (trending younger), and all walks of life (including pastors), with men and boys predominant, but with women and girls catching up.

Now, is this a problem? To use a cliché, *"Everybody (seemingly) is doing it."* Should we be concerned or should we just get over it? Move on.

⁸ In addition, "haptic" technologies now exist that allow, for instance, a husband whose wife is expecting a child to experience, by wearing a Huggies-supplied belt, the sensations of a baby kicking. I have read that this technology was invented to stimulate sexual arousal.

⁹ See www.barna.org for articles and look for the upcoming book [The Porn Phenomenon](#).

For a number of reasons, I am convinced that it is a problem. And the most important reason for thinking this is because of what pornography is and what the Bible says about something that does what pornography does.

The Problem with Porn

Defining

In 1964, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was asked to define porn. His response was the now famous, *"I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I see it."*

You and I may internally resonate with that response, but I think we can do better.

Here's the definition that I've grown to appreciate more and more as the years have passed. Porn...
 ...tries to turn you on sexually.
 ...tries to make you think about having sex with someone who's not your spouse.
 ...doesn't qualify as art.¹⁰

It is understandable that many people who view it believe that pornography is a victimless crime.

It has been mainstreamed across our culture, and an increasing number of Americans believe viewing porn is "no big deal" or that it's even healthy and helpful.

But, if we'll keep in mind our working definition of pornography - while realizing that (at least as we know it today) it wasn't around in biblical days - Scripture makes a clear case that pornography is sinful.

Is porn sinful?

¹⁰ See www.exxit.org or www.exxitsa.org. See also the Christian ministry, Family Life Today, "Porn is any type of media (words, video, music, etc...) that [intends to] create sexual arousal.

Jesus

While delivering His most famous sermon (The Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 5-7), Jesus spoke to the issue of sexual sin and raised the bar well beyond where people of His day were placing it.

[Matthew 5:27] “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; [28] but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

I believe He was saying that to purposefully entertain lustful thoughts about a woman who is not your wife (or, for a woman, about a man who is not your husband) is to actually violate the 7th Commandment, which is to not commit adultery.¹¹

We have no business viewing someone in a sexual way if they are not our spouse. It is sinful. And pornography, by its very nature, invites lusting after a non-spouse.

Viewing pornography violates the sacred marriage bond and will cripple a marriage.

It invites an unmarried person to engage in random sexual fantasies with those to whom he or she is not married - and that, too, is both destructive and sinful.

That’s what Jesus says. And in the passage we have already looked at this morning (1 Thessalonians 4), the Apostle Paul has something to say that I believe also relates to pornography.

Paul (see 1 Thessalonians 4:6)

Right after he urged us to ***“know how”*** to possess our bodies in a way that honors God, he went on to write, ***[6]...that no man***

¹¹ It is possible that Jesus may have been saying that if you start down the pathway of lust/coveting (Remember the 10th Commandment - ***[Exodus 20:17] You shall not covet/desire...***), you will inevitably end up committing adultery. If that is at least partly what He had in mind, He is espousing a wisdom principle, similar to what is found throughout Proverbs. Taken this way, viewing pornography would be unwise (which it certainly is) because it will certainly lead to overt sin.

transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things...

Here, Paul is giving us an ethical framework within which to view sexual sin. It is a framework of love. To relate sexually with someone who is not your spouse is to violate love.

It is a violation of love for the person you are with, because sexual intimacy is to be reserved for the covenant relationship of marriage. But that’s not all.

Paul says that if it is an act of adultery, it is unloving toward the spouse of the one you are with. If the person you are with is unmarried, it is unloving toward that person’s potential future spouse.

If it is an act of lust (i.e. - pornography), far from being a victimless crime, we are unlovingly violating the current or future spouses of the men and women who are being filmed and photographed.

Whenever we view the bodies of people to whom we are not married in a sexual way, we are embezzling from their current or future spouses, we are violating them, and everyone loses.¹²

To view pornography is to sin. And, as with all sin, involvement with pornography does great damage.

This past summer, many of us watched in horror at the damage done to one of the most scenic waterways in America, a beautiful river in Colorado.

The pristine Animas River was the site of a terrible accident. Into the Animas, three million polluted gallons of water were released. Levels of lead rose twelve thousand times the normal amount and dozens of miles of river way were polluted as the Animas and San Juan Rivers flowed through Colorado, New Mexico and Utah.

¹² I would encourage you to reflectively read Proverbs 5 for Solomon’s wisdom on sexual sin. The “naïve” man who falls for the temptations of the seductress (and obviously, the roles can be reversed male/female) follows a pattern that is seen in person-to-person sexual sin *and* print or digital sexual sin.

The river was polluted near the headwaters and that caused damage downstream. When the headwaters are polluted, there is always damage downstream, or, as Solomon puts it,

[Proverbs 4:23] Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flows the springs (or, as one version has it, “the headwaters”) of life.

So, what damage does pornography cause? What is the downstream pollution?

First, it enslaves.

The damage done

Loss of freedom (see Proverbs 5:22)

[Proverbs 5:22] His own iniquities will capture the wicked, And he will be held with the cords of his sin.

Stimulation by pornography follows a well-established addictive pattern.

There is, first, the discovery of a hyper-stimulating experience. That is followed by a repetition of the experience and that experience leads to a compulsive need to increase the experience.¹³

That pattern holds for those trapped by alcohol or drugs - and, increasingly, by pornography.

Jesus offers a completely different experience. He holds open the liberating promise of freedom from slavery to our appetites. He said, ***[John 8:36] “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”***

¹³ “Use of pornography...creates a sense of relief, excitement, exhilaration or pleasure...Porn can elicit internal surges as addictive as cocaine.” (Christian Counsellor Robert Ellis)

That’s life in Jesus. Liberty. Freedom. And when the Apostle Paul described the life God wants us to enjoy in Christ, he also expressed it in terms of freedom.

He said that the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2) and that wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2 Corinthians 3:17)¹⁴

And yet this is exactly the opposite of the experience of so many who have allowed pornography to pollute the springs of their souls.

Pornography robs us of freedom and it also robs us of a capacity for genuine relationship.

Loss of relational drive and capacity

Secular studies have found what we would have expected, that men who view pornography are less inclined to relate well to real, live women.

When we are regularly engaging in sexual fantasy with a digital image, neither men nor women will be as willing or as able to relate person-to-person with a flesh and blood wife or husband, or opposite gender friend.

There is an inverse relationship between the viewing of pornography and healthy, respectful interaction between men and women, boys and girls.

Porn pollutes relationships.¹⁵ And there is more.

¹⁴ See also Romans 6:12, 6:14 and Galatians 5:1 and 13.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis alluded to this when he described the world of sexual fantasy as being “a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against a man ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attributes which no real woman can rival. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself.”

Other

The magazine Psychology Today reports that regular viewers of pornography experience more depression and loneliness and are, overall, less satisfied with life than non-viewers.¹⁶

All kinds of antisocial behavior are encouraged in the pornographic world, including rape, sexual deviancy, and the degrading of women. We shouldn't be surprised if the thinking of men who view pornography becomes horribly distorted.

Jesus said, **[Matthew 6:22] "The eye is the lamp of the body....[23] But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness"**

He meant by this that what enters our minds through the portal of our eyes greatly impacts our thoughts and attitudes and actions. Exposure to the darkness of pornography leads to polluted thinking and acting.

And all of this is to say nothing about what damage is done to the actors in pornography.

They are very often unwilling participants, abused, often trafficked, somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, somebody's brother, someone's son, being degraded for the viewing pleasure of an anonymous crowd.

OK. Point made. There is nothing wholesome about pornography and it's not a victimless crime. Viewing it is a sinful, unloving act that enslaves and does untold damage.

What now?

What do you do if you find yourself snared or if you are being tempted or if you know someone who is? How can you build a wall that

will protect yourself and your home and your loved ones and your friends?

I have three words to offer today, and the first word I want you to hear as we head toward the finish line today is the word, "Grace."

Strengthening the Wall

The Beautiful Gifts of Grace and Forgiveness

When Jesus died on the cross, He took the penalty for your sins. Your sins are forgiven when you accept that His offer of eternal life is available to you through simple faith in Him alone.

When you receive that gift of eternal life, you are forgiven for all sins you committed before you placed your faith in Him *and* for all the sins you will ever commit after placing faith in Him - both non-sexual sins AND sexual sins - and sexual sins are not unforgivable sins.

So, if you are currently involved in a sexual relationship with someone not your spouse, there is cleansing available.

If you are struggling with a current involvement with pornography, there is cleansing to be found at the cross of Jesus.

As surely as there is forgiveness for gossip and lying and cheating, there is the offer of fresh cleansing for any and all manner of sexual sin.

That cleansing is found as you come to Jesus, for the first time, or as you come to Him again.

If you have come to Jesus before, coming to Him again means that He will stoop down, will take up the basin and towel, will wash your feet and clean you up. You are already clean - and He will make *all* clean again so that you can rebuild that protective wall around your soul.

If before today you have never come to Jesus, come to Him now, for the first time. He died on a cross for your sins - including that sexual sin that you are thinking of right now.

¹⁶ "How Porn Really Affects Relationships" by Kevin Skinner, Ph.D., August 5, 2014.

He died to forgive and to cleanse and to set you free from bondage to that sin. Today, accept the free gift of eternal life from Jesus - and know what it is to be a forgiven daughter or son of God.

And then follow Him by building a wall of sexual purity that will allow you to grow in His grace.

So *grace* is the first word. The second word I have to offer is not a stronger word, but it is a harder word. It's the word, "No."

The Strength of a Good and Godly "No"

Paul wrote to his younger friend, Timothy that he should discipline himself for the purpose of godliness. (1 Timothy 4:7) Discipline involves saying "No" to a present pleasure for a future reward.

That's what athletes who compete do. They discipline themselves. They say "No" to dessert and to that extra hour of sleep in the morning while training to win a championship.

We who follow Jesus discipline ourselves so that we will hear, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" from the Lord, so that we'll receive rewards for faithfulness at the end of time, and so that we'll enjoy the abundant life He promises now.

We don't say "No" to pornography for "no's" sake. We say it for Jesus' sake and for the beauty that sexual purity brings to our lives and to our world.

We listen to the patriarch, Job, who lived two thousand years before Jesus. Job said that he had made a covenant with his eyes to not look at a young girl lustfully. (Job 31:1)

This morning, we join Job in a covenant-making declaration of "No." No more surfing the Internet to places we shouldn't go. No more clicking on the link that leads to who knows where. No more sending or receiving provocative selfies. No more. We've had it.

This morning, I want to assure you that victory over the temptation to view pornography is within your grasp. It is, by the

power the Holy Spirit provides, a battle that can be won. But to say "No" is to invite a fight.

To say "No" is to follow a path of repentance - and repentance means to do an *about face*.

Repentance may mean changing the physical location of your computer, installing a filtering device, or cutting cable.¹⁷ It will mean doing whatever is necessary to separate yourself from the destructive behavior you're turning from.

But, by all means, say, "No"! Purity is worth fighting for!

If you have become involved in some sexual sin - pornography or any other - you will have to decide to go to war. Appeasement may appear to be the easier path. Make peace with a pet sin.

But your pet is a tyrant and tyrants always demand more. While sex is a wonderful servant, it is a terrible master. Jesus is the only Master whose servants are set free. Submit to sexual sin and you're enslaved.¹⁸

It's better to fight. If we don't fight, our sin will invade our career, health, church, reputation, family and home.

It is *true* that the child of God is not under God's condemnation (Romans 8:1). It is *not true* that the child of God is exempt from the Law of the Harvest. We will reap what we sow. So, fight!

The weapons you can bring to the fight will involve some of the practical ideas I mentioned a minute ago. There are great blogs to read

¹⁷ One article I read had this: Alcoholics shouldn't live across the street from a liquor store and people who struggle with pornography shouldn't use a computer alone without internet filters.

¹⁸ In 1938, after the British Parliament decided to appease the Nazis when they invaded Czechoslovakia, Winston Churchill saw the error of having chosen peace when battle was called for. He said, "*You have been given the choice between war and dishonor. You have chosen dishonor, and you will have war!*"

and books to check out and podcasts to listen to. And I can point you to some of these.

But as we close, I'm going to suggest one final word that has proven worth its weight in gold to me and to scores of others I've known. The word is "Us."

The Powerful Gift of Us (James 5:16)

My brothers, this may be the single most important thing you hear today. My dear sisters, what follows is crucial for your victory.

[[James 5:16] Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

If you are a man or a boy who is struggling with a temptation to view pornography, find a man to whom you can turn.

Find a brother who will be there to help you, encourage you, hold you accountable, and pray for you.

If you are a woman or a girl struggling with sexual temptations, you may already have the face of another woman in mind to whom you can turn to find counsel and help and tough love and prayer.

Don't try to fight this war alone. Sexual sin thrives in the dark, so expose it to the light of a loving, Jesus-centered friendship. Let your friend, let a trusted older brother or sister, know of your temptation. You'll be amazed how gentle and strong and supportive and helpful they'll be.

Conclusion:

When the Berlin Wall came down in November of 1989, the free world rejoiced. East Berliners were free to get out and to cross into West Berlin.

In that case, the tearing down of a wall brought one very special kind of liberty. Today, we are erecting a wall that will bring spiritual liberty.

When you confess and then gratefully receive the *GRACE* and cleansing forgiveness Jesus offers; when you agree to fight and you say, *NO* to the lure of pornography; and when you stop going it alone and employ the power of *US* in the fight, that protective wall will go up, brick by brick, layer by layer.

The guilt feelings you have long felt will dissipate. You will start to experience true freedom in Jesus. You will begin to morph into the peaceful, joyful, loving Christian you were saved to become.

And thus liberated, you will be equipped and inclined to be on mission for Jesus' Great Commission.