

**Rectitude: The “Vessels” of Right Man & Right Woman Are Sanctified by Abstinence & Marriage,
1 Thess 4:3-4, 1 Cor 7:1-5, 9**

Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 defines the right man-right woman relationship in terms of the man knowing how to “possess his *own* vessel.” The possessive pronoun is ἔαυτός, **heautos** and is the genitive of possession:

Dana, H. E. and Julius R. Mantey. *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament.* (Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1955), 76:

The Genitive of Possession. To denote ownership is to make one noun the attribute of another in the relation of privilege of prerogative.

In the phrase “Each one of you men should know how to possess his own vessel.” The noun “vessel” is said to be “possessed” by the man. The word “possess” becomes very important in the analysis. It is the present middle infinitive of the verb:

κτάομαι, ktaomai - “obtain; procure; acquire; possess”

When a person obtains, procures, or acquires something then he possesses it, in other words, he owns it.

The construction of this verb has led to controversy as to whether this is addressed to single men who may be tempted to assuage their passions and desires by means of prostitutes or to married men who may be tempted to become dishonorable toward their own wives by indulging in adultery.

The answer is that honor is required for both situations. Abstinence must come first as Paul emphasizes celibacy prior to marriage. However, the principle of abstinence is under constant assault by the body’s passions and desires. Can these two emotions be sanctified? Yes. They become sanctified by the possession of a wife.

Prior to marriage a man’s passions and desires are restrained by abstinence while after marriage they are sanctified by the possession of the vessel of his wife.

Two resources address the impact of this verse and the phrase “to possess his own vessel”:

Thayer, Joseph Henry. *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 363:

κτάομαι, [ktaoma]. “To procure for himself his own vessel (i.e. for the satisfaction of the sexual passion) in sanctification and honor, i.e. *to marry a wife* (as opposed to the use of a harlot; the words ἐν ὀλγιασμός καὶ τιμή [“in sanctification and honor”] are added to express completely the idea of marrying in contrast with the baseness of procuring a harlot as his ‘vessel.’”

Yeager, Randolph O. *The Renaissance New Testament.* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Co., 1985), 15:197-98:

κτάομαι, [ktaoma] is present middle not the perfect [tense]. Thus the translation is not “possess” but “acquire.” Paul is talking about courting, not sex life after marriage, although sex relations in marriage are also subject to the will of God and honorable, i.e. not subject to the perversions to which the pagans in Thessalonica were addicted. (pp. 197-98)

The context of verses 3-8 seems to indicate that by σκεῦος [skeuos] Paul meant “wife.” “But what does Paul mean by ‘his own vessel’? It can only mean his own body or his own wife. Objections are raised against either view, but perhaps he means that the man shall acquire his own wife ‘in sanctification and honor,’ words that elevate the wife and make it plain that Paul demands sexual purity on the part of men (married as well as unmarried).

There is no double standard here. When the husband comes to the marriage bed, he should come as a chaste man to a chaste wife. (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, IV, 29). (p. 198)

The best way to iron this out is that a man possesses a right woman in the perfect plan of God. But with reference to this context what is it about her that he possesses? He possesses her as a vessel. She is his “container” and he is to “know how to possess her container.” If he doesn’t know how to do so under biblical standards then he will resort to the way of the heathen, the libertine, and the pervert.

The first qualification for possessing the wife properly is said to be “sanctification,” the instrumental of manner from the noun:

ἅγιασμός, *hagiasmos* - “sanctification”

This application of the word must not be confused with the doctrine of sanctification except in a secondary way. Sanctification in this context needs to be defined precisely, so we turn to:

Kittel, Gerhard (ed.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 1:111, 113:

ἅγιάζω [hagiazō]. By sanctification (we) are separated from what is profane and set in a consecrated state. Sacrilege, or the violation of what is holy, does not come under human jurisdiction but under the judgment of God.

The logical subject of sanctifying is God alone and not man. (p. 111)

ἅγιασμός [hagiasmos] signifies “sanctifying” rather than “sanctification.”

In the New Testament the term “sanctifying” fits better than “sanctification.” It must be remembered, however, that the operation of ἅγιασμός [hagiasmos] can be accomplished only by a holy person, so that ... it is always assumed that it is accomplished on the basis of the state of sanctification attained in the atonement. Ἅγιασμός [hagiasmos] is the will of God (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and it consists again in purity of physical life, so that marital fellowship is fulfilled (4:4). (p. 113)

The person who is positionally sanctified by the baptism of the Holy Spirit at salvation is capable of “sanctifying” something in the course of his Christian life that is unique to the Church Age. Such is the case in our context:

1 Thessalonians 4:4 - so that each of you know how to possess [κτάομαι, *ktaomai*] his own [ἐαυτός, *heautos*] vessel [σκεῦος, *skeuos*] in sanctification and honor,

The “vessel” here refers to the right woman that is designed for each man with emphasis on the woman’s body and by extension on the body of the man. The concept of sanctification is “to set something apart as separate from the rest.” Through faith in Christ we are “set apart” from the rest of the human race.

Because of doctrine, the man is “to set apart as separate” the body of his right woman from the rest of the human race—including men. This is also true of the woman; she is “to set apart as separate” the body of her right man from the rest of the human race—including women. This is the subject of Paul’s commentary in:

1 Corinthians 7:1 - Now with regard to the issues you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to kindle a fire in a woman because of sexual immoralities.”

v. 2 - But each man should have marital relations with his own wife and each woman should have marital relations with her own husband.

v. 3 - A husband should fulfill the sexual needs of his wife, and likewise a wife should fulfill the sexual needs of her husband.

v. 4 - It is not the wife who has these rights to her own body, but the husband. In the same way, it is not the husband who has these rights to his own body, but the wife.

v. 5 - Do not deprive each other, except by agreement for a definite time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then resume your sexual relationship, so that Satan may not tempt you due to your lack of self-control.

v. 9 - But if they do not have self-control, let them get married. For it is better to marry than to burn with unfulfilled sexual passion and desire.

These are exactly the same principles that Paul addresses in 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5. Paul first wrote these principles to the believers at Thessalonica in A.D. 51 and later to the Corinthians in A.D. 56 (1 Corinthians 7).

1 Thessalonians 4:4 - so that each of you know how to possess [κτάομαι, *ktaomai*] his own [έαυτός, *heautos*] vessel [σκεῦος, *skeuos*] in sanctification and honor,

Verses 4 and 5 may be paraphrased as follows:

1 Thessalonians 4:3 - [Paraphrase] For this principle is the will of God, your sanctification of your passions and desires: that you abstain from sexual immorality prior to marriage;

v. 4 - so that each of you know how to possess his own body prior to marriage so that by doing so you will know how to possess the vessel of your wife in marriage where your passions and desires function in sanctification and honor,

The passage continues by identifying what kind of behavior is to be avoided by the believer:

1 Thessalonians 4:5 - not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;