



WALKING IN SEXUAL PURITY

Catalog No. 1332
Ephesians 5:3-14
Seventh Message
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September 29th, 2002

In this series of messages on the “worthy walk” from the book of Ephesians, we come now to the practical and relevant topic of walking in sexual purity. Christians are called to be sexually pure. This is one of the fiercest battlegrounds in the Christian life. All of us would be in trouble in this area even if there were no external negative influences around us. But when we factor in things like pornography on the internet and the print media, together with the blatant sensuality of our modern world, we are confronted daily with an avalanche of sexual temptation.

Listen to these words of Ray Stedman:

As I reflected upon the year, I wondered if there was not some way to eliminate, or at least cut back, all this evil. I thought of one thing which would certainly reduce crime, bring an end to the divorce scandal, eliminate teenage pregnancies, reduce the prison population, stop the sale of pornography, and decrease poverty. If we could come up with a drug that would remove pleasure from the act of sex (because that is why everybody indulges in sexual misbehavior), we could change the whole moral climate of our country. But I realized we also would lose much color from life. We would forfeit the companionship and fellowship which the sexes have in one another. Life would become very drab and dreary indeed. Since we obviously cannot make that drastic change, the only thing left to us is to learn how to handle our sexuality properly.¹

Many of you are probably thinking that this is a message for the men. Wives are surmising that today is the day their husbands get their comeuppance. While it is true, generally speaking, that men struggle in this area more than women, it is no less true that women have just as great a struggle with eating disorders as men do with sexual behavior. Men don't understand women's preoccupation with food, and women don't understand men's all-consuming passion for sex. Both struggles are simply different manifestations of the same internal issues, and both are at epidemic proportions today. Both sexes therefore need to be compassionate and understanding towards each other.

This is not going to be a hellfire and brimstone message designed to make you feel guilty. We want to recognize and acknowledge the enormity of the problem for Christians, to bring about honesty and confession of sin, and to be encouraged that in the new man, God has made provision for this area of our lives. The goal is not

that we try harder, but for all to be transformed by the Holy Spirit—putting off the old man, renewing our minds, and putting on the new man. If we are to walk worthy of our calling, we need to know how to handle our bodies.

Here is what the apostle has to say:

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph 5:3-6, NASB)

We will look at this text in terms of taking off the old, putting on the new, and renewing our minds. Christians are exhorted to put off the old man, in both our actions and speech. Paul uses three words to describe sexually immoral acts. The first is immorality, or fornication. The Greek word for this is *porneia*, from which we get the word pornography. The word was used of a harlot, to describe the act of selling oneself. That is what sexual immorality is—a selling of oneself. The second word is impurity or uncleanness. It refers to anything rotten or filthy, as we saw earlier: “and they [the Gentiles, people who do not know God], having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (4:19). The third word here in chapter 5, “greediness,” is also found in 4:19. It means to covet, to desire more. The term conveys the truth that sexually immoral acts never satisfy the yearnings of the soul. The old man is always greedy for more, with the result that, in his efforts to find fulfillment, he sinks into darker and darker behavior.

Paul also uses three words to describe vulgar speech. “Filthiness” means a shameful deed, but it can also refer to obscenity or shameful talk. The root idea behind the second word, “silly talk,” is foolishness. It refers to offensive and foolish speech. “Course jesting” involves vulgar expressions and indecent content. The dirty old man has a dirty mind: “a dirty mind expresses itself in dirty conversation” (John Stott). The heart is the source of our words. Filthy words reveal what is going on in the heart.

We do not have to look far to find examples of sexual immorality. These days, college students collect beads marking sexual exploits during spring break. The goal is to collect as many as possible to make a necklace. Daily we hear about pastors becoming involved in affairs. Reports of molestation are widespread. During my son's six years of playing football, two of his coaches were jailed over sexual misconduct. Many men are fighting a daily battle with pornography. All of us at one time or another have either fallen into sexual immorality or have close friends who have done so.

And we do not have to go far to find examples of vulgar, inappropriate speech, either. Just read the gossip columns. Dial-a-porn is but a finger-tip away. The workplace is saturated with sexual conversations about co-workers. Words with double meanings proliferate in the media. Television sitcoms are built on dialogue with sexual overtones—and the worst offenders often win the most awards.

This then is the nature of the old man. And it's not going to get better. Marriage won't solve it. The only solution is to put off the old and put on the new. So what does the text have to say about the new man?

1. The new man is not even associated with immoral conduct.

The new man takes so much care in this area that not only does he not engage sexual immorality, he agrees with Paul that such things "must not even be named among you." There is no hint of improper conduct in the new man—no wondering, no questioning, no suspicion. The reason for such extreme measures is so that the church might be above reproach. The "you" here is plural, referring to the corporate body. We are not to go just part way, to put on a good image and conform outwardly. These things "must not even be named among you," says Paul.

This is why Christians should not live together before they get married, even if they are not engaged in sex. This is why people should not spend the night at their girlfriend's or boyfriend's house. This is why we should not go to lunch frequently with co-workers of the opposite sex. This is why our male pastoral staff does not counsel women on an on-going basis. The new man builds healthy walls and sets boundaries for himself.

2. The new man is grateful to God for the gift of sex.

The old man engages in vulgar speech; the speech of the new man is characterized by giving thanks. Thanksgiving is the antidote to vulgarity; the former is God-centered, the latter self-centered. Vulgarity is the pagan attitude toward sex; thanksgiving is the Christian attitude. Offering thanks elevates a high and holy view of God's good gift; vulgarity cheapens and degrades it.

God created us male and female and gave us our appetite for sex. It is a gift created by God for enjoyment in marriage. In the proper context we can have a healthy attitude toward sex and experience complete

freedom and pleasure. But the world renders this gift ugly and filthy. The church does just as much damage, if not more, by its negative and legalistic attitudes at times. The proper attitude towards sex, however, is to give thanks and enjoy it within its proper place.

So husbands, rather than demanding sex from your wives, give thanks for them and the physical relationship you enjoy together. Men, when you see an attractive woman, rather than engaging in lustful fantasy, give thanks to God for the beauty of women and what they contribute to life. Regard women not as objects, but as God's creations, and let your lips speak praise.

3. The new man not only resists participation in darkness, but exposes it.

We see this principle in verses 7-14:

Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says,

**"Awake, sleeper,
And arise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you." (Eph 5:7-14)**

These verses may be general in nature with respect to putting off darkness, evil, unfruitful deeds and putting on light, but they are quite specific and appropriate when we apply them to sexual immorality.

Paul gives two negative commands: "do not be partakers with them," and "do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of the darkness." And he gives two positive commands: "walk as children of light," and "expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness." The new man not only does not engage in immoral sexual behavior, he exposes the darkness and brings the disgraceful things done in secret into the light.

The Genesis account records that in creation, God separated light from darkness. Once something is brought into the light it is no longer part of the darkness. Paul quotes Isaiah, saying that when dark deeds are exposed, the light of Christ can shine on the sleeper. The one living in darkness can wake up and be healed.

We can apply this truth to ourselves by bringing our own secrets into the light. This goes against everything the old man wants to do, of course. The last thing we want is to expose our dark secrets. But that is a necessary step for healing. Darkness loses its power when it is exposed.

Some time ago a young husband told me that his wife discovered pornography on his computer. Both of

them were devastated. But instead of creating division, the process of bringing this into the light caused them to communicate at deeper levels, to be healed, and to even experience greater intimacy. It is a wise thing for men to have friends with whom they can share these deep struggles and let light shine on the darkness.

Furthermore, Christians expose the darkness of the world. Everywhere we go we bring the light of Christ, because we are light in the Lord. As we go into our community, workplace and neighborhood, we are to speak truth and question the attitudes and actions of the old man. We can ask store owners why they stock pornographic material. We can tell video store chains that we will not frequent their stores if they carry X-rated movies. We can bring truth to bear when we see an immoral commercial on television. When I worked as an engineer, I once heard a group of men make sexual comments about a woman as she walked by. I asked them if they would like to hear men speak about their wives in that manner, pointing out how demeaning and dishonoring their comments were. That is exposing the darkness and giving the opportunity for the light of Christ to shine so that unbelievers might be drawn to the Lord.

How do we renew our minds to put off immorality and put on light? Paul gives us several helpful insights.

1. Immoral acts and vulgar speech are not fitting for saints.

Sexual immorality is inconsistent with the life of a holy one, a saint, one who has been set apart by God to be different and separate from the world. We were formerly darkness but now we are light in the Lord. The two are not compatible.

2. Those who do these things do not have an inheritance in God's kingdom.

Notice that the trio of terms from verse 3 is repeated in verse 5. However, here they are not adjectives but nouns, implying that these people are by nature fornicators, unclean and greedy ones. They do not know God and have no place in God's kingdom, at least yet. This is not saying that if these saints in Ephesus sin they will forfeit the kingdom. The point is, why engage in activities that characterize people who do not know God? Christians are blessed in Jesus. We are to live our lives out of blessing.

3. There are many ways in which we can be deceived, but that does not change God's response.

Paul writes, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." This is similar to the last point (the fact that sons of disobedience, non-believers, fall under the judgment of God), but here Paul's reasoning is motivation for not being deceived.

The "empty words" may well refer to the dualist view of man of that first century day. The Gnostics argued that bodily sins could be committed without

damaging the soul, because body and soul were separate entities. Thus people were encouraged to sin all they wanted, without any consequences. But the Bible teaches that God wants to use the members of our bodies as instruments of righteousness.

Today the "empty words" might sound like the following: Why wouldn't God want me to enjoy what he created? The temptation is too great and I can't deal with it. My spouse is not responsive to me, so I am justified in looking elsewhere. It's good to have sex prior to marriage to see if you are compatible. Nobody will get hurt. These are empty words. Buying into a false philosophy will not alter the consequences. There is no justification for sexual immorality, not even a struggling marriage or the state of being single.

4. We need to consider the fruit of the old man versus the new man.

According to Paul, the reason for walking in the light is that the old man bears rotten fruit while the new man bears good fruit. Goodness, righteousness and truth replace immorality, impurity and greed. One way we can renew our minds is to look to the future.

Listen to these gripping words from Dave Roper:

It is good to regularly rehearse the consequences of an affair. We gain insight through hindsight, they say, but foresight is the less costly way.

This is the debt I pay
Just for one riotous day,
Years of regret and grief,
Sorrow without relief.

Slight was the thing I bought,
Small was the debt I thought,
Poor was the loan at best-
God! but the interest! (Paul Dunbar)

The wise man insists that what a man has built with his strength—his family, business, and reputation—will be torn down, but the greater cost is the toll that adultery takes on his soul. He will have given away his dignity and majesty as a man. Then comes old age and regret: when a man groans, when his flesh and body are spent, when his body and soul are diminished and dwarfed; when adultery has shriveled his soul. In his final impotence, the man will lament his folly and failure to pay attention to those who taught him wisdom. He will know for himself what T. S. Eliot called "the bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit... The rending pain of reenactment of all that we have done, and been; the sham of motives late revealed, and awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm." He finds himself, "on the brink of utter ruin" (Pr. 5.14).²

5. We need to understand that sexual immorality is essentially idolatry.

The phrase "who is an idolator" holds the most important key to renewing our minds. Ephesus was the

center for worship of Diana, the goddess of fertility. Sexual orgies were part of that worship. The Christians in Ephesus had engaged in this kind of behavior in the past, but now they were to worship God. Sexual sin is false worship. Immorality is idolatry. Sex, even in marriage, can become an idol that we worship in place of God. This is the heart of the issue.

The focal point for both men and women is the woman's body. Women are concerned with their own bodies. They want to be beautiful, and this is why they are preoccupied with food. Men are concerned with women's bodies as well, thus their preoccupation with sex. Genesis 3 says that woman was fashioned or "architectured." Woman is beautiful, complex and mysterious. She is the apex of God's creation, more captivating than anything else in all creation. "The naked woman's body is a portion of eternity too great for the eye of man" (John Eldredge). But both men and women make God's creation their chief idol. This is why Adam was silent when Eve offered the fruit to him. He chose to be one with the woman as opposed to being one with God. Eve became his idol, replacing God.

The issues are the same for men and women. We live with the pain of loneliness, rejection, worthlessness, inadequacy and fear. We crave to be loved, accepted, worthy and beautiful. The only thing that will deal with these internal issues is worship of the one true God. However, there is a strong connection between spirituality and sexuality: they awaken the same desires and offer the same hope to our internal issues. And so we turn to the worship of the woman's body. This is why Paul says that all sin is outside the body, except sexual sin. The root of sexual sin is our inner craving to worship. When we find ourselves lusting and desiring, our body is telling us that our soul wants to worship. Thus if we are to have success putting off the old and putting on the new, we need to worship the one true God.

Is there any hope? If you want to fulfill your lusts and satisfy your deep cravings for worship with sex, then the answer is no. But if you want to control your body instead of your body controlling you, then the answer is yes. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He cleanses, purifies and renews us. Through the Spirit we find forgiveness for even the darkest and ugliest sin. Through the Spirit we no longer have to be slaves of lust. By the Spirit the old memories can be erased. By the Spirit we can sense the presence of God. He will deal with internal issues of our lives. By the Holy Spirit we can experience the gift of sex in marriage as God intended it to be. If Paul had hope for the saints in Ephesus, then by all means we can have hope for our lives today.

It is fitting that we come to the Table of the Lord this morning to eat the bread and drink the cup, symbols of the body and the blood of Christ. This is a time for confession and renewal. The body of Jesus was broken for our sake. As we feed on his body we find the grace to control the members of our own bodies and use them for his glory. The blood of Jesus was shed for the forgiveness of sin. As we drink the cup, his blood flows through our veins, cleansing, purifying and renewing. This is the cup of the new covenant that fills us with the life-giving force of the Holy Spirit to create within us a new heart.

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1. Ray C. Stedman, *Handling Your Sex Drive*, Discovery Papers Catalog No. 4093, January 3, 1988.

2. David H. Roper, quoted from *Femme Fatale*, from his series, *E-Musings*.