



CONQUERING THE WILD BEAST OF IMMORALITY

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My family and I have just returned from a week's vacation in Lake Tahoe, which we shared with our friends the Hanneman's. On our last evening there we decided to visit a casino together. Driving to Stateline we could see in the distance the bright lights of the casinos that allure the unwary with dreams of glamour and riches. Soon we found ourselves in bumper to bumper traffic. When we got to the casino at Harrah's, there was hardly a parking space available. At last we made our way inside the palace-like hotel. The basement, where children get to play video games while their parents gamble upstairs, was no palace, however; it looked rather dilapidated.

As we made our way upstairs we could hear the din of the slot machines and the occasional cheer when the dice came up or someone cashed in on a jackpot. We made our way past people packed shoulder to shoulder, some of them glassy-eyed, drinks in hand, staring blankly. We felt like cattle being herded into a pen. By one of the roulette tables I overheard a young man, probably in his early twenties, making a ritual vow as he walked to the ATM machine: "Just one more withdrawal and I'm done," he promised himself. The Baccarat tables, reserved for the very rich, couldn't even be approached without a month's wages in hand.

For those who didn't feel like gambling, a suggestive billboard advertised a cabaret ("Beyond Bare Essence") complete with showgirls. In another area, fanciers of the sporting life gathered to gamble underneath multiple TV screens showing sporting events. The odds-makers sat nearby, calling out odds on football games and horse racing. In a corner I spied a young girl in tears as she recounted her disgust with her boyfriend to what appeared to be a male sympathetic ear, but on a second look, the man seemed more like another male beast stalking his evening prey. After about 45 minutes we had had our fill. My eyes were blurred, my mind jaded, my clothes grimy. The parking lot outside was more crowded than ever. As we left, I heard a man say, "What am I offered for this parking spot?"

Outside I thought about a pastor friend who had lived in Lake Tahoe for several years. How could anyone make an impact in a city whose economy was based on immorality and greed? I wondered. Then I remembered that in A.D. 52, a rather unimpressive-looking Jew, a tent-maker by trade, made his way into just such a city in Asia Minor. Ephesus lay at the mouth of the Cayster River valley, and was thus the gateway to the interior of eastern Asia Minor. The Greeks called such a colony an *emporion*, or "way in," since through it all the trade and resources of the world outside could be tapped. The city, which had excellent harbor facilities, grew rapidly as a commercial port. Later the Romans developed it, making it the seat of the provincial government. They called it "The Landing Place."

In the century before Christ, the area was hit with a severe economic depression. To survive, the city turned from trade to tourism. On the San Francisco waterfront area, the old canneries have today been transformed into restaurants and tourist shops, and a visit to the wharfs is a must for tourists. In the same way, a visit to the temple of Artemis was a must for tourists in the ancient city of Ephesus. Alexander the Great had contributed liberally to the new temple in the city, making it a shrine of unrivaled splendor. It was run by a fertility cult, complete with temple prostitutes. Here is what one commentator, E. M. Blaiklock, has written concerning the cult:

Artemis of Ephesus was a strangely ornamented female figure, shrine and basket on head, a veil decorated with beasts, long necklaces, embroidered sleeves, legs sheathed with impaneled animals, and with multiple breasts, or as some suggest, an apron covered with clusters of grapes or dates, sign and symbol of Artemis; role as the nourishing spirit of nature...Around the great shrine, to which worshipers and tourists poured from far and near, tradesmen and hucksters found a living, supplying visitors with food and lodging, dedicatory offerings, and the silver souvenir models of the shrine that the guild of Demetrius was most interested in making and selling. The temple was also a treasury and a bank, in which private individuals, kings, and cities made deposits. Coins of Ephesus sometimes show a date palm, sacred to Artemis, and the symbol of the goddess' beneficent activity.

Into this city then, midway through the first century A.D., came the apostle Paul. He set up shop in the Hall of Tyrannus, and for a period of two and a half years there preached the gospel of the risen Christ. His message met with astounding success. Even repentant magicians were converted. They actually had a book burning, and about one-half million dollars worth of magic books went up in smoke. Demetrius, the silversmith, fearing that the entire guild was in jeopardy, organized a riot to throw Paul out of the city (Acts 19). The apostle left at last, but not before a band of Christians, loosely organized in house churches, had been formed in the very shadow of the temple and tables of the idol merchants.

Ten years later, the apostle wrote to these Ephesian Christians asking them to make four commitments that would enable them to conquer what I call the wild beast of immorality. We find these commitments set out in chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, starting at verse 3, where he begins by asking the Christians to be pure in both conduct and speech.

I. Commitment to Sexual Purity (5:3-4)

But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed 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.

(a) Purity In Conduct

There are two elements to this first commitment. First, the act. The word immorality (*porneia*) comes from the verb "to sell." We get our term pornography from this word. Literally, it meant "harlot for hire, prostitution or fornication"; metaphorically, it was associated with idolatry. This word refers to all sex that is engaged in outside the bonds of marriage; in other words, the act of selling out cheaply something that has infinite value.

Second, the effect of immorality is "impurity" (uncleanness). This word is used in Classical Greek for the foulness that emanates from a wound or sore. Sexual sins create a weight of guilt, uncleanness and defilement that makes one feel ashamed.

And third, the drive. "Greed" (covetousness) literally means "a desire to have more because one is arrogant." In Classical Greek, the word was used of material greed. Due to their arrogant presumption, some wanted to have more than their share, to go beyond the bounds. Here, the word is applied to sex. Man, in

his arrogance and presumption, wants to have more than his due. Lust is a wild beast with an insatiable appetite that plagues mankind.

I would like to offer four practical suggestions here for how Christians should live today in light of the immorality of our own times. First, a word to single men. How far do you think you are permitted to go in your relationships with women and still remain pure? We find the answer to this question in Paul's letter to Timothy: Treat "the younger women as sisters in all purity," says Paul (1 Tim. 5:2). Women are holy, and men should treat them as they would their own sisters.

In like manner, the bride in the Song of Songs asks the young virgins to take a similar oath:

**"I cause you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,
That you not arouse or awaken (this kind of) love
Until it pleases" (2:7).**

The metaphor of the gazelles and the hinds seems to be hinting that sexual love, once it is aroused, takes off, speedily runs out of control, and frequently results in sexual intercourse. This is why the bride urges the daughters of Jerusalem to "swear" — a serious charge.

So the biblical admonition to young men and women is not to arouse or awaken this kind of sexual desire before marriage.

Second, I would say that young women need to be aware that men are easily aroused by what they see, therefore caution is necessary in choice of dress, deportment, etc. Women, on the other hand, are aroused by touch and closeness. Again, quoting from the Song of Songs, the bride says:

**"I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers;
Then I became in his eyes as one who finds peace" (8:10).**

Young women need to be taught to cover themselves in order to protect their purity. Here, the bride says she made her breasts like towers (a point of defense on the city wall), then they would be considered beautiful in the eyes of men.

The third exhortation is that men need to be vulnerable and honest with each other. Sexual enticement has been escalating at an alarming rate during the last decade. But we need not be afraid to admit that we struggle with temptation toward sexual fantasy or impurity. We should admit one other thing: we can't survive this kind of temptation alone. We need help. Let us therefore be vulnerable with each other and stop concealing our struggles. That is the devil's strategy to make us feel we're the only ones who struggle in this respect. But no one is exempt. If men share their struggles with their brothers, even with their wives, they won't be condemned, but loved. When we're open and honest with each other, the devil has no foothold. On a personal level, one brother actually telephones me weekly to help me check out my thought life, because he knows I can't make it alone. No one can.

Finally, a word to all: pre-determine your ethics. Lust is persistent, therefore assume you're going to be tempted. Chuck Swindoll had this to say about the perversity of lust:

Its alluring voice can infiltrate the most intelligent mind and cause its victim to believe its lies and respond to its appeal. And beware, it never gives up...it never runs out of ideas. Bolt your front door and it'll rattle the bedroom window, crawl into the living room through the TV screen, or wink at you out of a magazine in the den.

You must assume you're going to be tempted — when you travel, at work, during leisure time — so predetermine your ethics. Travel in twos, for instance. Turn off the cable TV before you enter your hotel room. Be especially watchful when you're tired, lonely, or depressed. These are times when you may be vulnerable to fantasizing.

So Paul's first word to Christians is, commit yourselves to purity in your actions.

A second thing is necessary.

(b) Purity in Speech

and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

We must put off three things: Filthiness, which is shameful, base, lewd conduct, and brash sexual gestures. Likewise, we must put away foolish or silly talk. Do not treat sex lightly. Do not make jokes about it or become involved in sexual innuendo at work. And do not partake in coarse jesting. Being witty and facetious, skilled at giving quick, witty answers, rapidly turning phrases and circumstances into double meanings, was an honored attribute in Greek society. Comedians make millions of dollars doing this today, but these things are not fitting for Christians. Jokes and witty retorts are merely defense mechanisms to keep people at arm's length. In summary, Christians must put off any speech that defiles, devalues or is a defense mechanism, under the guise of humor, to keep people at a distance.

What should we do in matters pertaining to sexuality? Paul says we should respond by "giving of thanks." Prayer and praise are the answers to lust. Give thanks for the beauty you see around you and pray for the other person. This will help defeat lust.

Purity in actions and speech, therefore, is the first commitment that Paul sought from the Ephesians. In the Old Testament, Noah's sons, Shem and Japheth, discovered their father drunk and naked once. Their other brother, Ham, was making light of the situation, but the two brothers took a cloak and, walking backwards into their father's presence, covered him in his nakedness lest they be defiled. In a day when some people are seeking every opportunity to unclothe each other, Christians should be guarding, protecting and sanctifying others, making them feel holy and dignified.

Here is the second commitment that Paul sought.

II. Commitment to the Truth (5:5-7)

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.

(a) Know That This Area Determines Everything Else

"You certainly know," Paul is saying here, that a fornicator or unclean or covetous one who is an idolater, has no share in the kingdom of God. This doesn't mean that those who fall into sexual sin and then repent lose their salvation. What it does mean is that sexuality and idolatry are closely linked. Whatever we worship affects our body, and what we do with the body affects the soul. You can't sleep with an idol at night and expect to be pure during the day. If you try to, eventually the idol will take possession of your whole person.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's story, 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,' the kindly, benevolent doctor began tampering with a magical brew that transformed his person and released all the diabolical evil in him so that he became the tyrannical, hideous Mr. Hyde who terrorized the streets of London at night. As he drank the potion, in time he became more and more addicted to it. At last, one night as he sat debating with himself whether or not he would drink his magical brew, to his horror he turned into Mr. Hyde, without even drinking the potion. Evil had triumphed over him and destroyed him.

Alexander Pope caught this syndrome beautifully in these lines,

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien

*As to be hated needs but to be seen,
But seen too oft too familiar that face
We must first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

Television, unfortunately, has brought us to this place today. Daily we are subjected to all kinds of vices and evils on our TV screens. Adultery used to be a hateful thing, but because we have grown accustomed to adulterous situations on television, we have learned to endure it. It is the same with homosexuality. We have learned to first endure it, then pity it, and finally embrace it as a legitimate lifestyle.

(b) Know That It Will Come Under Attack

For this reason, because the stakes are high, Paul knew that his teaching would come under attack by false teachers. But Christians should not be deceived by empty words. The apostle comments, "...because of these things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience." And God's wrath is not something that will happen sometime in the future, it is an ongoing phenomenon. Our schools today educate children about sexually transmitted diseases, yet at the same time some authorities are inviting teens to be open about their sexuality and to experiment with it. "Safe sex" (through the use of condoms) is what they call the bridge between these two notions. But "safe sex" is a myth. Physically, so-called "safe sex" has a 16% failure rate, but emotionally, pre-marital sex has a 100% failure rate. But we never hear this statistic quoted, do we? No one talks about the shame and the emotional heartache, brought on by experimenting with sex, that is destroying so many of our young people.

But, says Paul, God will judge. No civilization can last in immorality. Ephesus, which had the full patronage of five Roman emperors subsidizing its glory, had to learn this bitter lesson. E.M. Blaiklock comments: "Under Claudius in the middle of the 1st century and under Trajan at the beginning of the 2nd, the great theatre was remodeled. Under Claudius the monumental Marble street was built. Nero gave Ephesus a stadium. Domitian widened and beautified the great central boulevard." Because it was built in immorality, however, Ephesus became a heap of rubble following a Gothic raid in AD 263. No family, no city, no nation will stand in immorality, because God will judge.

Christians, says the apostle, need to be committed to sexual purity and to truth.

There is a third thing.

III. Commitment To Love (5:8-10)

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 light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), proving what is pleasing to the Lord.

(a) Enjoying the Fruits of Proper Sexuality

Promoting abstinence ("Just say no!") is not enough to defeat the wild beast of lust and immorality. Living healthy, attractive, robust lives is the answer. As Christians, we need to cultivate goodness, righteousness and truth. "Goodness" here refers to making a proper use of these things instead of perverting them. As far as sex is concerned, Tom Cruise has nothing to teach the Christian! Have you ever thought about this? I have. Christians need not be ashamed of the biblical view of sex. Actually, they are the ones who truly know how to handle sex.

"Righteousness" refers to doing right by another person; and truth (its Hebrew synonym is "faithfulness") speaks of not breaking covenants of fidelity, but promoting faithfulness among couples.

(b) With a Renewed Mind and Holy Affections

Paul encourages this commitment to goodness, "proving what is pleasing to the Lord." God's intent is not to have us learn by

the pain of experience, but that we might learn by the light of his Word. As we do so we will have renewed minds and thus will be able to test life at its deepest levels, "...proving what is pleasing to the Lord," says Paul. This requires the hard work of observation, thinking and meditating. Christians can't afford to have lazy minds, passively drifting along with the tide. What we need is to have renewed minds and holy affections.

So the apostle calls Christians to commit themselves to purity, truth, and to love.

But there is one final thing necessary to defeat the beast of immorality.

IV. Commitment To Evangelism (5:11-14)

And 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 rise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.'**

(a) Don't Hide In The Dark, Expose With The Light

Some Christians feel so threatened by the immorality prevalent all around them that they are tempted to take off and look for a wholesome environment where they can build a secure family life. But Paul has a different perspective. First, there is no place to hide. You will find immorality wherever you go. A glance at history proves that. And secondly, instead of being threatened by the fact of sexual immorality, Paul sees this phenomenon as an open door for evangelism.

Why is this? It is because sexual immorality destroys its victims. Think of the terrible plague of AIDS. Think on the fact that one out of seven teenagers already has a sexually transmitted disease. The toll resulting from sexual abuse creates such an intense level of emotional and physical pain that people are ready to quit playing games and respond to the truth of the gospel. Christians are the light of the world. Who is going to tell people how to be truly human and why God created them if we don't? And let us not witness like self-righteous prigs, holding up signs and rudely confronting people. Let us instead be like Jesus — personal, intimate, understanding, and compassionate. We shouldn't leave non-believers with the impression that their ethics offend us, but rather that we grieve for them because they aren't experiencing life as God designed it to be lived.

So expose everything with the light — and preach Christ. If you do these things, there is a side benefit for you: it will foster your own purity. At Stanford University, I joined a fraternity that did not have one Christian member, but I found it rather easy to overcome sexual temptation in our pagan frat house, because I led a Bible study there. This fact was so well known that they even took my initials and renamed me "Bible Monster"! With that label pinned on me, there was no way I could browse through the sex magazines that were lying around. As a marked man in that pagan environment I felt protected. A passive, secretive Christian, on the other hand, is much more prone to indulge in what is going on around him.

When things are thus exposed to the light, there is a great promise awaiting.

(b) Knowing The Promise Of The Light

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 rise from the dead,**

And Christ will shine on you.’ (5:13-14)

Light at first exposes. Then after time it gives off heat. Heat turns to flame, and flame consumes and purifies all that is impure, transforming it into light. You can't remain in the light and not have it transform you.

George MacDonald's words bear eloquent testimony to this:

[God] is a consuming fire, that only that which cannot be consumed may stand forth eternal. It is the nature of God, so terribly pure that it destroys all that is not pure as fire...He will have purity. It is not that the fire will burn us if we do not worship thus; but that the fire will burn us until we worship thus; yea, will go on burning within us after all that is foreign to it has yielded to its force. No longer with pain consuming, but as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God.

Concluding this passage on conquering immorality, the apostle quotes from Isaiah 60. There was a time when I thought that these words formed the Christian's appeal to the non-Christian world, but then I discovered these verses were originally addressed to Israel, the people of God:

**“Arise, shine; for you light has come,
And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness will cover the earth,
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the LORD will rise upon you,
And His glory will appear upon you.
And nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.”**

**“Lift up your eyes round about, and see;
They all gather together, they come to you.
Your sons will come from afar,
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.
Then you will see and be radiant,
And your heart will thrill and rejoice.” (60:1-5a)**

Here in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul addresses this word from Isaiah to the church. Let us have done with lesser things. Let us rise up, climb out of our graves, and gaze upon our magnificent Christ, “whose eyes are like a flame of fire.” As we allow his gaze to penetrate and purify us, his holiness will penetrate deep inside our very beings; then the world will come to us like a flood, seeking to learn about the Savior.

Our sexual drive is actually a token of our deeper, spiritual longings: we long to be possessed and owned and loved by God himself. Sexual desires, therefore, are truly satisfied only in Christ. When he shines on us, casting his burning, flaming brightness about us, out of the watching world will spring an international family of Christians. There is no thrill, no joy greater than that. I witnessed the birth of my first-born son David, and as I saw him cradled in my wife's arms, a sense of holiness overcame me. I remember thinking that romantic love was never as thrilling as being present at the birth of a newborn. In the same way, the greater purpose of sexuality is to witness to the miracle of new life in Christ. As we involve ourselves in this magnificent work, we will understand why God said to the prophet Isaiah,

**“Your sons will come from afar,
And your daughters will be carried in the arms.
Then you will see and be radiant,
And your heart will thrill and rejoice!”**

The wild beast of lust can never tamed by man, but it can be transcended by the love of the Lion of Judah.

In appreciation to God who alone conquers the wild beast of immorality, I want to close by reading wrote a poem that I wrote last evening:

Beauty and the Beast

What beast is this,
Garbed in light
Whose appetite
Craves the soul of man?

He stalks his victims with untold pleasures,
First bite excites and delights,
Then wounds and bleeds and festers
With perverted appetites.

His seducing fangs sink into the naive
Reducing their innocence, truth and purity
To figments of distant childhood dreams
Now shattered.

Then he retreats into the darkness,
His work is done, for every wounded prey
Repeats his craft, enhancing it more
On those yet born.

What can man do
Strangled by the beast
But weep, shackled in his shame,
His sterile vows shown vain?

What beast is this who roars
Upon the horizon seen
Whose appetite craves the souls of men
And walks in light unseen?

He stalks his prey with focused eye
His first bite wounds and bleeds,
Til a premature death foretold,
Takes us to thy grave.

Yet stunned and fallen,
He bids us awake, arise to our delight,
And with enlightened eyes
We behold Judah's Lion ablaze in light.

He cries, “Live my child and gaze on Me,
Before you victory stands, with shining train.
Look to the horizon, and see fertility,
Countless faces of your children purged of pain.”

O what can man do but weep with joy
For one vow made and kept
To restore childhood longings,
For a greater goodness than man had ever dreamt.

Blessed be the Lamb of God.

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