

## Ephesians 5:3-7

### Introduction

Last week, Paul summed up everything he said in chapter four, and really the entire Christian life with these words: “Therefore be imitators of God as *beloved* children, and *walk in love*, just as also Christ *loved* us and gave up Himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God, for a fragrant aroma.”

Now, in stark contrast to this “self-sacrific[ing] love,” Paul turns to its exact opposite. Paul turns “from behavior that imitates God and walks in love to a manner of life that is diametrically opposed.” (O’Brien; cf. Lincoln) The polar opposite of self-sacrificing love is “self-indulgent sensuality.” So Paul writes:

### I. “But sexual immorality and all impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as befits holy ones”

There’s a pattern of 3’s here in this next section of Ephesians. First, Paul mentions sexual immorality, impurity, and greed. In the next verse, Paul speaks of filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking. Then in the next verse Paul mentions again the sexually immoral, the impure, and the greedy. And then in verse 9 he refers to the good, the right, and the true. In each set, the three words are all talking about basically the same thing with maybe slightly different nuances. In fact, the first three sets are really all talking about one and the same thing, and that’s “sexual immorality” (the word that Paul begins with). “Sexual immorality... impurity... greed...”

“Impurity” (in this context) is a synonym for sexual immorality (cf. Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3, 7; 2 Cor. 12:21), but it helps Paul make the point that *any kind* of sexual immorality *whatsoever* (“*all impurity*”) – not just the really “bad” stuff – is unacceptable and wrong. “All impurity” eliminates all exceptions. “All impurity” eliminates anything and everything that might possibly be considered sexual in nature outside of the context of an unbreakable *marriage* commitment between one man and one woman – as created by God. The writer of Hebrews speaks of the “marriage bed” not because only the bed is to be reserved for marriage, but because every sexual expression of any kind is a gift that God sovereignly bestows within the context of the full covenant commitment of marriage. I would just point out here that “dating” and engagement are still not marriage. I wonder how much we’ve all been influenced and shaped by our culture even as we might feel good about how different we are?

“Sexual immorality... impurity... *greed*...” What does greed have to do with immorality and impurity? It’s simple, isn’t it? “Greed” is the “inner spring” or the source from which sexual immorality and all impurity flow (cf. Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3-5). Greed is that “insatiable desire [within]... for selfish gratification.” (O’Brien) The true *explanation* for sexual immorality and all impurity is greed. Paul said in chapter 4 that the unbelieving Gentiles “have given themselves over to *unrestrained degeneracy* for the working of every *impurity in greediness*.” (4:19) The old man, he says, is the one “being corrupted according to the *cravings* of deceit.” (4:22) And so in verse 5, Paul sums up the sexually immoral, the impure, and the greedy with one word – “*idolater*” (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9; Col. 3:5; Gal. 5:19-20). You see, if greed is the insatiable desire for

self-gratification, then it's also the idolatrous worship of self – where I am at the center, and where the world around me ultimately exists for *me* – for the satisfaction of *my* wants and *my* desires. All idolatry is a form of [greed], for by refusing to acknowledge all things as gifts sovereignly bestowed by the Creator, it seeks to seize them at will from the creation. (cf. Lincoln)

So in other words, sexual immorality and all impurity are not the result of our “natural drives” (whatever we may be told, or whatever it may “feel” like to us). This is the world’s justification for calling what is evil, good – for substituting words like “empowerment” and “liberation” and “innocent good times” for what the Bible calls immoral and impure. If Adam and Eve had not fallen, their “drives” would have been no weaker than ours, and yet there would have been no immorality or impurity (even for those who were single or being wrongfully deprived by a spouse) because there would have been no greed or idolatry. Jesus Himself is our example of one who was fully human and fully a man, and who remained single without sin. The reason Jesus knew no sexual sin is not because He was not fully human, but because there was no greed or idolatry within Him. Sexual immorality and impurity are not the result of “natural drives,” but rather the result of greed, which is idolatry – the insatiable desire for selfish gratification. Only in understanding this can true freedom be found, because now we can distinguish between a God-given, natural desire, and the perversion of that desire by sinful greed and idolatry.

In a sense, sexual immorality sums up our entire way of life apart from Christ because it's one of the ultimate expressions of living for self. So even if this specific sin has not been your struggle, it should be a picture to you of what your own sin really is. It is the living of life with *self* at the center, and so the breaking of God's command to love Him with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or greed...” What do we expect Paul to say next? These things must be *put off from you* and *put to death in you*? That's what Paul says in Colossians (Col. 3:5, 8), but not here. Here Paul says:

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or greed must not *even be named* among you...” There's no room for subtle distinctions or justifications, or playing around the edges. These things aren't even to be named among us. We're to be so far away from these things that we hardly have words for them in our vocabulary. I like what Thielman says: “This is... an *emphatic* way of saying that within the people of God a *culture* should prevail that is *utterly different* from the [‘Gentile’ culture] where these vices are so common.” Paul goes on to make this explicit:

These things “must not even be named among you, *as befits holy ones*.” You and I have been called *out* of the world in order that we might be radically *different* – in order that we might be *separated* unto God. The question is, what are you hearing right now – Law or Gospel? Rules or freedom? Or both? So many of us hear only “Law” (which burdens and condemns) when in fact Paul's concern is to bring us back to God's *grace* in *choosing* us to be *His holy children*.

✓ Ephesians 1:3-4 — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy* and *blameless* before Him in *love*.

And this, in turn, reminds us of Paul's opening greeting:

- ✓ Ephesians 1:1-2 — Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to *the saints [the holy ones]*... [who are] in Christ Jesus.

*Therefore*, “sexual immorality and all impurity or greed must not *even be named* among you – *as befits those whom God has graciously chosen and called to be holy – as befits you who are God's holy people.*” So now in light of what Paul just said about these things not even being “*named*” among us, he moves to a second list of three vices where each one has to do with our *speech*.

## **II. “nor filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.”**

All three of these words appear only here in the entire Greek New Testament. And they all three refer here to filthy, foolish, or crude talk about sexual things. This is precisely the kind of talk that's literally all around us. It's on our internet “news” pages, on billboards and digital advertising of every kind, on TV sitcoms, late night shows, crime shows, reality shows, medical dramas, and it's almost safe to say every single show on TV. We can think especially of the third word in Paul's list – “crude joking.” Lincoln says the idea here is “innuendo,” “insinuations,” “suggestive language,” and “double entendre.” It's the treating of sexual matters lightly or as “a topic of amusement.” (Lincoln) This kind of sexual talk, and worse is the bread and butter of almost *all* modern entertainment. It might be safe to say that none of us engage in this kind of talk ourselves. But the question is, how do we respond to this kind of talk in the world around us? Are we sure to register our disapproval as we keep on watching, or are we so revolted by the things that shouldn't even be named among us that we can only refuse to watch the show altogether?

Now some might be taking exception right now. And I'll be honest – I'm easily tempted to do the same. Maybe we claim Christian liberty and a clear conscience for the entertainment we enjoy. And maybe we think of those who would call our choices sinful as legalistic and puritanical. But I wonder if we'd also call the Apostle Paul himself legalistic and puritanical? If these verses really mean that almost every single show on TV is now repugnant to God's holy ones, are we to conclude that Paul is being legalistic? Far from it! Already, Paul has taken us back to the Gospel by reminding us of God's *grace* in *choosing* us who were undeserving to be His *holy children*. And now Paul takes us back to the Gospel yet *again*.

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or greed must not even be named among you, *as befits holy ones*; nor filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, *which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*” The Gospel shows us how to replace the “old” with the *joy* of the “*new*.” I hope we can totally identify with Lincoln when he says that “thanksgiving... appears [here] like an oasis in [the] desert.” But what is it about thanksgiving that makes it the perfect contrast to sexual immorality or allowing ourselves to enjoy entertainment with sexual talk? Why, of all things, does Paul contrast sexual immorality and sexual talk with thanksgiving? The answer is simple, and wonderful, and profound.

Idolatry worships the created thing rather than the Creator (Bruce). Idolatry worships the gift rather than the Giver. So it's very simple – the idolatrous person *must have* the gifts or he cannot be happy. Idolatry results in a powerful greed—even a craving—and it's this greed and craving which then results in sexual immorality and impurity – the seizing of the gift at will from the creation, rather than acknowledging all things as gifts *sovereignly* bestowed by our *good and loving Creator*. So Paul writes in Romans chapter one:

- ✓ Romans 1:21, 24-25 — For although they knew God, *they did not... give thanks to him*, but they became futile in their thinking... Therefore God gave them up in *the lusts of their hearts to impurity*... because they... *worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*, who is blessed forever!

Are you an idolater or a giver of thanks? “Thanksgiving [naturally results] in a Christian attitude to sex that is [the polar opposite of the] pagan attitude with its immorality and vulgarity.” (O’Brien) Thanksgiving is the antidote not just to sexual immorality, but to sexual vulgarity. If our speech is to be characterized not by filthiness, or foolish talk, or crude joking, but rather by the giving of thanks, then how can we not be wholly revolted and appalled by the sexual talk that’s all around us? This isn’t an arrogant, hypocritical, “I’m better than you” revulsion. It’s a revulsion that flows *from* our *thanksgiving* to God for His *unmerited, undeserved grace* in our own lives. It’s actually the attitude of *thanksgiving* that frees us up to despise the shows we once enjoyed. “Thanksgiving is almost a synonym for the [whole] Christian life. It is the response of gratitude to God [for His] saving activity in creation and redemption... a recognition that he is the ultimate source of every blessing.” (O’Brien) Lincoln puts it as a question:

“What is acknowledged as ultimate—God or some aspect of being in the world, such as sexuality or sensual gratification? ... Thanksgiving acknowledges God as the ultimate source of [our fulfillment and satisfaction and of every good gift], the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of life.” (Lincoln)

As the antidote to our idolatry, and greed, and sexual craving and immorality, thanksgiving is just the natural response of the one who’s experienced the grace of God in Jesus Christ. (cf. Lincoln; O’Brien) It was Paul himself who cried out in Ephesians chapter one:

- ✓ Ephesians 1:3 (cf. 1:12, 14) — *Blessed be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed us with every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places in Christ... *to the praise of the glory of His grace*.

When we are able to say this with all of our hearts, then we *will* be freed from the idolatry and greed and cravings of our sinful hearts. Then we *will* be set free to find in God our true satisfaction, and fulfillment, and our all in all.

But maybe someone’s not yet convinced. Maybe we’d still like to believe that our sexual immorality or our enjoyment of entertainment that contains sexual talk is somehow more “innocent” and “understandable” and “excusable” than what Paul has just implied.

“It is all too easy for believers to be influenced by the surrounding world and to succumb to its ways of thinking and behaving. The result is that what is acceptable to the culture of the day becomes acceptable in the church. This is particularly true in contemporary Western society in the area of sexual morality.” (O’Brien)

The attitude of our culture toward sex is pervasive and powerful, and it fundamentally and at every single point actively undermines and opposes the biblical teaching on *thanksgiving* and the *grateful worship of the Creator rather than the things He’s created*. The attitude of our culture has a powerful brainwashing, mind-numbing influence – especially when this cultural attitude is allowed to exist in the context of our “entertainment.” And so we are no longer revolted and appalled, unwilling even to hear these things named among us. To the contrary, we justify and excuse the expressions of our idolatry and greed as at least understandable, if not normal – even a part of the way God made us (like when Adam blamed “the woman whom *you gave* [God] to be with me” – Gen. 3:12). It’s in light of this powerful effect of our own sinfulness and the culture around us that Paul would lovingly seek to jolt us out of our apathy.

**III. “For this you must know with certainty, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or greedy (that is, an idolater), has no 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 on the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become fellow partakers with them.”**

If we read these words and truly believe them, how can we not tremble? The things we treat so lightly are the very things on account of which the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience. It’s on account of the things in the shows that we’re entertained by—the things that ought not to be named among us—that the wrath of God is coming on the people in those shows. The things that we’re tempted to justify, and rationalize, and excuse, are the very things that if not repented of and grieved over will exclude us from the kingdom of Christ and God. This, Paul says very emphatically, we *must know* with *certainty*. But are we really taking God at His Word?

Paul knows the power of our idolatry and greed. Paul knows the pervasive power of the culture around us. Paul knows that there is always the constant danger of being deceived by empty words. “It’s not really *that* bad.” “It’s understandable.” “You can enjoy that entertainment, or continue engaging in that sin without suffering the consequences.” “You will not surely die.” (Gen. 3:4) And so not just here, but over and over and over again, Paul warns us:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 — Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the *sexually immoral*, nor *idolaters*, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality... will inherit the kingdom of God.
- ✓ Galatians 5:19-21 — Now the works of the flesh are evident: *sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry*... of which I forewarn you... that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- ✓ Colossians 3:5-6 — Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: *sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and [greed]*, which is *idolatry*. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

- ✓ Hebrews 13:4 — Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the *sexually immoral* and adulterous.
- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 4:3–6 — For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from *sexual immorality*; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the *passion of lust* like the Gentiles who do not know God... because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.
- ✓ “For this you must know with certainty, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or greedy (that is, an idolater), has no 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 on the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become fellow partakers with them.”

Paul’s intent here is not that we should tremble and live in paranoia and fear. Paul’s intent is that we should tremble and *repent*. Paul’s intent is that we should tremble and be *revolted and appalled* at the mere thought of those things that call forth the holy wrath of God. Paul’s intent is that we should tremble and have all our greed and idolatry replaced with *thanksgiving* – thanksgiving to God for His undeserved, unmerited grace and mercy to us in Christ. “Therefore,” Paul exhorts us all, “do not become fellow partakers with them.” Hendriksen writes:

“In the light of God’s marvelous love and mercy in Christ, the upward call that was extended to you, your own profession of faith, and the wrath of God coming upon the sons of disobedience, think on your way, walk in paths of light and be done forever with the works of darkness.”