

Sermon No. 34 in Ephesians

Turn with me in your copy of God's Word to Ephesians 5. And please don't put your Bible up when we're done- you need to be like Bereans and search the Scriptures to see if these things are true. Ephesians 5, and I'm going to start at verse 1, but our text for today will be verses 3-5. Remember that this is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God, and is the only rule of what we are to believe and how we are to live.

[1] Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[3] But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. [4] Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. [5] For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

We are right in the thick of a section of Ephesians in which Paul is teaching us how we are to live the Christian life. Remember, in the first 3 chapters, Paul taught all about what Christ has done for us in the Gospel, and how we are saved by grace through faith, and we don't contribute one little thing to our salvation. I want you to notice that in the first three chapters, when Paul was telling us how we are saved, Paul did not tell us one thing to "do." Why? Because the emphasis is on how Christ saved us. Our salvation, 100%, from beginning to end, rests on what Christ has done for us.

But now, Paul is teaching us how to live as God's people. How do we live as those whom God saved and calls His own?

And he's been hitting on some areas that are going to change if we are really God's people. He already talked about putting off anger, getting rid of lies, getting rid of laziness, getting rid of bitterness, and in each case, he's told us that we **can** do so because of Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit.

Now he gets to an area that is very important for Christians to deal with: the area **sexual immorality**.

Now, some of you saw the title of today's sermon and you probably thought to yourself "polite people don't talk about things like this, especially not in church." Well, beloved, the church is about the only place that we as a culture aren't talking about this! And we have allowed the world to train our children about it because we haven't had the courage to talk about it.

So for those who are already a little uncomfortable because you don't think we should talk about stuff like this...how's that going for us? We have all but given up the Bible's view of sex because we were too *polite* to talk about it.

We're going to talk about it because we need to talk about it.

Now, parents who are a little nervous right now, I will my best to keep this sermon PG. We don't do children's church here, so we have many little ears among us. And I will say nothing provocative in the presence of these children that I would not say in the presence of my own.

Children, you may have some questions, and I hope you will take this as an opportunity on the way home or this afternoon to ask some questions. And parents, I hope you will not shy away, because if you're not teaching your children, the world already has.

Let me say a couple of things quickly about why we, of all people, need to talk about this:

1. **It is pervasive.** The Ephesians, to whom Paul was writing, came from a very immoral culture. The heart of Ephesus was the Temple of the goddess Diana, and the way in which worship happened was through sexual ritual with temple prostitutes. This is their past.

But friends, I want you to think about this: if one of these pagans from Ephesus came to our world today, I think they would blush. You see, in almost every culture in the history of the world, promiscuity took place behind closed doors. You had to look for it. Even for most of us growing up here, you had to look for it. **But today, it looks for you.** It is everywhere: billboards, computer screens, you don't have to look for it; it is looking for you.

2. **It's important for us to deal with because of the danger of sexual immorality.** Obviously, it destroys marriages. It destroys churches: I remember in seminary hearing a professor talk about churches where the pastors had committed adultery, and time after time, he said "and that church closed down." If you know the story of king David, you know that David's immorality led to the downfall of Israel.

But there is no greater danger than what it does to our souls. **Anyone who does not repent of being sexually immoral will ruin their souls for eternity.**

3. **We need to talk about it because sex is glorifying to God when rightly understood.** It is actually a very good part of God's very good creation, and God wants us to have nothing to do with sexual immorality because God wants us to fully enjoy the sexual relationship within marriage, and you cannot enjoy it as God intended if you are being immoral about it.

I want to tell you something that I think will shock you: **of all people in the history of the world, do you know who probably enjoyed physical intimacy most? The Puritans!** We often think of them as being opposed to anything good or fun. But that's not true: this was one area that they understood well: God created human relationships to be very good, but it is only very good when we follow God's guidelines for it! That's why they had so many children!

Friends, this is so difficult to understand because **we live in a society that both obsesses over sex and has no clue about it**, all at the same time. Human sexuality is a very good thing when used correctly.

There are only two understandings of sex that the Bible allows for: there is a **godly view and practice of sex**, and an **ungodly view and practice of sex**. Godly sex is very good, but immoral sex is very bad. And as long as immoral sex has a role in your life, then you cannot experience this concept called godly sex.

Now, on to the passage.

This passage actually contains a progression of thought. It starts with sexual immorality, which would include things like **adultery and fornication**. Then it goes to **covetousness**, which would include looking lustily on anyone who is not our spouse. And then it's going to go to something that seems the most harmless, which is that Paul says we're **not to speak crudely about sex**. And by the time we get there, some of us are thinking "Paul, aren't you being a bit prude?"

But actually I think that what Paul is doing is showing us that there is a progression of sexual sin, and it never starts with adultery. It starts with a wrong view of sexuality, which comes across in joking and crude references. When it comes to sexual sin, that which seems to be the most mundane is actually the most insidious. **He is moving from most obvious to most insidious.**

We don't realize that because we each bring a worldview that has been shaped by a highly sexualized culture. As we already said, you can't get far in this world without seeing things that, even 20 years ago, would have made people blush deeply. Please, do your best to step outside of our sexual ethic and into the Bible's sexual ethic, which is that **sex only belongs in the monogamous, committed, heterosexual marriage relationship, and anything outside of that is sin.**

Okay- I'm done with my introduction! Finally!

Let's look at the passage: **Verse 3**, Paul says Sexual immorality and all impurity have no place among the saints. Now, some of us are legalistic and we want to say "well, what qualifies as sexual immorality?" And the answer is this: anything sexual outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage.

Now, I don't understand how in the world we have created so much gray area here about this matter. The Bible's ethics on this matter are incredibly clear. No sex outside of heterosexual marriage. To do so is always and without excuse, sin. The Old and New Testaments both consistently bear witness to this same teaching. If anyone tries to tell you that this is not true, or that the Bible's teaching no longer applies, they are lying!

And Paul wrote about this because this was certainly part of at least some of these Ephesian's past. And it likely still was part of their lives. We see that this was the case in Corinth: Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:1, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you."

For those who struggle with sexual immorality, you're in good company. There has not been a church in the last 2000 years where this message did not apply. And I say that, not to say it's no big deal or to give you license to continue in sin, but *rather to say that you are in good company of those who have struggled with this and overcome it.*

Perhaps you feel utterly defeated in your struggle against sexual sin, so much so that you don't fight it at all anymore, let me share some encouragement: **As long as Jesus Christ lives at the right hand of God, Jesus Christ who understood every temptation common to man, and as long as the Holy Spirit lives in you, then you are not condemned to a life of defeat at the hands of sexual sin.**

I want to encourage you to do battle with it, because if you do not do battle right now, you will sink further and further into it. How does sexual sin hurt us?

For one thing, **it steals from you the joy that is reserved by God for the marriage bed.** It will complicate and damage your current marriage, and single folks if you do not repent of it, it will damage your future marriage.

Another thing sexual sin does is it **robs us of our spiritual vitality.** None of us, when laden with guilt and constantly aware of our hypocrisy due to unrepentant sin, can be spiritually alive. You will not grow spiritually while continuing in sexual sin.

And one more effect of sexual immorality: **it's a downward spiral**. A one-time act will almost always lead to a habit, which leads to an addiction.

Here is what is so deceptive about sexual sin: we perceive that in our sin, *we are exercising freedom*. But the more we do it, the more in bondage we are.

I want you to hear something very surprising from Romans 1. In Romans 1, Paul has been talking about the godless state of natural man apart from Christ. And he says there that sexual immorality, especially homosexuality, is one sign of God turning people over to judgment. Listen to verse 26: "For this reason (because of their godlessness) God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."

Now, you may be a man today and you've got perhaps a marriage in which you don't sense love and esteem in your wife, and along comes an attractive woman. And she's affirming of you, and she's even flattering of you, and you feel your heart being tugged in that direction.

And the Apostle Paul is saying you need to understand that this particular sin, husbands, is a sin that will destroy your **marriage**, your **home**, your **career**, and your **relationship with Christ**.

And it's the same thing for wives, you understand. A wife can be saying 'Look, I don't have a husband that is emotionally there for me. He doesn't understand me. He doesn't care about me. He doesn't spend time on me.' And then someone comes along that provides everything that he's not providing, and it seems so, so, right.

And maybe you're a young person... 'I'm young! I'm a young guy...I've got hormones.' Or maybe you're struggling with a same-sex attraction.

The Apostle Paul knows that sexual immorality comes in all varieties and great potency, and that they pull on our soul; and so, the Apostle Paul is trying to arm us with as many arguments in this as he can possibly give us.

You know, I don't know your exact situation, but I know this: God's will for you, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality."

Then in verse 3, **Paul moves down the spectrum to something that our culture would probably say is less harmful**: what he calls "**covetousness**." Here, **he's not talking about longing for something that doesn't belong to you**. Rather, he is talking about *someone* who doesn't belong to you. This is the first application of the tenth commandment: *you shall not covet your neighbor's wife*.

Adultery never just "happens." It starts with taking too long a glance, letting our minds wander where they ought not to, letting our flesh be tempted. I think of Job, who said, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look upon another woman."

Now, modern technology means today that covetousness means something different than it did 2000 years ago because of pornography.

- *35% of all internet downloads are related to pornography*

- *Every second 28,258 users are watching pornography on the internet*
- *47% of families in the United States reported that pornography is a problem in their home.*
- *The US spends about 11 billion dollars annually on pornography, which is more than the rest of the world combined.*
- *The average age that a child is now exposed to pornography in America is somewhere between 9 and 11.*

Yes, harmless.

Families, please be vigilant in this area. **Don't have computers without accountability software.** Don't give your child a phone or tablet without **some way for you to protect them.** When they have friends over, take the devices.

Now, some of you will say "my child wouldn't do that!" to which I say "would you?" And even if your child wouldn't do that, remember, **it is looking for them now.**

And as much as we would like to think we are, Christians are not immune: 60% of professing Christian men and 30% of professing Christian women admit to struggling with pornography on a regular basis. Wives and husbands, *you need to be allies in this fight.* Don't be judge, jury, and executioner for one another. Help one another in this area. Help one another- one of the purposes of marriage according to 1 Cor 7 is so that we aren't driven to immorality.

Let me say this plainly so there is no misunderstanding: **looking at pornography is sexually immoral.**

Friends, many of you have taken a bold stand because of homosexuality, and for that I commend you. But let me ask you a question: do you stand for the Bible's whole sexual ethic, or just those that you don't struggle with? **To condemn homosexuality but to laugh at pornography or adultery is hypocrisy.**

And that's the point Paul starts to make in verse 4: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving." He's moving further down the spectrum: it started with sexual immorality, then covetousness, and now it's even joking about these things.

Paul, why are you being so prude? Isn't humor a good thing?

Well, of course humor is a good thing, but this is not good humor. Joking about sexuality and body parts shows ignorance of God's ethic of sex and the human body.

Here's why this matters: **because filthy language and coarse joking relegate the God-ordained beauty of human sex to the realm of the tawdry and filthy and nasty.**

This is why **so many Christians don't know how to see sex as a good thing: because we don't know how to talk about it without making it seem nasty.** We have made it something to be ashamed of for so long, and then we get married and **we don't know how to see it as a gift from God!** We have treated it as something to be embarrassed by, and **it is not, as long as it is done in the context of heterosexual marriage!**

So here's what Paul's saying: we should have a zero tolerance policy for sexual immorality. No adultery, but to prevent adultery, we have to prevent looking covetously, so no pornography. And to prevent pornography, which utterly degrades and cheapens sex, we should never joke about sex in a way that makes it cheap or embarrassing. **The body will not act on what the mind will not let in!**

Women, let me plead with you for a moment: there is a way that you can dress that will accentuate the beauty of your inner spirit and bring glory to God. But if you dress in a way that intends to draw attention to your outer figure, to those things which God made specifically for your husband to enjoy, you may be causing your brothers to sin by looking lustfully after you. This is an area that Christian women ought to be so different from the rest of the world.

Now, we've talked about a lot of hard stuff today. Some of you, right now, you're thinking *what is the big deal?* *Everyone* does these things.

Well, I think **Paul knew that the Ephesians would say that as well, so look at verse 5:** "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

Are you uncomfortable yet? We believe in justification by faith alone, Paul! So how are you going to say that nobody who does these things can be saved? Did you forget what you wrote earlier in this same letter: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith? **Does this mean that the way to be saved is grace + sexual purity?**

No. But Paul sees something most of us don't. Look at the caveat he gave in verse 5: covetousness (that is, an idolater). **For Paul, sexual immorality is the ultimate expression of idolatry.** It is an outward expression of the worship of our own desires.

Sex was given for our own enjoyment and fulfillment, but given by God and only to be used rightly on God's terms. He created it to be incredibly fulfilling and even glorifying to Himself, but only as He has ordained it.

But along slithers Satan to each of us and he says "has God really said?" He will say to you the same thing that he said to Eve, "God is holding out on you. Do this if you really want the good life."

And what we do when we commit sexual immorality is we say to God "God, you are wrong. Your creation and your laws, they are wrong." And what we are doing when we commit sexual sin isn't just that we break a law, but **we are saying to God, "I will be my own God."** **It is the ultimate expression of idolatry- it is idolatry of self.**

And Paul can make this bold statement because he knows that idolatry is a product of a heart that does not know Jesus.

Turn in your Bibles to **1 Corinthians 6**. We're going to camp out there the rest of the time. Remember, Scripture interprets Scripture, so let's read 1 Cor 6 to understand Ephesians 5 a little better. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "Or 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, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Well...I'm out. But look at verse 11, which will be like the balm of Gilead to your

heart: And such were some of you. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

The beauty of the Gospel is that Paul can say "such WERE some of you." You *were* defined by those things. You *were* unrepentant. You *were* hellbound with no inheritance in God's kingdom.

So what changed? Christ changed *you*! You came to know Christ and He changed you. Not all at once. Not as quickly as we might like, but He changed you.

This is so, so important. Do you have sexual sin in your past, and you feel like you're damaged goods? Perhaps it was 20 years ago, perhaps it was 24 hours ago. Do you feel like you're wearing an invisible scarlet A? *Do you feel like God is off limits to you because of your past?*

Well, here is what is so amazing: **if you won't come to Christ in repentance, then all of that is true.** If you're here and you're pretending that all is well and you're hiding your sexual sin and your past and you are unrepentant, then that is true of you: you have no inheritance.

But Christ loves people who are an absolute mess. Christ loves to receive those who have made an utter train wreck of your life. He comes to you, 100%. **He doesn't come 99% and wait for you to clean yourself up a little bit and then you can know Him.** He doesn't say, "I'll take you but you're on the bench because of your past." He says "I love you just as you are, warts and all."

But here is how He proves His love for us: He doesn't leave us just as we are. He doesn't leave us in the **same pigsty of sexual sin that has nearly ruined our souls.** He cleans us up and doesn't let our past define our future.

This is why we are to be sexually pure: *not so that God will love us. We are to be pure because God loves us, and we are to live as His holy people.*

Do you understand how loved you are by God? Do you understand how special you are to God, regardless of what you have done? Paul says that is the answer to sexual sin:

Still in 1 Corinthians 6, look down at verse 13. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Paul means this: God the Father made you. There's a little name tag on the back of your neck that says "Made by God."

Then verse 15: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Paul means you belong to Christ. He purchased you, according to Acts 20, by His blood. And the nailprints in his hands are his receipt of purchasing you.

Then verse 19: "Do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit, within you, whom you have from God?" Just as the tabernacle and the Temple were God's dwelling place in the Old Testament, **you are God's dwelling place in the New.** God lives inside of you!

Do you get what that means? **Regardless of your past, you are holy ground. You are sacred to God. That's why in verse 3 he says we are to live "as is proper among the saints." Verse 4, he says foolish talk and coarse joking are out of place for you. Why? Because you are sacred- you are holy to God.**

Many years ago, we had a President who held the oval office in such high regard that he would not enter without wearing a coat and tie. He said that room is *the* room of the people of this great nation.

It did not matter if he was alone or not, day or night, he would not go in there without coat and tie because of his reverence for the sanctity of that room.

A few years later, another president used that same oval office to commit sexual immorality. And not only were people appalled to have a President do those things, but they were most appalled that it happened in the oval office, perhaps the closest thing we have to sacred space in our nation.

Friends, **you are God's sacred space.** He dwells in you. Your body was made by Him, and you were purchased by Christ's blood. **Don't bring the Holy Spirit of God into your sexual immorality, but holy as He is holy.**