

Kingdom Living – Eph. 5:3-7

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But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 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. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them – Eph. 5:3-7, ESV

Introduction: What is Your Kingdom? Who is Your King?

How do you respond when you hear that hundreds of Americans support ISIS and have openly, publicly expressed their support and even pledged allegiance to them? How do you feel when you hear that American citizens have travelled to Syria and have engaged in active combat for ISIS, helping them spread their reign of terror?

Surely these actions are un-American, right? At what point along this spectrum of activity does someone lose their American citizenship, their rights and privileges as Americans? Isn't it a little disturbing to think that potentially hundreds of ISIS supporters will cast ballots in elections in America this year?

If support for and involvement with ISIS is un-American, then in today's text, we're dealing with actions and activities that are just as un-Christian. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, then you have been granted citizenship in a heavenly kingdom, in the kingdom of Christ and God, as Paul says here in verse 5. For such citizens who have pledged allegiance to such a King, sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness are so improper that they should not even be named among us and filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking are also out of place.

So, what are these six sins and why does Paul name them as being inappropriate, out of place, out of line for believers? We can easily see that they are divided into two sets of three, and it seems clear that the first set of three is even worse than the second set of three.

I. What Must Not Even Be Named (v. 3, 5-7)

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.
– v. 3

So first, Paul names three things – sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness - which are the very opposite of the life of love he calls Christians to live in verse 2. These three sins are so contrary to a life of love and so unfitting for a professing Christian that Paul says they “must not even be named among you.” Furthermore, in verse 5, Paul says that people whose lives are characterized by these three sins “*have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*”

In Colossians 3:5, Paul lists these three among five things which Christians must “put to death” because they belong to their earthly, or fallen, nature: “*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*”

These earthly sins also show up in Ephesians 4:19, where they describe the mindset of unbelievers: “*They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*” While the precise word for sexual immorality is not used in 4:19, the idea is certainly there under the terms “sensuality” and “every kind of impurity” and the idea of being “greedy” for these things is the same word translated here as “covetousness.”

A. Sexual Immorality

The Greek word for sexual immorality here is “porneia” and it refers to any sexual activity outside of marriage – to premarital sex, to adultery, to sex with a prostitute. As you might have guessed, we do indeed get our word “pornography” from this word, as “pornography” literally means writings or graphic depictions of sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality is a particularly dangerous and deadly sin. Sometimes Christians get a bad reputation for being almost obsessed with sexual sins to the exclusion of other sins. Frankly, this accusation is usually made by people who disagree with what the Bible teaches about sexuality. The Bible does treat the sin of sexual immorality differently.

In I Corinthians 6:18, Paul says, “*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.*” In Galatians 5:19, sexual immorality is listed first in the works of the flesh, just as love is listed first as the fruit of the Spirit. So, we could say that sexual immorality is the first fruit of the flesh, just as love is the first fruit of the Spirit.

Or consider the very strong language Paul uses in I Thessalonians 4:3-8:

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; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (ESV)

The reason why sexual immorality is so serious is because sexual intimacy between a husband and his wife is so serious and so precious. Hebrews 13:4 says, “*Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*”

Marriage is to be held in honor and the marriage bed kept pure and undefiled because marriage is a model, an imitation, patterned after Christ’s love for the church, His bride, and of God’s intimate love for His people. Christ loves us, know us intimately, protects and cherishes us. And marriage is to be an earthly picture of that reality. Husbands are to love, know, cherish and delight in their wives, just as Christ does in the church, in His bride.

B. Impurity

The Greek word for impurity of “akatharsia.” It’s a negation of the word “katharos,” which means pure. So, it literally means a negation of purity, or impurity. Jesus used this word in Matthew 23:27 as a rebuke of the scribes and the Pharisees, saying, “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.*”

Together with sexual immorality, impurity is listed by Paul in Galatians 5 as the first two works of the flesh: “*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.*” (Galatians 5:19-21)

So, what exactly counts as impurity? Well, it’s a tricky term to define precisely, but it seems to be a very broad term inclusive of all kinds of impurity.

C. Covetousness

The word for covetousness or greed is commonly used for financial greed or materialistic coveting, but it also refers to the desire for more and more, as I mentioned earlier it is used in Ephesians 4:19: “*They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*”

The connection between financial/material covetousness and a greediness to practice every kind of impurity is this: a lack of contentment and satisfaction with what God has provided. The covetous person – whether greedy for material gain or for impurity – is dissatisfied, discontent, always wanting more than what God has provided.

In verse 5, Paul says that a covetous person is an idolater. In Colossians 3:5, Paul also identifies covetousness as idolatry. Those who are covetous are desiring something more than God, either some material possession or wealth in general or impure sexual pleasure. Covetousness is actually at the very heart of pagan idolatry. Almost all pagan idol-worship is designed to bring the worshipper sexual pleasure or material prosperity, which is why the fertility goddesses were and are always the most popular idols.

D. These Have No Share in the Kingdom (v. 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. – v. 5

In verse 5, Paul then says something very sobering about these three ugly and inappropriate sins. He says that people whose lives are characterized by such sins “have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” “The kingdom of Christ and of God” is an interesting expression. This is probably a reference to the present reign of Christ over His church and the coming kingdom of God, to be fully and finally established in the new heavens and the new earth when Jesus comes again.

In other words, Paul is saying that people whose lives are characterized and dominated by sexual immorality, impurity or covetousness – such that you could accurately describe them as being sexually immoral or impure

or covetous people – are not, in fact, subjects of King Jesus. They are not, in fact, subjects of His heavenly kingdom and will have no share in His inheritance in the kingdom of God to come.

Paul is saying that we must absolutely refuse to have anything to do with these sins because those whose lives are dominated and controlled by these sins are not true believers, are not children of God, are not redeemed heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. They may talk a good game, but they are deceivers or else are self-deceived.

Now we need to be careful and clear here: Paul is not talking about people who struggle against these desires, those who occasionally fall into these sins, those who are aware of the danger of these sins and are actively fighting against them. He is not saying that if you ever have sex outside of marriage or ever have impure thoughts or ever covet, then you're not really a Christian. That would probably disqualify anyone from being a true Christian.

So, what does Paul mean? Well, there have always been those in the church who have had a poisonous understanding of grace and sin, one that treats grace far too cheaply and takes sin far too lightly. These are people who openly, flagrantly and unrepentantly engage in sexual immorality, impurity and/or covetousness and who don't think they're wrong. Prosperity Gospel preachers teach covetousness as the Gospel, that godliness is a means to financial gain, a teaching explicitly condemned by Paul in I Timothy 6.

Likewise, in Paul's day and throughout the history of the church, some people have taught that sexual acts are not important or fall under Christian liberty. In John Calvin's day, these people in Geneva, Switzerland, were known as libertines, and they practiced wife-swapping and wife-sharing and Calvin fought a huge battle to get them disciplined by the church.

But we need to be careful in the other direction, too. We don't want to be too quick to condemn ourselves because we struggle with lustful thoughts or covetous desires, but neither do we want to make light of such desires. Hebrews 3:12-14 gives us this warning: *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”*

E. These Things Bring the Wrath of God (v. 6-7)

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them

To keep us from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, Paul's exhortation to us here in Ephesians 5 includes three warnings:

1. **He warns us against being deceived by false teachers in this area** and to remember that God's wrath comes because of these sins. Christian teachers who make light of sin or who dismiss concerns about holiness and obedience are dangerous false teachers who peddle a dangerous false gospel and give people false promises and assurances not based on God's word.
2. **He warns against becoming partners with those who are "sons of disobedience" and who practice such sins as a pattern of life.** This means that we should not become too intimately connected and committed to anyone – whether a professing believer or an unbeliever – whose life is characterized by these sins.

Of course, with unbelievers, we will always have some level of interactions and dealings with these kinds of people; unbelievers cannot really help but be motivated by sexual immorality, impurity and/or covetousness, since they are living for themselves and for their own pleasure. But we must avoid "becoming partners" or – to use another Pauline term – becoming "unequally yoked" with them.

But when it comes to our fellow believers, other professing Christians, God's standard is higher. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that the purpose for dis-associating ourselves from such professing Christians – those whose lives are known to be characterized by such sins – is that God might grant them repentance and bring them back to Himself. When such a person repents, forgiveness, love and reconciliation should be extended freely and fully, according to 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 –

For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

II. What is Out of Place (v. 4)

3. **The third warning in Paul's exhortation actually comes before the other two, in verse 4.** Here, Paul names three sins which are "out of place" for believers. These three sins are not as serious as the other three, but they are dangerous because they lead to the other three sins.

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place,

A. Filthiness

Filthiness is a similar term to impurity. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament, so it's hard to be 100% certain of its meaning, but it's just a little less severe than the word "impurity" and likely refers to filthy speech. It's basically a reference to obscenity – dirty language, foul speech.

B. Foolish Talk

"Foolish talk" is literally the words of a moron, the conversation of those without wisdom. The word "fool" here should be understood in the same way that Proverbs uses the term "fool." Consider these Proverbs:

Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge. – Proverbs 14:7

Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince. – Proverbs 17:7

Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool. – Proverbs 19:1

Speech that is lacking in knowledge, truth, integrity and wisdom is "fool-talk" and is out of place in the life of a believer.

Some translations use the terms "silly talk" or "jesting," which I don't think are appropriate translations because they make it seem like Christians should not have a sense of humor. Telling jokes or being silly is not a sin, as long as the humor is appropriate and not degrading.

C. Crude Joking

But some humor is not appropriate, which is what the third term refers to: "Crude joking" or "coarse jesting" refers to a type of bawdy humor that relies heavily on sexual innuendo, double entendre, etc.

Together, these three terms describe the kind of speech which is out of place for unbelievers. Some Christians who would never dream of engaging in sexual immorality or acts of impurity and who are not generally covetous people still have careless, false, crude, obscene or bawdy speech. Obscenity, innuendo, foolish talk devoid of truth and wisdom – Paul is saying that all of these things are out of place for Christians. Not only are these kinds of speech out of place in and of themselves - because they reflect poorly on the character of God, who is Holy and True - but they also reflect a heart that is in the process of being given over to sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness.

III. Instead . . . Thanksgiving (v. 4)

but instead let there be thanksgiving.

So, what should characterize the speech of believers instead of these three, instead of obscenity, fool-talk and crude joking or bawdy humor? What should characterize the life of believers instead of sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness? In contrast to all six of these sins of heart, life and speech, Paul responds with a single word: Thanksgiving!

In place of sexual immorality, thanksgiving. In place of impurity, thanksgiving. In place of covetousness, thanksgiving. In place of obscenity, thanksgiving. In place of fool-talk, thanksgiving. In place of crude humor, thanksgiving.

Does this seem like too much weight to place on the importance of thanksgiving?

In his commentary on this passage, Peter O'Brien says, "*Thanksgiving is almost a synonym for the Christian life.*" Does that seem too strong? O'Brien goes on to explain: "*It is the response of gratitude to God's saving activity in creation and redemption, and thus a recognition that he is the ultimate source of every blessing.*"

More than anything else, thanksgiving puts us in our proper place and puts God and His gifts in their proper perspective:

If I am truly thankful to God for my wife and if I express that thanksgiving regularly, specifically and sincerely, then this thanksgiving is the best protection against sexual immorality. Or if, like Paul himself, you are single and you are truly thankful for the gift of singleness and the freedom it gives you, that thanksgiving will protect you from sexual immorality or bitterness.

If I am truly thankful for God's material blessings to me, this guards my heart from covetousness.

Thankfulness for the gifts of language and truth protect us from the sins of fool-talk and obscenity.

Thanksgiving is the most powerful reflection of life-changing truth: God is God and I am not. Every good and perfect gift comes from Him. I have nothing but what He has given me. He is good and loving and has been very good and loving toward us, very kind and generous and gracious in so many ways. The discipline of thanksgiving re-tools our perspective and pulls us out of the deceptions of temptation.

And so the emphasis here in Ephesians is not so much on avoiding these bad things because they are so bad, although they are. Rather, the emphasis is on avoiding these things because what God has given is so much better, and to exchange what God has given for what Satan and the world would offer in exchange is to give into a cheat – to exchange the genuine good for a false imitation, the goodness of God for the sinister snare of our enemy.

It is interesting that the Greek word for "thanksgiving" here is "eucharistia" and the word "eucharist" is used in some Christians circles to speak of the Lord's Supper, which we are about to receive. In the Lord's Supper, we receive and give thanks for the grace of Gospel in the body and blood of Christ. This is a time of thanksgiving, a thanksgiving meal of sorts, - thanksgiving for the greatest gift of all, the gift of Jesus Christ.