

RCC in the Word
Week of March 4
Ephesians 5

Ephesians 5:3 - "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints."

There is no doubt that sexual immaturity is a problem in the church. Even among the people God has called to holiness, there is still the battle to be waged against sin. And as much as we aim to destroy the sin in our lives, we are not always victorious. Because sexual immaturity is a problem, we must study the Scriptures and openly discuss what the Scriptures demand of us. What kind of sexual immorality is found in the church? You find it in the news, unfortunately, all the time and perhaps you have seen it in your life or in the life of a friend - pornography, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, lustful desires, masturbation, sex outside of marriage, and so forth.

Several years ago, a pastor and seminary professor told me they no longer ask new students if they are struggling with pornography, they simply assume every student has a pornography problem. And it is not just a problem for men. The genre of writing called "mommy porn" made famous by one of the best selling series of books of all time, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Movies adapted from the books then followed. Consider also the vast majority of shows one scans through on Netflix that are filled with sexual immorality - and I hear of Christians enjoying these shows.

This verse in Ephesians chapter 5 is just one of the many passages in Scripture that speak to the issues of lust and immorality. The Bible speaks about these things because they are common to man. We have a sin problem. That's the root of the issue. We have a heart problem, a sin problem, a worship problem - you can think about it in any of those ways. It is that we desire something other than God. We are not satisfied by God and so we seek other things that we think will satisfy us.

What causes us to sin? Is it the environment? Is it when we find ourselves in places we shouldn't be? Is it the computer, the internet? Is it other people? Is it the flirting of another person? What causes us to sin? This answer is key; we must understand this if we want to overcome sin in our lives. When we sin, it's our own evil desire that entices us. James 1:14-15 says, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death." And Jesus taught, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matthew 15:19). So what causes us to sin? We do. It's us. Nobody else, no situation or circumstance. We have no excuse for our sin. It's just each of us individually, you and me.

Though the source of our sin is our own evil desires, the One who is offended is God. When we choose lust, we are actively rejecting God. Lust, like any sin, is always based on the same lie— that satisfaction will be found apart from God. Lust is an idolatrous and ultimately insatiable desire that rejects God's rule and seeks satisfaction apart from Him. As we read earlier in Ephesians 3 God's standard for his people is clear. This is to be our standard of holiness.

Unfortunately, some of us think we can have a diet mentality towards lust. We want to cut back on it because it makes us feel bad and it's not healthy. But lust is just too tasty for us to give up completely. Surely God will understand, we reason, if we break our diet. The Bible teaches the opposite. God calls us to eliminate any kind of impurity in our thoughts and actions. Not even a hint.

Sounds like a good idea right? But is it possible? Seems awful hard. How can we fight our sin? Willpower won't work. God's standard of not even a hint quickly brings us to the end of our own ability and effort. It reminds us that God's standard is so much higher than the standards we place on ourselves that only the victory of Christ's death and resurrection can provide the right power and the right motive needed to change us. Only the motive of grace— trust in the undeserved favor of God— can inspire us to pursue holiness free from fear and shame.

Why is God against lust? If we ever expect to find victory over lust, we must believe with our whole heart that God is against our lust not because He is opposed to pleasure, but because He is so committed to it. God wants us to despair in our own strength so that we have no other option but to throw ourselves on His grace. That's the mystery of His plan. You will find His strength in your weakness. As you despair in yourself, you will find hope in Him. And as you turn your back on lust, you will discover that true pleasure is something only God can give.

God's standard of holiness for us is "not even a hint." That's because lust never stays at the level of "just a hint." In Ephesians 4:19, Paul describes this endless cycle of lust. He speaks about those who have turned away from God and says, "Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." That's the payoff of lust—"a continual lust for more."

Lust's power comes from the promise that it gives that something besides God that can make us happy. What this means is that the only way to overcome the power of lust in our lives is by finding better promises. The key to holiness is satisfaction in God— faith that He is more to be desired than anything this world has to offer. We're not just turning away from lust; we're turning toward true satisfaction and joy in God.

Sexual immorality is also a corporate concern for the church: what the individual member of the church does is not merely an individual matter. The issue is the responsibility of the whole community. Let me say it another way, we are responsible for one another. We are responsible for sexual sin in our church. Sexual sin is often hidden. Maybe hidden for years. Most oftentimes it never just happens, but it builds. It's like what we read in Ephesians 4:19 - even a hint of lust leads to a continual lusting for more. So it can remain hidden for years. But that does not absolve us all from our responsibility of the purity of the church. (See also the corporate responsibility of the church in regards to sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 5.) Believers share a spiritual union with other believers and the actions of individuals affect the whole church. As a result, the church needs to stand guard against such wickedness, sometimes going so far as to discipline its members.

The fact that sexual immorality is sinful should not lead to despair, but rather hope. The God who envisioned and created sexuality is for sexuality, within the parameters that He has created it to best function within. The God who calls you to flee from sexual immorality has given you legs to run, through the gospel of His Son. Keep fighting. Keep warring. Keep wrestling. Persevere in the work of sanctification. Get up when you fall; confess your shortcomings to God and others, and ask for help. Look to Christ and trust that He is better.

We're in this together. This is our battle. This fight against sexual immorality is given to the entire church. We don't fight this alone. We must be in this together. In Hebrews, and from the writings of Paul, sexual sin in one member is never separated from the overall health of the church. So sexual immorality is a church-wide concern. It's not just his problem or her problem, it's our problem. So let's expose sexual sin for what it is, let's deal humbly, gracefully, truthfully and mercifully when it appears, and let's shine the light of God's truth, of God's love, of his goodness, and of the satisfaction found in him, so that none of us fall to this temptation.

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