



Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.
by Don Hooton

Lesson 8 | SINS of IMPURITY: *sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity* April 19 & 26, 2023

As we noted in lesson 7, part one of this section on sins of impurity, **we are commanded** to crucify the flesh. Surely we can do this because Paul said Christians *have crucified the flesh* (Galatians 5:24). In Romans 6:6, he said, *“knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.”* Further, in Colossians 3:5, he said, *“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion...”* In Ephesians 4, Paul wrote, *“But that is not how you came to know Christ, assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, to take off [g] your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires...”* Note the footnote on verse 22, [g] *This means: take off (as a command).* CSB.

And as we have noted in previous lessons, Cain was commanded by God (outside of Eden, and as an heir of whatever Adam had brought into the world): “If you do what is right, won’t you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but **you must rule over it.**” (Genesis 4:7). So, repentance is not something that the Holy Spirit grants, it is something that God commands. Just as Jesus said, *“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (Matthew 4:17); and then he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done, *because they did not repent* (Matthew 11:20). The command to rule over sin – and to repent of sin – is commanded in the broken world where man is sinful. Consequently, the premise underlying Augustinian *Original Sin* and Calvinism’s *total hereditary depravity* is unfounded.

In the list of the works of the flesh that Paul has made to the Galatians, he says,

- “I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh” (5:16).
- “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (5:24-25).

In the last lesson, we presented a chart that compared Paul’s lists of sins. But even in the list we are covering in the works of the flesh, it is not a complete list of every type of sin. Even Paul acknowledges such by saying, *“and anything similar.”* See the chart on the previous lesson *in which we began our study of the...*

SINS of IMPURITY: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity (April 19, 26).

The list of these sins are sins of impurity. *And this impurity is connected to sexual impurities.* The sexual immorality of our day seems to be wretched but the times which Paul wrote about were bad, if not worse.

Already noted are several examples of sexual life in the Greco-Roman world. One was Demosthenes who said, “We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for the day-to-day needs of the body, but we have wives in order to produce children legitimately and to have a trustworthy guardian of our homes” (Against Neaera, quoted, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 573 B). Historian Edward Gibbon wrote: “Of the first fifteen Emperors, Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct. Julius Caesar was notoriously the lover of King Nicomedes of Bithynia. ‘The queen’s rival,’ they called him, and his passion was the subject of the ribald songs the soldiers sang. Nero ‘married’ a castrated youth called Sporus and went in marriage procession with him throughout the streets of Rome, and he himself was ‘married’ to a freedman called Doryphorus.” So, this was in the mind of the Apostle as he penned these works of the flesh.

Sexual immorality is from *porneia*, which is often translated as fornication. Word studies find that *porneia* in Old Testament times had strong associations with harlotry and meant “to sell” and referred originally to prostitutes and prostitution. Over time, it came to mean the one who visits a prostitute and then began to be applied to adultery. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Kittel tells us that the rabbis



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believed "unnatural forms of intercourse" would also be *porneia*. That said, it is apparent that in Jesus' day **sexual activity with a person one is not married to** would meet the definition of *porneia*. A man and woman who are physically intimate with one another and are having or simulating sexual relations would easily fit the definition and standard use of *porneia* in Jesus' time. To be physically intimate with someone not your mate, making physical contact with another person in a sexual way, is *porneia*.

"Fornication," i.e., the Greek "*porneia*," describes a much larger class of activities, however, than "intercourse between unmarried people" (i.e., adultery). It is, in fact, the root that we get our word "porno" from, and it covers about the same broad class of behaviors as "porno" does to us today.

"Moral impurity" is *akatharsia* from which the word catharsis or "cleansing" comes. The alpha at the beginning of the word makes it a negative, meaning: "not cleansing" or "filth" or "filthiness." It literally meant "refuse" and was used of the contents of graves. From this it came to be used of sexual sins. Sexual immorality frustrates the purpose of God's call. Pagan cults promoted unclean ceremonies, but Christ's plans for a Christian are to clean him up. It also is a more general term than immorality, going beyond the act to the evil thoughts and intentions of the mind. It could include aspects of sexuality that is practiced outside the norm or natural, including what would be child abuse and "kink" as some would say. This word was used in other ancient writings to refer to pus that oozed from an unclean wound.

"Promiscuity" or sensuality is *aselgeia* which originally referred to any excess or lack of restraint but came to be primarily associated with sexual excess. It is *unbridled nonrestraint* that is its connection. It is a fixation of sexuality (c.f. Ephesians 4:19). It speaks of someone who flaunts their immorality, throwing off all restraint and having no sense of shame, propriety, or embarrassment. William Barclay wrote: "The great characteristic of *aselgeia* is this, the bad man usually tries to hide his sin; but the man who has *aselgeia* in his soul does not care how much he shocks public opinion so long as he can gratify his desires."

1Thessalonians 4:1-8 | "Additionally then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received instruction from us on how you should live and please God—as you are doing—do this even more. 2 For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, 4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God. 6 This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. 7 For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness. 8 Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.."

These words of Paul to Thessalonica cast even more light. In view of the cultural background mentioned above, it must have been true in Thessalonica. The moral climate in the Roman Empire was morally decadent. "Immorality was a way of life; and, thanks to slavery, people had the leisure time to indulge in the latest pleasures. The Christian message of holy living was new to that culture, and it was not easy for these young believers to fight the temptations around them" (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, 72).

William Barclay observes: 'In Rome, for the first five hundred and twenty years of the Republic, there had not been one single divorce; but now, under the Empire, as it has been put, divorce was a matter of caprice. As Seneca said, "Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married." In Rome the years were identified by the names of the consuls; but it was said that fashionable ladies identified the years by the names of their husbands. Juvenal quotes an instance of a woman who had eight husbands in five years. Morality was dead.' (William Barclay, *The Letters to The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 231).

So, with a gentle and general reminder, the Apostles said we *ask* and we *encourage* (or, *urge*) to "live" (literally, "walk") with emphasis on actions, and "please God," with emphasis on motives. Learning to live and please God **is a matter of biblical instruction**. While there is a sense in which there is a moral ought



Wretched Man I Am

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that the conscience was designed to manage (c.f. Romans 1:18ff), Christians are reminded that the Lord has instructed them how to please Him (c.f. Colossians 2:6). In the Old Testament, Israel was commanded to walk in His ways, statutes, and laws, i.e., according to the Word (Leviticus 26:3; Deuteronomy 5:33; 8:6; 10:12). And to Paul, this is a “how you must live.” *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live”* (c.f. Titus 2:11-14). “Walking” with God in Scripture is always parallel to “Pleasing” God. In Genesis 5:22, “Enoch walked with God” in the Hebrew text; but when translated into Greek in the Septuagint (LXX), it is “Enoch pleased God” which is what Hebrews (11:5) quotes. In this command to walk with God (in step with the Spirit), Paul shows that to please God, we must walk with Him in the light of *His Word*, i.e., the will of God (1Thessalonians 4:3).

Sex is not evil. From the beginning God created marriage as a sacred union between one man and one woman; sex was integral in that union for the continuance of the race and its implicit pleasure *in marriage*. What makes many of man’s desires evil is his self-centered commitment to follow those desires contrary to God’s will and at the expense or exploitation of others. This is “your sanctification.” “Sanctification” is the Greek *hagiasmos*, from *hagiazō*, “to set apart, consecrate, dedicate, sanctify.”

So then, **Christians are to KEEP AWAY from SEXUAL IMMORALITY** (3b). “Keep away from” is *apecho*, “to hold back, keep off, be distant.” In the middle voice as used here, it means “to hold oneself from, avoid.” The middle voice draws attention to *the subject’s personal participation in the action on himself with vested interest*. This stresses **personal responsibility** along with the benefits that will result in pleasing God and protecting ourselves from sin and avoiding its consequences (see 4:6-8).

“While *porneia* means primarily traffic with harlots (*pornai*), ... it may denote any form of illicit sexual relationship. But “immorality” is too vague a rendering. In some New Testament passages *porneia* appears to have a more general sense. Christianity from the outset has sanctified sexual union within marriage (as in Judaism); outside marriage it was forbidden. This was a strange notion in the pagan society to which the gospel was first brought; there various forms of extramarital sexual union were tolerated and some were even encouraged. A man might have a mistress (*hetaira*) who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine (*pollake*), while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot (*porne*). ... There was no body of public opinion to discourage *porneia*, ... Certain forms of public religion, indeed, involved ritual *porneia*. In Thessalonica it was sanctioned by the cult of Cabiri of Samothrace” (F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians*, 82). Christians are to avoid and abstain from any and every form of sexual practice that lies outside the circle of God’s revealed will; Christians are to avoid adultery, premarital and extramarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other perversions.

Christians are to KNOW HOW to CONTROL (or, possess) YOUR VESSEL (4-5). Moving from the general to the specific (and from the positive to the negative), Paul urges Christians to know their “vessel”. There are two prominent ways to interpret this verse. The debate concerns what “vessel” (*skeuos*) and what it means to “control” or to “possess.” If “vessel” refers figuratively to one’s own body, some interpret verse 4 to mean, “learn how to control one’s own body with its sexual passions since our own bodies are our vessels” (2Corinthians 4:7; 2Timothy 2:20-21). This would be a command to learn and apply what God’s Word says about self-control of one’s body and sexual urges.

A second and equally prominent view (as suggested by the NET Bible’s translation) holds this clause to mean that believers are to learn how to acquire a spouse (i.e., vessel) and live with one’s spouse in the sanctity of marriage. In this view, the verse deals with the approach and maintenance of the marriage relationship particularly.

The reasons offered are: 1) “Possess” is *ktaomai* which, in the New Testament, is used in the sense of “acquire, purchase for oneself, or gain.” Compare Luke 18:12; 21:19; Matthew 10:9; Acts 1:18; 8:20; 22:28. In none of these passages is this word used in the sense of “get control over or mastery over.” 2) *ktaomai*



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was frequently used of courtship and contracting a marriage (cf. LXX uses kataomai in Ruth 4:5, 10). And 3) “Vessel,” *skeuos*, is used of any instrument, object or thing used for any purpose. It is used (1) of vessels in religious worship (temple vessels), (2) of men as instruments of the Lord (Acts 9:15; 2 Cor. 4:7), and (3) of husband and wife as vessels (1 Pet. 3:7). So, the application is that Paul reasoned that the way to avoid sexual impurity is through marriage and a proper understanding of sex and marriage as God designed it, with the positive caveat, “in holiness and honor.” This is the real objective of marriage.

Then verse 5 warns against the wrong goal that must not be the objective of marriage. Christians should not enter marriage, as the unbelieving world does, simply because of passionate lust. “Passionate” is *pathos* and refers to what one suffers or experiences as in suffering, like the passion of Christ, or of sexual passion. “Lust” is *epithumia*, “desire, longing, craving.” You only have to read the Song of Solomon to see that the sexual passion between a husband and wife is holy in this love poem. It only becomes wrong when it controls one’s life and goes beyond the limits of the marriage relationship in which there is personal commitment to each partner for life.

DO NOT TRESPASS AND DEFRAUD A BROTHER (6a). “*This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner...*” A biblical approach to marriage and sex according to these instructions will keep one from violating the rights and taking advantage of others in the matter of sex and marriage. In 4:4-5, Paul appealed that the importance of sexual purity was to obey God’s will (3); Here (6), Paul urged it on the bases of its immoral behavior against others. But who is “the brother”? Typically, the Apostle uses “brother” as a term for believers, but due to the context, many see “the brother” in this verse as most likely another person, not necessarily another Christian male. While Paul use of brother always, with the proposed exception, refers to the brother-believer, it is possible to view this as a reference to the brother-neighbor. Paul’s point is that just as stealing is a sin against our neighbor, so also is sexual immorality.

Then Paul offers three reasons for obedience to this sexual walk:

1. God is avenger of all sin (6b, see Romans 6:23a, Hebrews 13:4).
2. God called us to holiness (7, “For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.”). Sexual sin clearly goes against God’s calling for believers. With the word, “holiness” the Apostle again called their attention to the general principle that must guide the believer’s life.
3. God is the source of the purity of sex. First he says, sexual purity is grounded in the truth of God’s holy revelation. It is something which man normally will not arrive at on his own because of his own self-centered interest. The point Paul makes is that God has not been silent; He has spoken and revealed His will in both the Old and New Testaments to protect man from himself and to bring him into a life-changing relationship with the living God. Sexual purity is simply a practical application of the basic truths of God’s revelation and reveal His holy will.

Paul’s attitudes toward sexual uncleanness did not arise from his background or personal preferences. They were the logical consequences of divine revelation. The Thessalonians and later readers of this epistle should realize that to reject these instructions is to reject the Person from whom they came originally, that is, God.⁹³

Future Lessons

- SINS of IMPURITY: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity (April 19, 26)
- SINS of IDOLATRY: idolatry, sorcery (May 3)
- SINS of INTEMPERANCE: drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar (May 10).
- SINS of HOSTILITY: hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, and envy (May 17, 24, 31)