

"Restoring Sexual Sanity"

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Ephesians 5:3-7

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"A pastor should not preach a sermon on sex until he has been at a church for at least seven years." I remember reading that advice many years ago, and after 28+ years, it is time to address the topic. Oh, there have been a few sermons devoted to this subject over the years, but frankly, the Bible focuses more on sex than my sermons do. As we continue our journey through the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we come to a passage that warns us how dangerous sexual immorality is to our souls. If I decided, "Hey sex is a subject that makes people uncomfortable, I think we will just skip over these verse in Ephesians 5," I would not be doing the job God has called me to do, and you pay me to do. When God speaks about any topic, including sex, we all need to listen. Whether or not this is a sermon I want to preach or one to which you want to listen, is not really important. What matters is that we hear and heed His words. Let's pause and pray that the Lord would enable us to do this today.

"Pastor Dan, I am sorry, but I really am not interested in what the Bible has to say about sex and sexual behavior. Those words are 2000 years old. We have learned so much about human sexuality in recent decades. We really need to rely on science, not the Bible to determine our views on sex." Well, I think science obviously informs our understanding of human biology and how sex works. Science, however, has really nothing to say to us about sexual morality. Nothing. "Scientism," which is what many people mean by the term "science" has no room for God or for objective morality. It rejects prohibitions against not only premarital sex and homosexual conduct, but also again adultery and incest. Many folks say any consensual sexual relationship between adults is permissible. However, at least some "scientists" ask "Where did the 'consenting adult' standard come from?" They claim that pedophilia is normal and rape is natural. Really? My point is that "following science" will lead us to sexual anarchy. Yet, I think almost everyone knows that not only do there need to be some rules for sexual conduct, but those rules already exist... So where do the rules come from? I would suggest that both reason and experience point to the sexual morality spelled out in the Bible, as being beneficial for the well-being of both individuals

and society. That is certainly no surprise, if I am correct, that what is taught in the Bible are not just the opinions of some first century Jews, but truth revealed by the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. And when God reveals truth we need to listen.

That is the first reason this is an important topic, but there is also a second reason. Many Christians struggle with sexuality and sexual sin. One study found 45% of evangelical Christians admitted to having an inappropriate sexual relationship during their marriage. Many others may not have had inappropriate physical contact, but they still struggle with lust and pornography. A Christian counselor one told me about a couple who was upset because their six year-old sneaked downstairs and watched an X-rated movie on the Playboy channel. The counselor asked them, "So why does a Christian family subscribe to the Playboy channel?" A few years ago a study by Psychology Today found that 80% of men and 26% of women between the ages of 28-55 had viewed internet pornography sometime during the last seven days. Some of those 80% and 26%, are folks who attend church and profess to be Christians. Folks, we need to talk about sexual sin and sexual purity because these are issues with which many Christians struggle. Including pastors and other ministry leaders.

Many Christians are being hurt, sometimes crippled, because a pastor or other leader falls into sexual sin. The survey I mentioned earlier said 33% of pastors admitted to inappropriate sexual contact during their ministry. I know the names of many well-known pastors and plenty of not so well-known pastors who are no longer in ministry because of sexual sin. One of the names on the list is my brother, who after serving as a pastor at his church for 23 years, had to resign because of sinful sexual relationships. This is a reminder that folks who are very committed Christians, whose lives are devoted to serving God and other people, can still commit sexual sin. In fact, the vast majority of us in this room are much more likely to fall into some type of sexual sin than rob a bank, sell illegal drugs, or beat up someone they don't like. Those of us who are committed to the gospel and church of Jesus Christ need to pay close

attention to our text and topic today. We may think we are doing just fine, but as Paul warns in **1 Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.** If you think you are immune from falling into sexual sin, you may be kidding yourself.

So folks, God has spelled out the rules to guide our sexual behavior, and we, including many pastors and Christians, we are not doing a very good job at following them. That is why our text and topic today are important. If you are still not sure then listen to what Dr. William Coles writes: *“Christians need to learn that the open discussion of sex in our society is not wrong, rather the context of that discussion is the problem. Nothing is gained by a conspiracy of silence. Our sex-saturated society needs as its antidote not a return to repression and ignorance, but a discussion of sex in its proper context. What our times require is what the Bible gives us: A full, frank and open facing of the facts of sexuality in human life, but in the biblical context of divine sovereignty.”*

So, what does the Lord have to say about sex in our text? First, the apostle Paul begins by telling us that we should avoid sexual sin. Paul is writing to folks in the first century Ephesian church, but these are also God’s words for at all times. And in all places, including Minnesota’s Iron Range, 2022. **Ephesians 5:3 But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be names among you, as is proper among saints.** Sexual immorality includes adultery and fornication. The latter simply refers to sexual intimacy outside of a husband/wife marriage, homosexual or heterosexual. However, Paul is not just concerned about the physical act. Lustful thoughts, whether triggered by pornography or some other way are also impure and immoral. Remember Jesus’ statement in **Matthew 5:27, 28 You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** Jesus does not mean if you have a lustful thought you might as well act on it because you have already sinned. Not at all. Rather, He is making it clear that impure thoughts are sinful, not pleasing to God.

Now, in our text Paul also mentions covetousness, or greed. We cannot be sure, but I don’t think Paul is talking about an insatiable desire for money or

material possessions. I suspect he is referring to a desire for an inappropriate sexual relationship. In the Old Testament, the tenth commandment specifically says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” This also point to how selfish sexual sin is. Many pretend the reason they get involved in an affair is because they are in love with another person. Friends, it is not love, but almost always selfishness that motivates someone to break their marriage vows. Forsaking one’s spouse for someone younger, someone more attractive, someone wealthy, or someone more interesting is hardly an act of love. In a marriage, the sexual relationship should be a part of love. Outside of marriage, it is usually not love, but selfishness that propels the sexual sin. And Paul says this type of behavior, this type of desire, does not belong in a Christian’s life.

Second, we should avoid dirty talk. It has no place in a Christian’s life. **Ephesians 5:4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.** I think Paul is referring to the type of talk many of you hear at work or school every day. Because I am a pastor, a lot of people avoid speaking this way when they are around me, but I know it is pretty common. A few years ago, a 90-year-old woman in the nursing home wanted to tell me a dirty joke. Now, some of you might think, “Oh, Pastor Dan. I know it can get out of hand, but isn’t Paul being a little prudish here?” As someone asked, “What is wrong with a good, clean, dirty joke?” Well folks, the answer is “Plenty.” Sex is a serious matter. Yes, sometimes it is funny, and I am sure there are clean jokes about sex, but almost all of the sexual humor I hear is clearly filthiness, foolish talk, or crude joking. I suspect William Temple was on to something when he said, *“Christians don’t joke about sex for the same reason they don’t hoke about Holy Communion. It is not that sex is nasty, it is that sex is sacred and to joke about it is profanity.”*

A big problem is that joking about sex tends to lead to a lax attitude toward sexual sin. Someone said, “Sex is like fire. In the fireplace it is warm and delightful, but outside of the fireplace it can be very destructive.” When we start joking about sex, especially sexual immorality, we are playing with fire. When I was a kid we used to play a game, a pretty dumb game. We would bounce a ball off the wall of the school building. The object of the game was to throw the ball as close to a window as

possible without hitting it. Not smart. Yet, that is what we are doing when we joke about sexual immorality. Sexual sin is dangerous enough that we should try to stay far away from it. That is why Paul says to avoid filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking. There should not be even a hint of sexual immorality among us, because dirty talk really has no place in a Christian's life. Children's magazines sometimes have a "What's wrong with this picture?" feature. You look at it and see maybe a pig up in a tree, a cow driving a tractor or the farmer munching on some hay. These are things that are out of place or don't make sense. Friends, if we see a picture of a Christian, someone who professes to be a believer in Jesus, who goes to church and sings worship songs with enthusiasm, but during the week is telling crude jokes or laughing at filthy talk, there is something wrong with this picture. Something is out of place. This makes no more sense in a Christian's life than a pig up a tree.

Third, Christians should be thankful for sex. That is the proper Christian attitude. **Ephesians 5:4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.** Maybe Paul is talking about being thankful for good food and a nice home. But, that doesn't really fit here. I think he is saying instead of foolish talk and dirty jokes we should be expressing thanks to God for the gift of sex. As Christians, we need to do more than just avoid sexual sin. The Bible is not against sex any more than a fireman is against fire in the fireplace. In the proper context, sex is a wonderful gift from God and for which we should be thankful. The Bible views a marriage between a man and woman as intrinsically good. What is not good, according to Genesis 2:18 is for man to be alone. Yes, God calls some to being single and celibate, and that is a good thing as well. Yet, marriage is intended to be a wonderful expression of love between two people that is modeled on the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. We will explore that more later in this chapter. Because sexual intimacy is an important part of the marriage relationship, it is something which is to be cherished and celebrated. In his community, John Stott, who incidentally was never married, says "*Paul teaches that sex is something about which pagans joke, but for which Christians express gratitude.*"

Augustine, is recognized as one of Christianity's great theologians. I would place him in the top four since the apostle Paul. But Augustine really messed up the Church and a lot of individual Christians with some of his teachings on sex. Because of his own struggle with sexual sin, Augustine taught that it would be best if human procreation could occur without a sexual relationship. However, if there had to be sex, he said it would be best if it were not pleasurable. He was wrong, though it is interesting that reproductive technologies now make procreation possible without a sexual relationship. God intended sex as a beautiful gift for human beings. Yet, he also determined that this gift would be destructive if used outside the proper context, marriage. Within that relationship, sex is to be enjoyed with gratitude to God. Surveys have found that the people who report the most satisfaction in their sexual relationship are those who are married and faithful to their spouse. The love and security in a good marriage cannot be replaced in other relationships. That is why Paul says our attitude toward sex should be characterized by thanksgiving.

Fourth, Paul concludes by giving us this warning: **Ephesians 5: 5-7 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.** Folks, that is pretty heavy stuff and we need to be careful not to misunderstand what this text means. Paul is not saying sexual sin is the unforgivable sin. David, the King of Israel was blatantly guilty of adultery and God forgave him for that. When I think of all the Christians I know who have been involved in sexual sin, I am confident many of them are forgiven and will be in heaven. Yet, that doesn't mean this is not serious sin. Such behavior is a stark contrast to the holiness and purity of God, a holiness we are called to imitate. "Be Holy, for I am Holy." When we are involved in sexual immorality, or have lustful thoughts, we have sinned, often against another person, and always against God. That is serious. To label any type of sexual sin as "safe sex" is a total misnomer.

However, few, if any of us, can say, “I have never committed any type of sexual sin.” These verses are again a law/gospel text. When we learn of God’s standard of sexual purity, the law, the first thing we need to do is turn to Jesus Christ and seek His mercy and forgiveness. The wonderful news, the gospel, is that this is exactly what the Lord Jesus offers. When He died on the cross almost 2000 years ago, He died for my sexual sins and your sexual sins. No matter how perverse or pervasive that sin has been, God offers free and full forgiveness to all, who enabled His spirit, put their faith in Jesus Christ. And 1 John 1:9 means that if you, as a Christian, confess your impurity, or lust, or filthy talk, you will experience God’s forgiveness in a fresh way and you will be cleansed from all unrighteousness.

Matthew Chandler tells about inviting a friend to join him at an event for Christian college students. This girl was a 21-year-old single mom, who had been in and out of various sexual relationships for six years. The speaker was talking about the importance of maintaining sexual purity. He passed a single rose around the audience and invited the students to touch and examine it. By the time the flower ended up back in the speaker’s hand, the once beautiful rose was wilted and falling apart. The purpose of the illustration was to show the damage that sexual promiscuity does to people’s lives. As the speaker held the tattered rose up. Matthew realized that, yes, his friend’s life had been messed up by her sexual sin. But when the speaker asked, “Who could ever love something like this?” Matthew became angry. He wanted to shout out, “Jesus could!” He knew his friend made some big mistakes, just like man of us, but Matthew knew the Lord Jesus loved her and longed to forgive her and restore her. Oh friends, if you have been involved or are involved in sexual sin there is no need to despair. God’s grace, experienced through Jesus Christ, is far bigger than all your sin.

Yet, don’t forget Paul’s warning. If you persist in sexual sin, if you treat it as no big deal, if you refuse to repent and confess this sin to the Lord, then verse 5 maybe for us. **Ephesians 5:5 for you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.** Friends, if you are involved in sexual sin and have no desire to give it up, you need to ask yourself, is my

Christian faith real? Or am I just going through the motions, attending church on Sunday, but living like a pagan the rest of the week? Friends, the Bible is clear. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God forgives all of your sin, including your sexual sins. But if you are not a genuine Christian, if you have never been truly born again, you will pay the price for your unholiness. You will experience God’s wrath. Friends, we must listen when God speaks, take His warning very seriously, turn to the Lord Jesus to find forgiveness for, and freedom from sexual immorality.

Many Christians today are rightly concerned about the rejection of Biblical morality in our culture. I am troubled that in Canada it is now apparently a hate crime, punishable by time in prison, for a pastor to preach that heterosexual relationships are preferable to homosexual relationships, or that people should identify their gender as the sex with which they were born. It is crazy that speaking what is not only Biblical truth, but what seems to be obvious truth, should be treated as a crime. Yet, I suspect that Paul and the Lord would say to us, “Folks, don’t get so wound up about what is happening out there. Of course, non-believers are going to be involved in sexual sin. That is what they do. Your first priority is to deal with the sexual immorality in your own lives.” Oh, may the Lord help us, despite the sexual chaos around us, to seek to live in a way that pleases Him each and every day.