

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SEVENTY-NINE)

“FLEE FORNICATION”

EPHESIANS 5:1-4

1 Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children;

2 And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.

3 But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints;

4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

In **Lesson 76**, when we began our examination of the **fifth** chapter of Paul’s letter to the **Ephesians**, we noted that in chapter **5**, he continues the exhortations which he had begun in chapter **4**.

In verse **1** he writes, “*Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.*” Paul is arguing here that children are like their parents. If we are indeed the children of God, then we ought to imitate our Father. But we can only do so by imitating Jesus Christ-the One who reveals the Father to us.

In verse **2**, Paul writes, “*And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.*” Here, Paul is issuing a command, calling on the

believers in Ephesus to be constantly regulating their lives, and ordering their behaviour within the sphere of the unconditional, sacrificial love of God!

It should be clear to us that what Paul is calling for in these two verses, is not a “natural” walk, but a “supernatural” walk, enabled by the Holy Spirit. If we strive to obey these commands in our own strength, we will have to resort to legalism, and legalism is an abomination to God, because it is an attempt to please God by means of the religious activity promoted by the flesh. Legalism is an attempt to accomplish, by human effort, what can only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit, and it is therefore guaranteed to fail! To “*walk in love*,” we must abandon “self-reliance” and embrace “Spirit-dependence!”

If we are to imitate God by consistently regulating our lives, and ordering our behaviour within the sphere of the unconditional, sacrificial love of God, we must rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit to give us both the desire and the power to do what pleases God (**Philippians 2:12-13**). Paul is calling on believers to live a supernatural life of love.

In verse **3** Paul writes, “*But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints.*”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows:

“*But among you there must not be either sexual immorality, impurity of any kind, or greed, as these are not fitting for the saints.*”

The Greek word translated “*But*” is **de**, a term of contrast which conveys a very strong difference between the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, spoken of in verses **1** and **2**, and the sins mentioned in verses **3** and **4**. The contrast implies that the sins mentioned in verses **3** and **4**, are a stench in God’s nostrils instead of the “*sweet-smelling savour*,” or “*fragrant aroma*” that Christ’s giving of himself for us produced. Paul carries the **exhortation** to be imitators of God over to a **prohibition** expressed in the strongest terms against sin! The self-centered vices in conduct and speech mentioned in verses **3** and **4** are the opposite of the

self-sacrificing love spoken of in verses **1** and **2**. Since these sins are totally inconsistent with the imitation of God, the believer should not have even a hint of them in his or her life.

Commenting on this verse, **Warren Wiersbe** writes the following: "We are saints... That is, we are 'set-apart ones' and no longer belong to the world of darkness around us. We have been 'called out of darkness into His marvelous light...' It is beneath the dignity of a saint to indulge in the sins that belong to the world of darkness, some of which Paul names here. He warns us against the sexual sins (fornication, uncleanness) which were so prevalent in that day-and are prevalent today. Sad to say, these sins have invaded the homes of Christians and brought grief to local churches too."

The first sin that Paul references is "*fornication*." The Greek word is **porneia**: (**por-ni'-ah**), which originally referred to any excessive behaviour or lack of restraint, but eventually became associated with sexual excess and indulgence. Our English word "pornography" is derived from **porneia**.

Porneia, as it is used in the Scriptures, describes **any illicit sexual activity outside of the divine boundaries established by marriage**, and thus includes the ideas of fornication or premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, incest, prostitution, masturbation and pornography.

The following excerpt, from an article published by **Ligonier Ministries**, provides a helpful commentary in respect of our area of study this evening:

"Paul is emphasizing the ways in which those who believe the gospel live out their gratitude for salvation, reminding us that we cannot adopt the moral code of unbelievers (**Ephesians 4:17-32**). Midway through this exposition, he sums up the sanctified life as a life that imitates the character of God Himself (**Ephesians 5:1-2**).

Understanding that we need specific guidance in pleasing the Lord, the apostle continues to reveal the specifics of holy living in **Ephesians 5:3-5**. He focuses on how sexual immorality and greed are wholly anti-Christian. This was a message that a Gentile Christian audience, like the one in Ephesus, could not hear too often in the first century. Although Jews of the same period strictly frowned on sexually immoral behavior, ancient Greeks and Romans tolerated and even approved of sexual deviancy. Those Christians who had a past in such sin were constantly tempted to embrace it again, and they needed continual reminders that **God's standards for human sexuality are absolute...**

We need to hear this word in our own day, even if we have been in the church from our youth. The modern West is obsessed with sex, and the idea that the Lord might put any limits on sexual expression is completely foreign to most people outside of the covenant community. But the word Paul uses for sexual immorality in **Ephesians 5:3**, **porneia**, covers all sexual activity that occurs outside the marriage bed. Extramarital sex, homosexuality, incest, and other biblically forbidden acts violate the one-flesh principle of lawful sexual expression, and those who continue in these behaviors impenitently have no part in the kingdom of God (**Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:5**). Let us always remember this truth lest we be led astray."

In light of the flagrant sexual immorality that was so pervasive in the first century Greco-Roman world, the leaders of the early church condemned all sexual experimentation outside of the bonds of marriage. The following passages of Scripture, all reflecting the rendering of the **New English Translation**, are examples of their condemnation:

Acts 15:22-29

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

23 They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings!

24 Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said,

25 we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul,

26 who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you these things themselves in person.

28 For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules:

29 that you abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled **and from sexual immorality**. If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell.

1 Corinthians 5

1 It is actually reported that sexual immorality exists among you, the kind of immorality that is not permitted even among the Gentiles, so that someone is cohabiting with his father's wife.

2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you have been deeply sorrowful instead and removed the one who did this from among you?

3 For even though I am absent physically, I am present in spirit. And I have already judged the one who did this, just as though I were present.

4 When you gather together in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, along with the power of our Lord Jesus,

5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast affects the whole batch of dough?

7 Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough—you are, in fact, without yeast. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

8 So then, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of vice and evil, but with the bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

10 In no way did I mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers and idolaters, since you would then have to go out of the world.

*11 But now I am writing to you **not to associate with anyone who calls himself a Christian** who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.*

12 For what do I have to do with judging those outside? Are you not to judge those inside?

13 But God will judge those outside. Remove the evil person from among you.

Brothers and sisters, in this passage, the Apostles rebuke and exhortation is not only directed to those committing sexual immorality but to the church who, instead of being deeply grieved concerning the flagrant and despicable immorality in their midst, were actually arrogant, refusing to address the situation effectively!

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

12 *“All things are lawful for me”—but not everything is beneficial. “All things are lawful for me”—but I will not be controlled by anything.*

13 *“Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both.” **The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.***

14 *Now God indeed raised the Lord and he will raise us by his power.*

15 *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!*

16 *Or do you not know that anyone who is united with a prostitute is one body with her? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.”*

17 *But the one united with the Lord is one spirit with him.*

18 ***Flee sexual immorality!*** *“Every sin a person commits is outside of the body”—but the immoral person sins against his own body.*

19 *Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?*

20 *For you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body.*

To those believers in Corinth who were being tempted to play in the sewers of sexual immorality that they had frequented before their conversion, Paul’s screams a warning in verse 18: ***“Flee sexual immorality!” “Flee porneia!”***

The Greek word translated “flee” is **pheugó: (fyoo’-go)**, which means, “to flee away, to seek safety by flight.” Metaphorically, it means “to run away from, to shun or avoid, something that one considers to be despicable and detestable.”

The word is in the **present imperative**. Paul is saying in effect, “Run away from sexual immorality, and keep running until the danger is past. Don’t **rationalize**, don’t **reason**, **run!**”

Paul writes, “*Every sin a person commits is outside of the body*”—*but the immoral person sins against his own body*. What Paul is saying is that sexual immorality is not only a sin against God and other persons, it is also a sin against ourselves. **Porneia** is more destructive to the sinner himself or herself, than other sins because the one who engages in it cannot undo their act.

Brothers and sisters, sexual immorality is not a “**spiritual challenge**” to be met. It is a “**spiritual trap**” to be escaped! God, through the pen of Paul, gives such a clear and strong command because **porneia** is so serious, so seductive, so spoiling and so shattering to both our relationship with God and our relationship with each other! Let us not indulge in pornography, either on the internet, or on television, or in books or magazines. **Instead let us run for our lives!**

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1 Finally then, brothers and sisters, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received instruction from us about how you must live and please God (as you are in fact living) that you do so more and more.

2 For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

3 For this is God’s will: that you become holy, that you keep away from sexual immorality,

4 that each of you know how to possess his own body in holiness and honor,

5 not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God.

6 In this matter no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, because the Lord is the avenger in all these cases, as we also told you earlier and warned you solemnly.

7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.

*8 Consequently **the one who rejects this is not rejecting human authority but God**, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.*

Brothers and sisters, I am of the opinion that the sexual immorality of the twenty-first century in which we live, exceeds that of the first century, thus the leaders of the church in the “post-modern” world should be even more zealous than those in the first century, to condemn all sexual experimentation outside of the bonds of marriage.

One commentator notes that “Christianity brought chastity, a virtue that was foreign to the Greco-Roman world. Into this world of pagan idolatry where sexual immorality was not only condoned, but regarded as normal, the Christian faith came as a purifying fire.” Twenty-first century Jamaica desperately needs to be impacted by the lives of persons who know how to “possess” or control their own bodies and are living in holiness and honour and not in lustful passion!

In **Romans 1** Paul clearly links idolatry with immorality. In verses **18-27** he writes,

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness,

19 because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

20 For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they

are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened.

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

*24 **Therefore** God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.*

25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

*26 **For this reason** God gave them over to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged the natural sexual relations for unnatural ones,*

27 and likewise the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed in their passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

(New English Translation)

Brothers and sisters, the more we suppress the truth about God and fail to honour Him as God, the more we harden our hearts against the convicting voice of conscience, the more we resist the Holy Spirit, the more we refuse to bow to the pre-eminence of Scripture, is the more we compromise our “line of defense” against sexual immorality. When believers engage in sexual immorality, the testimony of the gospel is polluted, the holy Name of God is blasphemed, and sin is committed against the self!

The way to protect ourselves from sexual immorality is to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over our lives, both intellectually and practically. We must cultivate and maintain a single hearted and pure devotion to Jesus Christ, because sheep are always safest when they remain close to their Shepherd!

An excellent illustration of “fleeing fornication” is found in **Genesis 39:7-12**, the account of Joseph when he was tempted to sin by Potiphar’s wife. The **English Standard Version** renders the passage as follows:

7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.”

8 But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge.

9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”

10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house,

12 she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

One commentator made the following observations: “While there may be safety in numbers, sometimes there is more safety in flight! It is like the pastor who cautioned his handsome new assistant about the dangers of immorality in the ministry. The assistant said that he always did his socializing in a group setting and concluded that ‘there is safety

in **numbers.**' The wise pastor replied, 'Yes, that is so, but there is more safety in **Exodus!**'"

We will bring this evening's study to a conclusion with comments from one of my favourite theologians, **R.C. Sproul:**

"How far does *God* say we can go physically?" is one common question dating couples ask of Scripture. The correlative question married couples may pose is "What is permissible in our sexual relationship?" Both inquiries recognize that there are certain absolute limits our Father has set regarding our sexual behavior. However, there has been a lot of confusion in defining these limits.

The main reason for befuddlement is the Bible's lack of an extensive list of "do's and don't's" in this area. Of course, today's passage teaches that "sexual immorality" is forbidden, thereby prohibiting intercourse outside of marriage. But it is hard to find explicit biblical stipulations on the propriety of premarital displays of affection such as kissing or "petting." Likewise, Scripture does not give many specific directives for married couples, focusing instead on general principles including an undefiled marriage bed (**Hebrews 13:4**).

Many groups have not let the lack of a list of acceptable and forbidden activities prevent them from imposing their own man-made checklist of godly and ungodly behaviors. While this form of legalism is clearly harmful, it is another type of legalism that may be even more prevalent, namely, trying to find all sorts of creative ways to get around *God's* law. The Pharisees were excellent practitioners of this kind of legalism. Once they even thought they could righteously get away from honoring their elderly parents by taking any support they could offer them and giving it to *God* instead (**Mark 7:9-13**).

As we look to God's law and sexuality, let us be wary of our tendency to circumvent true obedience. We are always a hair-breadth away from becoming Pharisees ourselves.

Because it is hard to find a detailed list of do's and don't's regarding sexual behavior, it is easy for us to justify certain activities or thoughts that may in fact not be edifying. Even if something might be "lawful," it might not be "helpful" (1 Cor. 6:12). We can easily conform to specific commands while violating their spirit. Take some time today to recognize your own proclivity to find loopholes in God's Word. Confess your need of Him to make you obey truly and fully."