

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

(LESSON EIGHTY)

“FLEE FORNICATION” (PART 2)

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 our previous Lesson, we began to consider verse 3. 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 Message translates the verse in the following way: “*Don’t allow love to turn into lust, setting off a downhill slide into sexual promiscuity, filthy practices, or bullying greed.*”

Commenting on this, and the following verse, the American pastor and author, **Ray Stedman**, made the following observations:

"The apostle is here declaring the absolute incompatibility of sexual looseness with the Christian faith. The two cannot mix. There is no mincing of words in this passage. Here we have the truth as it is in Jesus, i.e., the reality of things as they are. This is an enlargement by the apostle on the teachings of the Lord Jesus himself. Remember that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that adultery and fornication were evil...Even the thought, he says, that leads to these activities, is wrong. Paul is simply enlarging upon this teaching of our Lord. God's intention for man is either marriage, with complete faithfulness to the partner, or total abstinence from sex. The Bible allows no deviation from this. It makes it clear that this is the Christian position: Nothing less; nothing more..."

The twisted concept of many about Christianity is that it forbids even the discussion of sex, but anyone who has read the Bible knows that it freely and frankly discusses sex. It approaches it in the most open way, and never sanctions Victorian prudishness about it. **The Bible reveals the fact that sexual powers are God-given. God likes sex. He engineered it. He designed it. The fact that our sexual drives are among the most powerful in human life is God's idea, not ours. He made us that way, therefore he has a purpose in it. The Bible faces these facts. It never treats sex as deplorable or shameful. Christianity, almost alone among all the great religions of the world, thoroughly approves of the body. It tells us that God once entered into time in a human body, a body complete with sex organs, and it finds no shame or cause for shame in that fact. The Bible makes clear that within marriage sex is beautiful, wholesome, and God-approved.**

But the Bible is equally clear in its declaration that sex outside of marriage is debasing and defiling; it is harmful to our basic humanity. God's prohibitions about sex are therefore not designed to keep us from something helpful and good, but to make possible something helpful and good. They are to keep us from that which

would prevent us from enjoying the best. Sex outside of marriage is so injurious in fact, that, as the apostle makes clear here, even passing references to it among Christians can be inflaming and dangerous. The Christian position is exactly what the Apostle Paul says here. **There must be a putting aside of even the desire to talk about the sordid, lurid details of these wrong acts."**

Paul begins verse **3** with the word, "*But.*" The Greek word translated "*But*" is **de**. It is an adversative conjunction which contrasts everything he writes about in verse **3**, with what he had written in verse **2**. The **New English Translation** renders verse **2** as follows: "*and live in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.*"

Paul is making the point that sexual immorality is a violation of love. We cannot genuinely love another person and indulge in sexual activity with him or her outside of the bonds of marriage. **Love and sexual immorality are mutually contradictory.** Remember how **The Message** translates the verse, "*Don't allow love to turn into lust, setting off a downhill slide into sexual promiscuity, filthy practices, or bullying greed.*"

The self-centered vices in conduct and speech mentioned in verses **3** and **4**, are diametrically opposed to 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.

The first sin that Paul references is "*fornication.*" The Greek word translated "*fornication.*" 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.

In **1 Corinthians 6:18**, Paul issues a warning to the believers in Corinth. He writes, *“Flee sexual immorality! “Every sin a person commits is outside of the body”—but the immoral person sins against his own body”* (**New English Translation**).

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!**” Sexual immorality is not a “**spiritual challenge**” to be met. It is a “**spiritual trap**” to be escaped!

In **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**, Paul writes the following:

*9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! **The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals,***

10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God.

(New English Translation)

Let us briefly consider these two verses.

The term *“**The sexually immoral,**”* in the context of verse **9**, refers to an unmarried person who engages in any sexual act. The term *“**adulterers,**”* describes a married individual who engages in sexual acts with someone other than his or her partner.

The term “*passive homosexual partners*,” is rendered “*effeminate*,” in the **King James Version**. The Greek word is **malakos**: (**mal-ak-os**’), which means, “soft, or effeminate.” The word describes a boy or man who is the submissive partner in a same-sex relationship.

The term “*practicing homosexuals*,” refers to the dominant partner in a same-sex relationship.

William MacDonald, commenting on the passage, remarks that Paul “does not mean to imply that **Christians** can practice such sins and be lost, but rather he is saying that people who **practice** such sins are not Christians.”

Let us be very clear. Paul is **not** saying that a true believer will **never** fall into the trap of sexual sin. Believers still possess the fallen adamic nature, or the “**Flesh**,” and so we can, and still do, commit these sins. However these sins should not **characterize** our lives. When these sins are **characteristic** of a person’s lifestyle, day in and day out, the clear implication is that he or she is not a citizen of the “*Kingdom of God*.” If he or she has no desire, and makes no effort to be delivered from the sin, then there is every reason to question whether or not he or she was truly regenerated.

When a truly converted believer commits sin, he or she experiences godly sorrow and seeks God’s forgiveness. He or she hates the sin that interrupted their sweet fellowship with the Lord, and continually strives to gain victory over sin by learning to abandon self-effort, and to rely entirely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

We do not inherit the “*Kingdom of God*” by **refraining** from sin, but we **prove** that we are citizens of the Kingdom by endeavouring to consistently live above sin. This is only possible by God’s grace, as Paul reminds us in **Galatians 3:3**. The **New English Translation** renders the verse in the following way: “*Are you so foolish? Although you began with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort?*”

Paul is not saying that a single violation or even a “season” of sin will cause a person to lose his or her salvation, for one who has genuinely been born again cannot become “unborn!” It is however, possible that the “**Flesh**” can become so dominant in a disobedient believer, that he or she may, for a while, live like an unbeliever. What Paul is saying is that people who continue to lead a life of sin, who intentionally and habitually go on committing one or more of the four enumerated varieties of sexual immorality, or any of the others sins named, demonstrate by their behaviour that they are not genuine members of the Body of Christ.

The **Jewish New Testament Commentary** makes the following observations:

“The idea that a person can profess belief in...Yeshua and still highhandedly go on sinning is repugnant to the writers of Scripture. Overly easygoing congregations bring shame on the Messianic Community by soft pedaling the need for believers to change their lifestyles. Such congregations produce complacent pseudo-believers. Some take advantage of the notion that God is gradually changing them, thereby justifying continued indulgence in their sins. God, who has made his will clear, has provided through the power of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and the Spirit of our God, everything needed to overcome known grievous sins like the ones named in these verses. We are not to presume on God's patience. (**Romans 2:3-6**).”

Let us read this passage, **Romans 2:3-6**. We will read the rendering of the **New English Translation**.

3 And do you think, whoever you are, when you judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape God's judgment?

4 Or do you have contempt for the wealth of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, and yet do not know that God's kindness leads you to repentance?

5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourselves in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed!

6 He will reward each one according to his works.

Someone has observed that "The Christian's response to sin is to hate it, repent of it, and forsake it. We still struggle with sin, but by the power of the Holy Spirit Who lives in us, we are able to resist and overcome sin (**Romans 8:13**). **The hallmark of a true Christian is the decreasing presence of sin in his life. As Christians grow and mature in the faith, sin has less and less of a hold on us.** Of course, sinless perfection is impossible in this life (**1 John 1:8**), but our hatred for sin becomes greater as we mature. Like Paul, we are distressed that sin still exists in our flesh, causing us at times to do what we don't want to do and looking to Christ for relief from this "body of death" (**Romans 7:18-25**)."

If a person actively, perpetually, and unrepentantly lives a homosexual lifestyle, the lifestyle of a thief, a greedy lifestyle, a drunken lifestyle, etc., that person is showing himself to be unsaved, and such a person will definitely not inherit the kingdom of God."

In the final analysis, what is it that differentiates a believer's life from that of an unbeliever? Is it that the believer lives a life of absolute perfection, while the unbeliever lives a life devoid of any goodness whatsoever? A thousand times no! **It is the struggle against sin and the ability to overcome it, that marks the difference between the life of the believer and the life of an unbeliever.**

When a genuine believer commits sin, he or she will always be brought to a place of contrition and repentance. He or she will always eventually return to God, and will always resume the struggle against sin. But the Bible gives no support to the idea that a person can engage in sin perpetually and unrepentantly, and still be considered a child of God.

One Bible Scholar made the following insightful comments:

"Sex is a gift of God which is like a great river flowing through life which, kept within its banks, is a source of pleasure and power. However when a river overflows its banks it becomes destructive and disaster ensues... Sexual impurity, is similar to a river overflowing its banks or the cracks in a dam. It begins with just a few thoughts (that come from a few 'innocent' images) and grows and festers and is fed more thoughts (images) until one day it suddenly breaks down. Sexual immorality is like that. No believer commits sexual immorality in a moment. It is a gradual erosion of the believer's core values, a continual ignoring of one's conscience and a repeated repression of the indwelling Spirit's urgings to refrain, to flee, etc. As godly men and women, we must recognize the deceitfulness of any sin (**Hebrews 3:13**) but especially the particularly pleasurable...sin of illicit sexual activity. When the tempting thoughts come, we must take them captive by grace and the power of the indwelling Spirit and hand them over to the Captain of the hosts, our Lord Jesus Christ...

Within marriage, sex is beautiful, fulfilling, creative, and has a protective effect against immorality (**1 Corinthians 7:2, 5**). Outside marriage, sex is ugly, destructive, and like fire. In a fireplace, fire is warm and comforting. Outside the hearth, fire is destructive and uncontrollable."

The second sin that Paul mentions in **Ephesians 5:3** is "*all uncleanness*" or "*impurity of any kind.*" The word "*uncleanness*" or "*impurity*" is a translation of the Greek word, **akatharsia**: (**ak-ath-ar-**

see'-ah). Literally, the word describes any substance that is dirty or filthy. It could refer to refuse, to pus around an open, infected wound, or to the contents of graves, causing ceremonial impurity. The word was also used in the New Testament in reference to unclean or demonic spirits.

In denouncing the hypocritical Jewish religious leaders of His day, our Lord used the word **akatharsia** in **Matthew 23:27**: *“Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of everything **unclean**”* (**New English Translation**). The word “*unclean*” in the verse is a translation of **akatharsia**.

Figuratively, the word was used to refer to a state of moral impurity, **particularly sexual sin**. It describes a filthiness of the **heart** and **mind** that defiles a person. The unclean person sees dirt in everything. He or she has what is referred to as a “smutty mind.” As it is used in its moral or ethical sense, the word **akatharsia** speaks more of an **internal disposition**. It is immoral filthiness **on the inside**. An insightful illustration of “uncleanness” or “impurity” is what transpires within the soul of a person who indulges in pornography.

The Apostle says *“**all** uncleanness,”* or *“impurity of **any kind**.”* The Greek word translated “*all*” or “*any kind*,” is **pas** which means, “all, in the sense of each part that applies, any and every, of every kind.” By using this word, Paul rubbishes the view that God’s standard of moral purity is relative. It is very important for us to understand that **God’s standard of moral purity is perfection!** In **Matthew 5:48**, our Lord said, *“So then, **be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**”* (**New English Translation**).

In **1 Peter 1:14-16**, the Apostle Peter writes,

14 Like obedient children, do not comply with the evil urges you used to follow in your ignorance,

15 but, like the Holy One who called you, become holy yourselves in all of your conduct,

16 for it is written, “You shall be holy, because I am holy.”
(**New English Translation**)

We have all seen Turkey Vultures, a.k.a. “John Crows,” or “Joncros” soaring high overhead, swooping down, and then rising up again with the air currents. Every so often, a small group of them can be seen in a gully, in a field, or on the roadside, feasting on the carcass of a dead animal. One gets the impression that these birds are constantly on the lookout for something rotten and repulsive to consume! Does that describe the desires of your heart and my heart? What kind of soul “food” do we prefer?

In the preface to his, and **Coleridge’s** seminal volume of poetry, *“Lyrical Ballads,”* **William Wordsworth** made the following statement: “The human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability.”

Brothers and sisters, is it only sexually explicit material that has the capability of stimulating our minds? Are we, like “Joncros” always on the lookout for rotting, decomposed material to satisfy our soul appetites? Do we find it unappealing to read a novel or watch a movie, or listen to music that is not sexually explicit? If a fulsome investigation were to be conducted relative to our internet browsing history, what would such an investigation reveal about the appetites of our mind and spirit? Is Bible reading stimulating to us? What about prayer? Do we find it difficult to introduce Christianity into our discussions, even with other believers? Some so called believers spend more time thinking and talking about sex than they do about Jesus Christ. God help us!

What does the Scripture say? Listen to Paul's sobering words written in **Romans 1:28-32**:

28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done.

29 They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are rife with envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility. They are gossips,

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, contrivers of all sorts of evil, disobedient to parents,

31 senseless, covenant-breakers, heartless, ruthless.

32 Although they fully know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice them.

(New English Translation)

Is there any hope for those of us who are struggling with sexual immorality? Is there any possibility of us ever being victorious over this formidable foe? What does the Scripture say? The Scripture informs us that the answer to both these questions is a resounding yes! For confirmation, let us look at 4 passages, each reflecting the rendering of the **New English Translation**.

John 8:31-36

31 Then Jesus said to those Judeans who had believed him, "If you continue to follow my teaching, you are really my disciples

32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

33 "We are descendants of Abraham," they replied, "and have never been anyone's slaves! How can you say, 'You will become free'?"

34 Jesus answered them, "I tell you the solemn truth, everyone who practices sin is a slave of sin.

35 The slave does not remain in the family forever, but the son remains forever.

36 So if the son sets you free, you will be really free.

Romans 6:6-14

6 We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

7 (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.)

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

9 We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

10 For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God.

11 So you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires,

13 and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness.

14 For sin will have no mastery over you, because you are not under law but under grace.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

3 For though we live as human beings, we do not wage war according to human standards,

4 for the weapons of our warfare are not human weapons, but are made powerful by God for tearing down strongholds. We tear down arguments

5 and every arrogant obstacle that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to make it obey Christ.

Galatians 5:16-25

16 But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

17 For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want.

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity,

20 idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions,

21 envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

24 Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit.

The phrase “*those who belong to Christ*” in verse **24**, speaks of possession. The ones referred to belong to Christ because they are bought by Him, delivered by Him, and possessed by Him, through His Spirit. Since they belong to Christ they are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit.

The “**old man**,” which refers to the person that the believer was before he or she was saved, dominated and controlled by the fallen, unregenerate adamic nature, or the “flesh,” was crucified with Christ. But believers have a responsibility to daily apply, **practically** and **experientially** the facts that are true of us **positionally**. We must live out and experience in a practical way the reality of the **old man** crucified with Christ. As **Roy Gingrich** notes, “The believer at his conversion **positionally** put off the old man and his deeds. Now in his daily life, he should make true in his experience what is true in his position.”

This practical and experiential living out of what is true of the believer positionally, is realized as we learn to yield to the Holy Spirit and trust Him to gradually conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.

The point is that **the Christian life** is not a set of rules and regulations to be obeyed, but is rather a Person living out His supernatural life in and through the believer. In **Colossians 1:27**, Paul refers to this as “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”