

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

(LESSON EIGHTY-ONE)

“NOT FITTING FOR SAINTS”

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.

For the last two weeks we have considering 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.*”

We noted that Paul begins verse **3** with the word, “*But.*” The Greek word translated “*But*” is **de**. It is an adversative conjunction, contrasting the self-centered vices in conduct and speech mentioned in verses **3** and **4**, with 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 “*sexual immorality*.” The Greek word translated “*sexual immorality*” 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!

The second sin that Paul mentions in **Ephesians 5:3** is “*impurity of any kind*.” The word “*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.

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 impure 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 of an **internal disposition**. It is immoral filthiness **on the inside**. An insightful illustration of “impurity” is what transpires within the soul of a person who indulges in pornography.

The Apostle says “*impurity of any kind*.” The Greek word translated “*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**, as our Lord highlighted in **Matthew 5:48**: “*So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (**New English Translation**).

The third sin that Paul mentions in **Ephesians 5:3** is “*greed*” or “*covetousness*,” as it is rendered by the **King James Version**. The Greek word translated “*greed*” or “*covetousness*,” is **pleonexia**: (**pleh-on-ex-ee’-ah**), which means, “a greedy desire to have more.” The word refers to a strong desire to acquire more and more possessions, especially that which is forbidden. It is a desire to have more, irrespective of one’s need, and is always used in negative sense. The idea is of a strong desire for personal benefit at the expense of others. In short, **pleonexia** describes an insatiable craving, a consuming ambition, and/or an ungodly expression of the appetites and desires. **J.B. Phillips New Testament** translates, “*greed*” or “*covetousness*” as, “*the itch to get your hands on what belongs to other people.*”

Interestingly, Paul also linked “covetousness” or “greed” (**pleonexia**), with “impurity” (**akatharsia**) in **Ephesians 4:19**. The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: “*Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every*

kind of impurity with greediness.” The point he is making is that sinful passions and desires are never satisfied.

Commenting on this verse, **Warren Wiersbe** made the following perceptive remarks: “Covetousness” may seem out of place next to fornication, but the two sins are but different expressions of the same basic weakness of fallen nature - uncontrolled appetite. The fornicator and the covetous person each desire to satisfy the appetite by taking what does not belong to them. ‘The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes’ (1 John 2:16) would describe these two sins.”

Brothers and sisters, covetousness is the root of the other sins listed in this verse. The opposite of covetousness is **contentment**. Therefore, when covetousness is replaced by contentment, sexual immorality and impurity will also be eliminated. This is a vitally important principle. It makes victorious Christian living not merely a possibility but a reality! Paul speaks of this principle in **Galatians 5:16-18**: The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

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.

The **Message** translates the passage in the following way:

16 My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness.

17 For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These

two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day.

18 Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

In verse **16**, Paul makes a statement opposing the erroneous view held by the Galatians, that without the restraining influence of the law, they would fall into sin. Instead of being motivated by fear to try and obey a set of rules and regulations in their own strength, Paul exhorts them to govern their lives by the inward motivation of the Holy Spirit.

The secret of victory over sin is **not** found in attempted obedience to a law that has been done away with, or to any rule keeping whatsoever. Rather, the secret of victory over sin is found in submission to a divine Person, the Holy Spirit, who takes up His permanent residence in the believer's being at the moment he or she places his or her faith in the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit takes up His permanent residence in the believer's being for the purpose of ministering to his or her spiritual needs.

Paul gives a strong assurance that if the believer "*walks*" or "*lives*" in the Spirit, depending upon the Holy Spirit to give him or her both the desire and the power to do the will of God, he or she will not bring to fulfillment in action, the evil desires of the fallen, unregenerate adamic nature, or the "flesh," but will be able to resist and conquer these evil desires.

Brothers and sisters, it is our responsibility to refuse to obey the wishes of the "flesh." We do so by placing ourselves under the control of the Holy Spirit and relying on the power He supplies. The Holy Spirit is not a perpetual motion machine which operates automatically in the life of the believer. He is a divine Person waiting to be depended upon for His ministry, and expecting the believer to cooperate with Him in it. The choice lies with the believer as to whether or not he or she is going to yield to the Holy Spirit or obey the "flesh."

The will of the believer is absolutely free from the compelling power of the fallen, unregenerate, adamic nature. If he or she obeys the “flesh,” it is because he or she chooses to do so. The Holy Spirit has given the believer a new nature, the divine nature. And the sweet, purifying influences of that nature are constantly permeating the activities of the believer’s will, as he or she keeps himself or herself yielded to the Spirit. In that way, the Spirit keeps on suppressing the activities of the “flesh” and negating any control which it might attempt to exert over the believer.

Brothers and sisters, greed or covetousness speaks to desire and what a person desires more of tends to become his or her “god.” Eventually, he or she ends up serving that “god.” Unless we are very careful the things that we possess can easily end up possessing us! It is for this reason that Paul links greed or covetousness with idolatry.

In **Ephesians 5:5** he writes, *“For you can be confident of this one thing: that no person who is immoral, impure, or greedy (**such a person is an idolater**) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God”* (**New English Translation**).

In **Colossians 3:5** we read the following: *“So put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, shameful passion, evil desire, and greed **which is idolatry**”* (**New English Translation**).

It is important for us to bear in mind that the context of Paul’s use of the word “greed” or “covetousness” is the pagan, Gentile lifestyle of the first century, where sexual activity was often included as part of the idolatrous worship of false gods. The idea that most of us today have of idolatry is that of a pagan bowing down to an image carved from stone or wood, reciting mysterious incantations, and carrying out peculiar rituals. But Paul is informing us that idolatry is much more familiar to us than we realize. All it takes is simple greed. It is therefore fitting to find greed included in a list of sexual sins, because it is greed that feeds all these sins.

The desire to have more is the essence of idolatry. The person whose life is controlled and dominated by the desire to get more, generally sets up things in the place of God-and that is idolatry. When persons begin to worship themselves and serve another master, they eventually become immoral. Why is this so? Because they can no longer relate on a divine level. They are caught in the trap of wanting more and more and never being satisfied.

Paul's point is that greed feeds a person's lust for more and more gratification, whether it be for sex, money, possessions, or power. This greed is motivated by a desire for selfish pleasure apart from marriage, which is the absolute standard dictated by God. Sexual activity outside of the bounds of marriage is always based on greed because the goal is to exploit the other person for one's personal advantage rather than to meet the other person's needs.

Paul urges the Ephesian believers to not allow sexual immorality, impurity of any kind, or greed to be among them, because such things *"are not fitting for the saints."* *"Let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints,"* is how the **King James Version** renders the clause.

The Greek word translated *"named"* is **onomazó: (on-om-ad'-zo)**, which means, "to name or call by name." The verb is in the **present imperative** indicating that it should be the believers' habitual practice to shun these sins absolutely. In other words, they were to have a consistent policy of zero tolerance in respect of these vices.

The Scottish theologian **William Barclay** made the following comment regarding this clause: "To jest about a thing or to make it a frequent subject of conversation is to introduce it into the mind and to bring nearer the actual doing of it."

Paul warns that some things are not safe even to talk or to joke about. It is a grim commentary on human nature that many a book and many a play and many a film has had success simply because it dealt with forbidden and ugly things.

As **William MacDonald** observes, "It goes without saying that they should never have to be named as having been committed by believers. They should not even be discussed in any way that might lessen their sinful and shameful character. There is always the greatest danger in speaking lightly of them, making excuses for them, or even discussing them familiarly and continually. Paul accents his exhortation with the phrase, '*as is fitting for saints.*' Believers have been separated from the corruption that is in the world; now they should live in practical separation from dark passion, both in deed and word."

Brothers and sisters, these sins, indeed all sin, must be detested and shunned. Like Job every child of God should "*eschew*" evil. Believers are not to be "saints" in **position** only. We are to be "saints" in **practice** as well! We should live like saints. We are separated unto God, and therefore we are separated from sin. These sins are not to be mentioned, much less permitted. Such conversation and action is inappropriate for saints and incompatible with Christianity.

Paul says that these sins are not "*fitting for the saints.*" It is critically important for us to understand that Paul's appeal for separation from all sin is not based on fear of the law, but rather on the character of the believer!

The word "*fitting*" is a translation of the Greek word **prepó**, which has the basic meaning of being prominent or conspicuous. It came to be used of a distinguishing characteristic, that which **conspicuously** stands out, and then especially what is **suitable**.

The idea of the word **Prepó** is that of acting, or conducting oneself appropriately in a particular situation. In the context of this verse, the appropriateness of the action or conduct would be inextricably linked with God's view of the action or conduct. In other words, an action or conduct is appropriate if the Bible says it is!

Paul says that sins such as sexual immorality, impurity of any kind, or greed are not fitting for the “*saints*.” Paul’s favourite description of believers is “*saints*.” In **Lesson 2**, we considered Paul’s use of this word in his address to the believers in Ephesus in chapter **1** and verse **1**. Let us revisit what we said then:

“The word ‘*saints*’ is a translation of the Greek word **hagios**. It is one of the great doctrinal words in this epistle. Paul borrowed this word from the terminology of the pagan Greek religions. He had to. There were no other terms available to him so long as he was confined to the Greek language.

In the pagan Greek religions, the word **hagios** meant ‘devoted to the gods.’ For instance, a Greek worshipper would bring an offering to one of the pagan gods as a gift. He devoted the gift to that particular god. Or, the Greeks would build a magnificent temple and devote it to a certain god. The building was thereby set apart from any secular use, and separated for a religious purpose. It was consecrated to the worship of that particular Greek god. The building was therefore holy. It was not holy in a Christian sense of the term, for the Greek temples were filled with immoral practices that were part of their religious worship. It is said that 3000 ‘sacred’ prostitutes served in the temple at Corinth. But the temple and the prostitutes were considered to be holy in the sense of being non-secular, and therefore religious in nature, set apart for the worship of the Greek gods.

The apostle Paul, took that Greek word **hagios** and poured into it a new meaning. The word ‘*saint*,’ as it is used in the New Testament means ‘to be set apart for God,’ and refers to the act of the Holy Spirit setting apart the sinner who has been elected to salvation, for God. The Holy Spirit takes that person out of the first Adam and places him or her in the Last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul refers to this act in **Colossians 1:12-13**: *‘Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who*

hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.' This is **positional** sanctification. It is an act performed once for all the moment the sinner places his or her faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour. That person is called a **hagios** person, a person set apart for God, a consecrated person. He or she has been set apart for God, for His worship and for His service. Such a person is a '*saint*' **positionally**.

This is followed by **progressive** sanctification which is not an act but a process. It is a process that goes on all through the earthly life of the Christian, in which that person is being gradually conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus. It is very important for us to understand and appreciate that the set apart **position** of the saint demands a set apart **life** in the **experience** of the saint. The saint must be separate from everything that would interfere in the least with the worship and service which is due to the God who brought about the separation and to whom the saint is set apart. This is a '*saint*' in the Bible sense of the term."

I am persuaded that one of the reasons for our failure to be more effective as believers is our lack of awareness as to who we really are in Christ. That is why we need to hear the gospel. The gospel informs us of our true identity.

According to the New Testament, every genuine believer is a saint **positionally**, meaning that the righteousness of Jesus Christ has been imputed to them. They possess an alien righteousness. They are righteous, not because they are personally righteous but because God has declared them to be righteous!

In the framework of a works-based, externally regulated system of "Christianity," persons are manipulated to think that their salvation and their standing before God are dependent on how well they perform. These persons are responding to another gospel, which is not another.

Rather it is a perversion of the gospel. Religion is always about how well persons do; Christianity is always about the wonder of what Jesus Christ has done for persons! A genuine believer is always amazed at the amazing grace of God that saves them, and keeps them saved.

We conclude this Lesson with an excerpt of John Piper's sermon entitled, "*The Enthronement of Desire.*" His text is **Ephesians 5:3-6**.

"Now we come to the question: How does Paul motivate us to eliminate fornication and homosexuality and covetousness and filthiness and silly talk and levity from our lives?"

First, notice what Paul did **not** do: he did **not** quote the tenth commandment: '*Thou shalt not covet*' (**Exodus 20:17**). Why not? It is, I think, because the only obedience that counts is obedience from the heart (**Romans 6:17**). And obedience from the heart is obedience that comes from a deep agreement that the will of God is not only required but beautiful and fitting.

So how does Paul motivate us? Two times, once in verse **3** and once in verse **4**, he tells us that these things are not fitting for saints. Verse **3**: '*Immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints.*' Verse **4**: '*Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting.*'

What is he saying? He is pleading with believers to be renewed in the spirit of their minds (**Ephesians 4:23**). He doesn't want mere obedience under the constraint of divine sanction. He wants new creatures, who have new ways of seeing the world: new values, new tastes, new desires, a whole new vision of the world, so that things like fornication and uncleanness and covetousness and filthiness and silly talk and levity, and a hundred other sins, will just seem out of the question because they don't fit anymore the way we are.

Let the great **Martin Luther** express the root of gospel obedience. In his magnificent essay called '*The Freedom of a Christian*'...he said that the renewed mind of the Christian ought to think like this, 'Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will, do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches?'

In other words, for a person who is born again and stands justified before God with inestimable riches in him, covetousness with all its impurities is utterly unfitting and out of the question. They can't go together. This is the way Paul wants people to obey God. This is **gospel** (evangelical) obedience rather than **legal** obedience."

*"I will serve Thee because I love Thee
You have given life to me
I was nothing until You found me
You have given life to me.*

*Heartaches, broken pieces
Ruined lives are why you died on Calvary
Your touch was what I longed for
You have given life to me."*