

## **Pursuing Sexual Purity**

### **Why I Chose This Area Of Spiritual Formation**

There are several areas of my life that I would like to work on (controlling my tongue and taming my pride being two other areas of concern) however I am most convicted by issues of sexual purity. "There shouldn't be even a hint of sexual immorality" Ephesians 5:3 declares and I don't think I have the words to frame my dilemma any clearer (or how deeply those words cut to the heart of the matter). At no time will this area not be a battlefield of temptation, especially as a young, single man. However this sin devastates at least two Christians every time lines are crossed, leading two down a path away from the holy life we are called to.

The sin goes deeper than just physically crossing lines with another. There are issues of my thought life included in this: what I think about, what I choose to watch, what I choose to listen to.

There are few sins that so specifically cause me (or anyone) to "forget" about God during the course of it. It affects my walk in a multitude of ways, like a cancer creeping into other areas of my walk and slowly atrophying it. I want to learn the Joseph lesson of running from temptation and avoiding setting my own traps to cause me to stumble. I want my relationships with my friends to be edifying to all of us, not a source of disruption. I want to develop character traits of faithfulness and discipline.

Hebrews 13:4 says that "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." My question is "why?" Why does God place such an emphasis on sexual purity? What is it about sexual immorality above many sins that God keeps singling it out to caution us about?

### **Defining Sexual Immorality**

"Porneia" is the word translated as "sexual immorality". Originally it meant the practice of consorting with prostitutes, but it came to mean habitual immorality. Porneia, therefore, is the idea of fornication or any kind of extra-marital sexual relations. In its most general sense, it covers all types of sexual sin between male and female. In some passages, usually when Paul is listing various characteristics that we are to excise from our lives, "sexual immorality" is expanded on by words like "impurity" or "lust". The word that translates as "impurity" has a broader reference since it includes uncleanness in thought, word, and act. "Pathos", the word for "lust", essentially means feeling, though in the New Testament it is used to denote uncontrolled desire.

### **What Does The Bible Say**

There are two passages in particular that I wanted to examine that discussed sexual immorality. The first is I Corinthians 5-6. Sexual immorality, in this case the act of incest, is condemned as is the church's attitude of indifference and arrogance. The purity demanded is symbolized as removing the leaven in the Passover celebration. In verse 5:3, Paul passes judgment on the sin. The church has to guard its own membership, not try to Christianize unbelievers by forcing biblical standards on them. Verse 5:5, Paul uses the phrase "turned over to Satan". I find it interesting that there is an allowance for (physical) punishment with an eye toward repentance.

In 6:9-10, Paul gives another list that is headed up by sexual immorality to show how unchristian and sinful their actions were toward one another. Verse 6:12 begins a look at Christian liberties

taken too far (almost begging the question ‘how far is too far?’). The Corinthians reasoned that physical activities had no impact on one's inner or spiritual life. Using the example that we have an appetite and a stomach so we indulge in eating, therefore if we have desire and the parts we should indulge in sex. Both, after all, are natural processes. Paul denies this. The conclusion to Paul's rebuttal of this is that the body is not meant for sexual license, but for the Lord. Sexual relations is more than just a physical act, it unites two people together, analogous to Christians having been joined in union with the Lord (united spiritually). Anything other than the divinely established marriage union is a perversion. A simple three-pronged argument is put forth in verses 19-20: 1) my body is the temple of God; 2) I have received the Spirit from God to help me against sin; 3) I have no right to pervert and misuse my body because I have been purchased at a price; therefore I am to glorify God in my body.

The second passage is I Thessalonians 4:1-8. Christian holiness requires total abstinence from porneia. The Thessalonians were congratulated on their faith in 1:3, but this did not mean that there was no occasional misbehavior in the church, which is kind of how I see my walk. Holiness requires me to learn to control my own body (v. 4). A wholesome marriage is Paul's antidote for sexual immorality. Believers are obligated to a higher standard, not to give in to passionate, wanton lust.

Sexual immorality has another sin attached to it: taking advantage of a fellow believer. The woman with whom I engage slowly becomes an object of cruel (emotional and spiritual) abuse by being used for my own selfish gratification. And vice versa. A future fellow believer is robbed or defrauded because their spouse (both me and her) is impure.

### **Don't Just Throw Verses At Me**

Sexual sin is not something cured, or prevented, by just offering up prayer and saying a few Scripture. If I encounter a brother struggling with pornography or the temptation of an adulterous relationship, I can't just throw him a few verses and say ‘have faith' and that be the end of it. That is a naive way to go through life. The same can be said for me and my struggles. There are no easy formulas to beating this problem. I need to understand it and understand that God can offer freedom from it.

In an article called "Sanctification and Sexual Sin" (David E. Longacre), the word addiction is used in a very specific way. He says that the out-of-control feeling and the cycle of behavior which takes over like an automatic pilot almost independent of our will (the trance-like pattern we fall into) can be described as symptoms of addiction. Specifically that people "can become so enslaved to their sin that it becomes a pattern which is almost independent of their conscious choices....To call sexual sin ‘addictive' is to say that people have in their lives ‘prevailing sins' or ‘life-dominating sins'." Sins that they feel they can never truly break free from.

This is because we learn and act in a habitual fashion. Once we learn something, it becomes habitual knowledge. As Longacre goes on to say, the dark side to this is that our learning of sin also becomes habitual. Once we get into a pattern, we go through it like Pavlov's dogs. "The habit can only be broke as we see the details of our sin pattern and how they like together."

The "Sin-System" follows a familiar pattern: First, the preoccupation with the sin. Even the struggle becomes a preoccupation. Second, comes the ritualization. Third comes the obsession, at this point the person rarely has the will-power or spiritual desire to stop. Phrases like "I got

caught up in the moment" or "I couldn't stop" are my common rationalizations. Which is followed by my guilt and shame. Last comes the despair, the sense that I can't beat it. The temptation arises to soothe the pain by resorting to the behavior again. This is the cycle of bondage the God warns us so clearly about.

Before freedom from sexual sin can occur, issues of the heart have to be dealt with. The article cites that there are two common themes for nearly all who struggle with sexual sins: they were either molested as children or were exposed to pornography at an early age. I had never thought about this before, though you'd think it would be obvious. I was 9 when I was first exposed to pornography. Both my father and grandfather were "collectors", so we were always stumbling over their "collections". The bottom-line is that "individuals discover that sexual pleasure gives them a sense of security, well-being, or control" no matter how short lived and unfulfilling. Hosea 4:10 says that when we seek satisfaction in things instead of Him, we eat but remain hungry. Such is the case with sexual sin.

The core of the problem is control: me wanting to control my own life. And this desire puts me in direct conflict with God and His Sovereignty. So the problem is not cut and dry, but the answers are still the same.

### **Three Lingering Questions**

I had three questions which kept nagging me after my study that I ended up discussing with Pastor Rich Vincent at College Park Baptist Church. Firstly, I Corinthians 6:18 says "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body." So I was left with the question "is sexual immorality a special type/brand/category of sin?" Frankly, yes it is, in that few sins so captivate and enslave a person as sexual immorality. It is interesting that the passage that begins the discussion of sexual immorality (v. 12), ends with "but I will not be mastered by anything." There is a mystery to sex. A transcendence, if you will, so that it is greater than the bringing together of the parts. Something that approximates the experience of religion. A (pseudo-) intimacy is created, indicating more than merely parts interacting. All of this can only be correctly expressed in marriage, because few other sins can be used so destructively when engaged in outside of their directed parameters.

Secondly, what exactly is condemned? I mean, is it the one time sinful act (and in a general sense, you can insert any sin), this sin as a recurring trouble area (what do you say to a person who is struggling with this, but is trying to overcome it), or this sin characterizing their lifestyle (a person indulging their sin)? What is condemned is both the individual act and the lifestyle that can come from it. After reading Romans 1:18-26 (the context for 1:24), I realized, from verse 19, that we all have weak moral fiber. However, the fact that I struggle with this sin, that I get back up after I stumble encourages me in that God has neither abandoned me nor turned me over, in judgment, to my own lusts. Him taking His hands from me and leaving me to my own rejection of His word and will would produce ugly results in my life.

Thirdly, I Corinthians 7:8-9 says "now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Thus, with marriage offered up as an "antidote" or prescription for unchecked passion, what counsel would there be for a couple in "heat" who

weren't sure if they were ready to get married to each other? Simply, if they aren't heading toward marriage, they shouldn't be dating. Separation is called for. If there is a relationship to preserve, they should put safeguards and hedges around their relationship. Common sense stuff like don't stay in either's apartment alone, try to do things in public (i.e., eating out at restaurants)--basically not creating your own traps. Engage each other in activities that will cause the relationship to grow closer intellectually and emotionally, but not physically (which won't grow a relationship).

### **The Bible Provides Strategies For Combating This Sin**

Actually, I could probably come up with a list of about 20 different strategies that the Bible comes up with for not only dealing with this sin, but sin in general. I'll stick to the ones most applicable to me. The battle against sexual immorality begins with studying and memorizing Scripture, since those commands stay with and guide me. These are my main weapons when battling temptation. I had a list of specific steps of actions that I wanted to begin to take for the purpose of improving this area of my life. I wanted to meet regularly with the Lord: I wanted my devotional life to be disciplined. Prayer and study of the Word are muscles in my spiritual walk that have gone flabby. They are also the first aspects of my walk derailed whenever I commit sexual impurity. Though I am still a largely undisciplined person, this month I have slowly begun to integrate Bible study into my life. Especially after it was pointed out in my time analysis that I don't dedicate nearly enough (read: any) time to serious Bible study during the week.

I wanted to lay out my concerns before those whom I am tempted, or whose lives are impacted by my sin. That way all parties are aware of the problem and can be praying about it. I wanted to be held accountable, especially since I am often seen as a leader. My position demands extra vigilance. During a recent counseling session, I came face-to-face with where sexual sin can get a person if left unchecked. Proverbs 6:20-35 speaks of how easy it is to become ensnared in adultery. I think to myself, how could I get caught up in some sin like adultery? That's one of the big ones; surely not I. Yet, I've talked to people who felt the same way. Adultery is only a hop, skip, and a jump down the road that starts with lust. All sorts of sins spring from lust and you end up in places you never dreamed you would. And sometimes adultery isn't the only sin that they find themselves entangled in. Once they come face to face with the consequences of their sin, all they are left wondering is "how did I get here?"

It starts with temptation. Temptations are simply those things that test one's moral strength to resist sin. Temptation follows the same pattern. James 1:13-15 gives the pattern: evil desire (my own) drags me away and entices me. My desire then seeks an opportunity. When desire and opportunity meet, sin is conceived. And the sin gives birth to death.

There are many things I do or participate in that actually nourish my sin. I strongly believe that there are ways for me to study and critique my culture, but I know I have to watch that line that says I am not using this activity to sharpen my ability to analyze, but I am participating in it. As I read Ephesians 4:17-5:21 (the context for 5:3), verse 4:17 says that we are to no longer to "live as the Gentiles do". This book having been written to Gentiles, Paul is saying that there was a specific kind of life that they used to lead that they had to make a clean break from. There is a futility of thinking that underlies irresponsible behavior. Don't go near fire and expect not to get burned.

The next verse reminds me that few sins cause one to so push God out of their minds as sexual immorality. We rationalize, we excuse, we harden our hearts. In examining my life and heart, I know it is not hardened to my sin. Just as I know that there is something to be said about picking yourself up after you have stumbled and continuing down the path you know you should be walking. "Hardened" is often used of calluses, thus we have the image of our hearts losing sensitivity and not responding to the pain that sin brings.

By verses 4:22-24, I am back to a familiar pattern in dealing with sin in my life. Putting off our old self and putting on our new self. This process is experiential and continual. It doesn't happen all at once, but it is something you have to actively do. Rich Vincent impressed upon me that you can't just worry about what sins to not do because then the mind is always concentrated on trying to not do something. You are always thinking about what you are avoiding. That is constantly coming at the problem from the negative, and that will only take you so far. You are to stomp out the sin, while replacing it by its corresponding positive attribute. So the point of the exercise shouldn't, for example, be to only not lust (which is inherently selfish), but rather to pursue loving (which is inherently selfless). I shouldn't concentrate on not being sexually immoral (how much can I get away with, how far can I go, etc.), but rather to pursue purity (how can I further conform to the image of His Son). You are to both "not do" (mortify) and "try to do" (vivify). "Therefore do not be partners with them." (5:7). Don't participate in the sinful lifestyle of unbelievers. Don't buy into the world's view and values of sex as strictly glamorous, casual, and bereft of real consequences.

In Colossians 3:1-17 (the context of 3:5), Paul outlines the fact that we are to not only be mindful of our vertical relationship (our inward relationship with God) but also our horizontal relationship (our outward relations with our fellow man). In fact, because of our union with Christ, we are called to a holy way of living; said another way, because we are united with Christ in His death, we should let our old life die.

### **A CASE STUDY: Genesis 39--Joseph And Potiphar's Wife**

A familiar story, Joseph was brought to Potiphar, it was quickly seen that he had skills (the Lord was with him and gave him success). As he gained success and increased trust and responsibilities, he became noticed. A cautionary note to wanna-be leaders, when you become noticed, you become more of a target. In his case, he was noticed by Potiphar's wife. Joseph employs four strategies to avoid sin:

1) Start with a "NO!" Joseph simply refused. Sin comes when desire meets opportunity. The opportunity was always there, so the battle lines were drawn at the desires.

2) Joseph acknowledged his position and responsibilities, all common-sense reasoning against committing such a sin, but he knew that such a sin was first and foremost against God. He kept God in front of him at all times (vertical relationship), with an eye towards the consequences of his sin, especially to Potiphar (horizontal relationship).

3) Joseph refused to "even be with her". He reduced the opportunities for him to stumble. He refused to lay traps for himself or create his own snares.

4) Joseph ran. "Flee from sexual immorality" (I Cor. 6:18a), taken literally, which is a way that we don't apply often enough. The Bible says flee for a reason.

Doing the right thing is neither easy nor always immediately rewarded. Sometimes it can be costly, at least judging from Joseph's turn in prison for doing the right thing. But God knows and sees, and He never left Joseph.

### **Conclusion**

Sex is good, God created it. It is a matter of how it is expressed: chastity before marriage, fidelity after marriage. Why is this so important? Three reasons: We are called to holiness; God said so; and it is a sin not only against God, not only against ourselves, but also against our fellow believer. Sin always is destructive. Sin is never edifying. John Piper, in his article "Strategies for Fighting Sexual Sin" said that we have to recognize that Biblical prohibitions are intended to protect something precious, not deny something pleasant.

Matthew 5:28 says that lustful desire in the heart is as wrong as the act. For one thing, I cannot simply address the problem by conforming my outward behavior to some acceptable standard. That does me no good. The problem begins in the heart and mind and the solution begins in the heart and mind. My inner thoughts are just as evil as my lustful glances or any other of my actions. So in that regard, as Piper puts it, I have to be vigilant over my eyes and avoid unnecessary stimulation. Job 31:1 says "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl." And Romans 13:14 says "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."

I have to be aware of assuming that past successes guarantee future purity. Sometimes I get it in my head once I have passed through a tempting situation and have triumphed over it, that "I'm cured." No, I won one battle. The war continues. I'm like an alcoholic: I will always be an alcoholic even if I don't drink, so I can't afford to drop my guard or put myself into situations where I may fall. I will always be battling this. And I Corinthians 10:12 warns against this very thing "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

The Holy Spirit is there to help me. And I need to be pursuing the positive side of Christian living as well as "not doing" the things that I shouldn't. Gal 5:16 says that by living by the Spirit, I won't gratify the desires of the sinful nature. I Peter 1:22 once I am purified (not perfectly purified, but purified by obedience to the Word), I will be able to truly love deeply (not selfishly as lust provides).

And God is patient. "Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."