

November 12, 2023

A CALL TO WALK IN SEXUAL PURITY
Ephesians 5:3-14
(10 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

I wasn't born until five years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 had gone into effect. Similarly, for most of my life evangelicals have been at the forefront of the fight for life. They've begun and led the fight for life in starting and directing crisis pregnancy centers, like we have in BirthChoice, and in taking the issue to the public square with demonstrations like the "March for Life" that takes place in Washington, D. C. each year. But, sadly, this was not always the case among evangelicals in regard to abortion.¹

Nearly five years prior to *Roe*, Carl F. H. Henry, who was the editor of *Christianity Today*, gathered twenty-five evangelical scholars together to discuss the issue of abortion, which produced a document titled: "A Protestant Affirmation on the Control of Human Reproduction," which sadly concluded, "Whether or not the performance of an induced abortion is sinful we are not agreed, but about the necessity and permissibility for it under certain circumstances we are in accord."² Then, when the *Roe* decision was handed down, *Christianity Today* responded merely by noting that the decision "brought, as expected, immediate response from the nation's Roman Catholic leaders."³

Even worse, W. A. Criswell, the popular pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, responded, "I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had life separate from its mother that it became an individual person, and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed."⁴ And as devastating as that quote was at the time, its full devastation wouldn't be felt until years later when President Bill Clinton vetoed anti-abortion legislation, noting that he was carrying out what he'd learned from a Southern Baptist pastor, namely, that life begins with breath and not at conception.⁵

¹ The following description of evangelicals' lack of support for the pro-life cause in the years prior to *Roe v. Wade* and in the immediate years following that decision as well as quotes from prominent figures and institutions come from: Russell Moore, "The Gospel according to Jane Roe: Abortion Righteous and the Reshaping of Evangelical Theology," *SBJT* (Summer, 2003): 40-52. This can be found at: <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/sbjt-72-summer-2003/the-gospel-according-to-jane-roe-abortion-rights-and-the-reshaping-of-evangelical-theology/>.

² This document is behind a paywall, but it may be accessed by going to the following address: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1968/november-8/protestant-affirmation-on-control-of-human-reproduction.html>.

³ "Abortion Decision: A Death Blow?" *Christianity Today*, 8 (November 1968): 18.

⁴ Criswell is quoted in "Abortion Decision," 14.

⁵ Quoted in Kenneth Woodard, "Sex, Sin, and Salvation," *Newsweek* (November 1988): 37.

As I've noted, evangelicals, thankfully, changed their tune on the issue shortly after (as did Criswell), recognizing that the Bible affirms life at conception, as David can say in Psalm 139:13, "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb." Russell Moore has rightly observed about this text that David sees the "fetus knit together in the womb is 'me.'"⁶ And many others have noted that when Mary and Elizabeth met together as recorded in Luke 1:39-45, Elizabeth declared, "The *baby* in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44), among other places where the Bible affirms the presence and dignity of life from conception to natural death. But it is painful to consider that evangelicals were so slow and confused out of the gate on such an important issue. It's almost hard to imagine we could have had such a blind spot. And yet I wonder if we're not living through that same kind of reality today in regards to sexual immorality.

When a television show or movie comes out that contains all kinds of images and acts that believers shouldn't set their eyes on and be entertained by, it's not uncommon for social media to be filled with prominent professing believers talking about how much they enjoy the show. The International Mission Board used to ask if its applicants have view pornography; now they just assume it. Dating couples where both are believers commonly find acceptance in committing sexual acts together as long as they technically maintain their virginity. And we could go on. One wonders what future generations of believers might think if they wake up to the atrocious nature of such actions and look back on this generation with our acceptance of such things?

Just as evangelicals finally woke up a decade or so after *Roe* to the atrocious nature of abortion, let's be a people who wake up to the atrocious nature of sexual immorality in our own day—and in our own lives. Let's be a people for whom purity is sought after, expected, and normalized in our community. Let's be a people who take our cues on what is accepted and forbidden in terms of purity, not from the culture around us, but from God's Word. And one of the clearest places the Bible speaks on this issue is in Ephesians 5:3-14.

Now, I've mentioned before that the sexual immorality seems to rise to the top of most vice lists in the Bible, and if it's not mentioned first, the vice lists seem to build up to it. The text we're looking at this morning is a case of the latter. After noting that believers shouldn't lie, steal, sin in their anger, speak in ways that tears down others, or pursue bitterness and wrath, Paul reserves an entire section to focus on sins revolving around sexual immorality. And the way he structures it is by providing an exhortation against sexual immorality and then providing reasons why we must not pursue it. So I want to follow that same format, beginning with Paul's clear and simple exhortation: We must have nothing to do with sexual immorality.

We must have nothing to do with sexual immorality

⁶ Russell Moore, "The Gospel according to Jane Roe," 43.

After having noted that we should imitate God and walk in love in 5:1-2, he contrasts that with what we must *not* walk in or pursue, writing, “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (v. 3). Now, your first thought might be that I’ve not dealt fairly with what Paul writes by putting all of this under the heading of sexual immorality. After all, though he does prohibit sexual immorality and all impurity, he also mentions covetousness. But I don’t think he’s switching tracks when he mentions covetousness after sexual immorality and impurity. Remember when the Lord initially forbade covetousness in Exodus 20:17, he declared, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” Now, obviously the Lord addresses coveting more than simply for lust’s sake in that verse, but he does also tell us not to covet another man’s wife. Therefore, I think he’s speaking of covetousness in that vein. As one commentator noted, he’s forbidding “that insatiable desire to have more, even the coveting of someone else’s body for selfish gratification.”⁷

So Paul is forbidding all forms of sexual immorality and impurity. But he does more than that, doesn’t he? He says that these things must name even be named among us. In other words, as believers, we should see sexual sin as so unfitting for the people of God that we avoid allowing it to become the topic of our conversations. We don’t want to normalize what should be viewed as absolutely unacceptable.

If you’ve attempted to sit and watch television in the last few years, you’ve probably noticed the rise in characters practicing homosexuality. It’s gotten to be so predictable, it’s humorous. You’re watching a detective show and all is normal until the male detective’s so-called “husband” is brought in on episode four. Why are they doing that? Well, it’s their attempt to normalize in our minds what we rightly see as inappropriate behavior. And we can do the same thing when we allow sexual immorality to become a part of our conversation. Making it part of our conversation normalizes something we should view as unacceptable.

Paul adds in verse 4, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” That is, Paul says, “Don’t even let these things be part of your conversation in a joking way.” Surely there are some things that we would not feel comfortable speaking about. Thankfully, pedophilia still falls into that category for most of the country. It’s such a terrible reality that most won’t even joke about it or speak of it as if it’s normal and okay. Paul is simply saying to broaden that prohibition to include all sexual immorality, impurity, and lusting after another.

Instead, he says, our conversation should be filled with giving thanks to God for his good gifts. But why say that as a contrast? I mean, we might expect him to say that instead of speaking of sexual immorality, we should speak of things like service or the like. But I think the reason he brings up thanksgiving is because sexual sin is selfish and self-centered. It’s about what I want

⁷ Peter O’Brien, *Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 359.

and what I might find pleasing for myself. Thanksgiving forces me to look out and consider what is God-honoring and how I might thank him for it.

So right out of the gate, Paul strongly prohibits sexual immorality, impurity, coveting another person for your own gratification, and he forbids not only practicing these things but making them part of our conversation and joking about them because it's not fitting for saints to do so. This of course includes viewing pornography, committing any sexual act with someone who is not your spouse, practicing homosexuality, and on and on. But it also (obviously) includes our language, and so let's just make sure we're not slipping into joking about things that Paul says shouldn't be mentioned and are not fitting for the saints to speak of.

But Paul also gives us some reasons not to give into practicing or even speaking the details of sexual immorality. I'll name three of these from the text. The first of these is those whose lives are characterized by sexual immorality will bear God's eternal judgment.

Those whose lives are characterized by sexual immorality will bear God's eternal judgment

Paul writes in verse 5, "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." Breaking down this verse a bit, we see that Paul is providing a reason for the prohibition he's given in the first four verses. We shouldn't practice sexual immorality or even speak of the details of it *for* . . . And that "for" should be seen as "because." That is, it's stating a reason. And the reason Paul states, he states negatively. The one who practices these things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Now, two things I want to make clear here. First, by stating that the person who is sexually immoral won't inherit the kingdom of God, Paul is not simply saying that we'll miss out on some blessing beyond heaven. That is, he's not saying, "Of course you'll be in heaven, you'll just miss out on some rewards that will make heaven even better. You won't inherit all there is available to you in the kingdom." No, by saying you'll not inherit the kingdom of God, he's saying that you won't be with the Lord. Rather, you'll be under his eternal judgment in hell. There is no middle ground.

Second, when he says that "everyone who is sexually immoral has no inheritance in the kingdom," he doesn't mean everyone who has ever committed sexual sin is going to hell. Surely that would condemn all of us in some form or fashion. Paul is saying this of those whose lives are characterized by this, that is, those who have given themselves over to these things. Those individuals who give themselves over to sexual immorality instead of repenting and turning from it will face God's eternal wrath in hell.

And this isn't the only place Paul speaks this way. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 and Galatians 5:21 he says nearly the same exact thing. This is why Paul adds in verse 6, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." In other words, don't let anyone tell you that it's really okay to pursue these

things or that they don't really matter. If someone is saying that to you now, they're speaking empty words and, worse, trying to pull you toward hell. That's reason number one to avoid sexual immorality in all its forms. A second reason to avoid is because we've been changed by Christ.

We've been changed by Christ

As Paul continues, he warns us against joining with unbelievers in mimicking these sexually immoral practices, writing, "Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord" (vv. 7-10).

In other words, don't participate in the sexually immoral practices of the world because you've been changed by Christ. Paul tells us that we were at one time darkness, but now we are light. Now, that's an odd way to word things, isn't it? We might expect Paul to say that we were *in* darkness but now are *in* light. But he says we *were* darkness and now *are* light. Why does he say it that way? Of course we can't be sure, but one reason is perhaps because he's stressing that what has changed in our lives isn't our surroundings. What has changed is *us*. We ourselves were once darkness. We were corrupt in our desires, words, thoughts, and actions. But now we've been transformed. We've been made new so that the light of Christ should radiate from us in this world.

And as those who now are new creations in Christ, with new hearts, new spirits, new desires, and the Holy Spirit indwelling us, there is no way that we can allow ourselves to be characterized by those words, thoughts, and actions that once characterized us and now characterize those who are still in darkness. Rather, as Paul notes, we should seek only to be characterized by what is pleasing to the Lord. And this leads us to our final reason to avoid sexual immorality: walking in the light will both expose and (hopefully) transform those around us.

Walking in the light will both expose and (hopefully) transform those around us

Paul's last reason begins with a note that our holiness will serve to expose sin. He writes, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret" (vv. 11-12).

Now it can feel like a contradiction for Paul to exhort us to expose the works being done in darkness and then remind us that it is shameful for us even to speak of the actions that they do in secret. So how do we reconcile these two things? Well, I don't think they're contradictory because when Paul speaks of exposing the works of those in darkness around us, he doesn't intend on us exposing them necessarily by going around and telling everybody who'll listen what sinners are doing. Rather, he intends on us exposing them by living holy lives.

Now, this is not to say that we don't report abuse or note evil actions so that they might be stopped, authorities might punish evildoers, laws might be made against them, etc. Of course we do these things. We've been rightly noting the evil of abortion and child mutilation and hormone therapy practices as the evils they are. So I don't think he's keeping us from educating the public so that we might do good in the public square. But he's envisioning our neighbor being shamed by the way that we live. When they see our faithfulness, they are exposed as those who are unfaithful to spouses. When they see us pursuing purity, they are exposed as those seeking impurity.

Just this past week the news went viral that the new speaker of the house has covenant eyes on his own phone as well as his son's. And if you don't know, covenant eyes is a software that holds individuals accountable and can filter certain images from showing up on our phones, tablets, and computers. It's a software to help prohibit you from viewing pornography. As a church we actually get a discounted rate on this, and if you're a member of Cornerstone, you can get this software for yourself and your family for next to nothing (or nothing if you can't afford "next to nothing").

But what was interesting about this news breaking is that the response wasn't positive. Sadly, people weren't saying, "Thank goodness one of our political leaders is trying to pursue holiness for himself and his family." The news broke in a way so as to mock and ridicule speaker Johnson. This news was greeted with ridicule. Why? It's because his pursuit of purity exposes their impurity and works of darkness. And exposed, they lash back in large measure. It's the same reason Mike Pence was ridiculed for not meeting one of his female staffers alone. In a town where immorality runs rampant, here was a man pursuing purity and fidelity, and he was mocked. But their mockery says more about them than him. Their deeds were exposed by his light.

That's another reason we walk in purity, so that evil deeds are exposed. But that's not all Paul adds here. He also notes that there's a possibility that some will be transformed by our holiness. Paul adds, "But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that become visible is light. Therefore, it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'" (vv. 13-14).

Many will mock when their evil deeds are exposed, but some will be convicted, wake up to their need, and become light themselves. That seems to be Paul's point. He combines in this quotation of verse 14 imagery from Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1, which may have even been an early Christian hymn picturing for us what has happened in our lives. We've been awakened from our sleep of death as Christ has shown on us. So now we must shine on others with our purity. And so we have one more reason to pursue purity.

Brothers and sisters, sexual immorality and impurity is rampant in our society. I don't have to tell you that. But we can be different. We *are* different. We were once darkness, but now we're light. So have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, and coveting others for your own satisfaction. Don't even let it become part of your conversation or joking because those whose

lives are characterized by these things will face God's wrath. But that's not who we are. We are light, so let's shine and allow our holiness to expose evil deeds. It may well be that even one in darkness will repent.

But I want to add one thing as we draw to a close. It may well be that you're hearing this and thinking, "Man, I've messed up. My life has been characterized by this more than I wish were true." And if that's the case, repent. Confess your sin to the Lord and receive the forgiveness that is yours in Christ. Recognize that Christ's life, death, and resurrection is sufficient for your full and total forgiveness. There are no second-class citizens in his kingdom. You'll not have to wear a scarlet letter, marking you as one who was sexually immoral. You'll be forgiven, cleansed, and free. This is why Christ died. So let's confess our sins, realize we're forgiven, give thanks to God for his grace as we come to the table, and then pursue holiness and avoid sexual immorality, knowing this is pleasing to our gracious Lord. Amen.