

How We Think About Sex

Good to see you guys. If you've got your bibles, go ahead and turn to **Ephesians 5**. For the past couple weeks, we've been talking about what we've called the "basic rhythm of following Jesus." Paul has now finished telling all about the realities of what God has done for us in Jesus in the first half of the book. Now what he's trying to do is answer the question, when it comes to the day-to-day, what does following Jesus actually look like? Last week, we talked about how it should look specifically in regards to how we treat each other. How the people in this room, as followers of Jesus, should relate to one another, speak to one another, interact with one another. But this week he shift gears and talks about what following Jesus should look like in how we think about sex.

Which means this week might be the *slightest bit* **more controversial than last week**. Last week's passage as a whole talked about things most of us probably *already knew* we shouldn't be doing: lying, stealing, gossiping, lashing out at people. This week's is going to warn against some stuff that we might be tempted to take issue with. But let's **take a look** at ch. 5, v. 1:

[1] Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So first, if you're thinking "we covered **these verses last week**," it's because we did. These verses were a great ending to last week, but they're a great intro to this week. Paul says we are to imitate God, and what we are to imitate specifically is how Jesus "gave himself up for us." **What love looks like, according to Paul, is *the complete giving of oneself*. And that's important, because he is going to go on to contrast *that* with some other things that are the exact *opposite* of that.** Things we might do that are diametrically *opposed* to that kind of love. Here's what they are, starting in v. 3:

*[3] But **sexual immorality** and all **impurity** or **covetousness** must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.*

So he uses **three terms** to describe things that are opposite of the self-giving love of Jesus: *sexual immorality*, *impurity*, and *covetousness*. Let's figure out what they mean:

- **Sexual immorality and impurity** are two words that often go together in the bible. Together, they describe any *sexual interaction* with someone you're not married to. If it is sexual in nature and it's not with someone you're in a marriage covenant with, it's included here.
- **Covetousness**, in this context, is describing any *sexual thoughts* or *desire* towards someone you're not married to. Any sexual or objectifying thoughts, whether it's towards a person you know, a random person out in public, or via things like porn and fantasy.

Just for simplicity's sake today, let's refer to **those ideas collectively as "lust."** That's what lust is in the bible's vocabulary: any sexual expression or desire towards someone you're not married to. **And Paul says that lust should "*not even to be named*" among followers of Jesus.** The NIV here says there shouldn't even "be a *hint*" of it. Meaning not only should we avoid it—we should avoid even the *appearance* of it. **So maybe you would say you and your girlfriend aren't really *sleeping together* that often, but you're just living together because it's easier. But that would definitely be considered "a hint" of lust. Maybe you haven't *met up* with anybody you've met on Tinder or Bumble yet—you're just sending**

some somewhat suggestive, provocative messages to the person you matched with to just see where it goes. That would definitely be considered a *hint*. Paul says there shouldn't even be a "hint" of these things among us as followers of Jesus.

Now, let me **press pause** right here for a minute. Because for some of you are in the room today, this passage is confirming every stereotype you've ever had about Christianity. You're thinking, "see this is the problem with Christians—they're always trying to control people's sex lives." But if you're thinking that, I want you to look a little closer at the passage. *Who* is Paul saying all this to? In v. 3, who does he say these things shouldn't be named among? *Saints. Followers of Jesus.* **So Paul's assumption isn't that everyone in the world would abide by this sexual ethic.** His assumption is that *followers of Jesus* would abide by it. That's different.

So **if you're not a follower** of Jesus, we wouldn't necessarily **expect Paul's instructions here to make any sense to you.** We would expect them to seem a little weird and unnecessary. Because you're missing the most important piece of the puzzle—who Jesus is and why he would ask something like this of us. **So if you're here and wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus, first understand nobody is preaching at you—if anything, we're preaching at ourselves.** But in light of that, here's what you're invited to do: keep an open mind. I'd love to invite you to listen and consider if the sexual ethic Paul is pushing for here is at least *logically consistent*, if it at least *makes sense*—even if you disagree with its conclusion. Fair enough?

Okay, so **here is Paul's logic** regarding sex. **There shouldn't be any hint of lust among followers of Jesus, precisely because lust is the opposite of what love is.** Love, according to v. 1-2, is the *giving* of oneself. But lust isn't motivated by *giving*—it's driven by *getting*. All of the things he mentions, at their core, are *using the other person* for what you can *get*. **Paul says that lust shouldn't be named among followers of Jesus because it is exactly the opposite of love.** And Jesus is about love. Here's how New York pastor and author Tim Keller puts it:

Lust says, "What can you do for me?" Love says, "What can I do for you?"

Now, maybe **some of you would take issue** with that line of thinking. Maybe you would say "but my boyfriend and I aren't *taking* from one another when we have sex—we love each other." And to that, Paul I think would say "great. Then you should get married." "Well, we're just not ready to get married yet." Well then you're not ready for sex—precisely because you're not ready for the type of love that sex is *about*.

Here's **another way to put it**: within the Christian worldview, **sex is saying with your body what is already true of your life.** To borrow some wonderful lyrics from John Legend, **sex is saying that if all of me belongs to all of you, that means my body belongs to you too.** Sex was simply **intended to be consistent with all other parts of the relationship.** It was meant to be doing with your body what you're *already* doing with your life—*giving yourself fully* to another person. And by definition, sexual interaction and sexual desire outside of marriage, *can't be that*. Because you're not giving yourself to them.

So one time I was explaining just that to a buddy of mine who doesn't follow Jesus. He was asking me why Christians thought sex should only be between a husband and wife, so I just explained to him a

version of what I just said to you guys. And without even skipping a beat, he says “that’s why **one-night stands** are always so awkward!” To which I was like, “huh?” And he said “that’s why it always feels so awkward after I have sex with a girl I don’t know. Afterwards, we have to decide if we want to exchange numbers or not, whether we’re gonna see each other again or not, all that stuff. Usually, I just dip out before she wakes up because I don’t want to deal with all that. But it’s probably awkward because I’m doing something with my body that I don’t want to do with my life!” To which I was like “can you start writing my sermons for me?” He was spot-on. **That’s why one-night stands are so awkward—because you’re doing something with your body that isn’t true of your life.** It feels out-of-sync and out-of-place. According to Paul, that’s because it’s not how sex was designed to work.

So Paul says none of this should be named among followers of Jesus. But he **doesn’t just stop** there. Look at v. 4:

*[4] Let there be no **filthiness** nor **foolish talk** nor **crude joking**, which are out of place, but instead let there be **thanksgiving**.*

So for Paul, it’s not *just* how we *engage* in sex, it’s also how we **talk** about sex. **Just like we shouldn’t participate in sex in a way that cheapens it, we also shouldn’t talk about sex that cheapen it.** Just so you understand what he’s describing here, *filthiness* is any type of sexually obscene behavior. Sexual gestures towards people, being sexually explicit in conversation for no reason. *Foolish talk* is anything from spilling intimate details of our sex life, to any public boasting about sexual conquests, whether it’s by a freshman in college or a U.S. president. *Crude joking* would refer to overtly sexual humor. Telling jokes that are really only funny because they’re dirty. All these things refer to how we *talk* about sex.

And here’s the point Paul is making: **the way we talk about things, over time, shapes how we think about them.** For example, If you call your wife your “old lady” every time you refer to her, don’t you think that’s eventually gonna impact how you interact with her? If you refer to your husband as “the ol’ ball and chain”—don’t you think over time, that’s gonna shape how you relate to him? In the same way, if we talk about sex like it’s trivial, insignificant, or even animalistic—we’re eventually going to start *believing* and *living* like that’s true. So Paul says, “don’t talk about sex in these ways.”

Instead, Paul says, there should be **“thanksgiving.”** Now what does *giving thanks* have to do with the rest of this? Well think about it—if **lust is driven by the desire what we don’t have, thanksgiving is just the opposite: practicing contentment with what we do have.** Paul is saying giving thanks is an antidote to lust. The more we cultivate thankfulness for what we *do* have, the less we’re likely to obsess over what we *don’t*. **And yes, even apparently giving thanks for sex. Just a shot in the dark, I bet not many of us regularly thank God for inventing sex. According to Paul, maybe we should change that.**

And then Paul circles back around to these **same three words**, in v. 5:

*[5] For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), **has no inheritance in the kingdom** of Christ and God.*

So Paul reiterates his point from earlier but ups the ante: he says *no one who practices these things has an inheritance in the kingdom of God.* Translation: **if you are content with the presence of these things in your life, you are not a follower of Jesus.** No matter how much you think you are. No matter

how meaningful the prayer you prayed to accept Jesus was, no matter how much you read your bible, no matter how much you go to church—if you are largely unbothered and indifferent about the sexual sin in your life, you are not a follower of Jesus.

Now that we've said that, I want everyone to take a **deep breath**. To be clear, **I don't think Paul means** if you've *ever been guilty of lust*, you're not a follower of Jesus. I don't think that for two reasons. First, remember that he's writing this letter *to followers of Jesus* and warning *them* against it. So evidently, he expects that at least *some* of them *struggle* with these things. Otherwise there'd be no reason to give them this warning. And 2) what he describes here are not *isolated struggles* with these things, but the *ongoing complacency* with these things. So Paul *isn't* saying "if you messed up once with your boyfriend, that means you're not a Christian." He's *not* saying "if you've ever looked at porn, you're not a follower of Jesus." That's not what he's saying.

But here's **what I think he is saying**. He *is saying* that if what you call 'messing up' with your boyfriend is actually just *living with your boyfriend*—you're probably not following Jesus." He *is saying* "if you look at porn regularly, as a pattern of your life, and haven't felt moved to do anything about it—you're probably not following Jesus." **There is a massive difference between struggling with sin, and settling in to sin. Every follower of Jesus struggles with sin. But Paul is saying no follower of Jesus settles in to sin. No true follower of Jesus makes a practice of sin in their life.**

Now, if you grew up in church, maybe all that sounds a tad legalistic to you. I'll be honest—I felt some of that too when I first read this passage. But believe it or not, **this is not the only time Paul** makes this point. He uses almost identical language at least two other times in his other letters:

- **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**: *Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers...* [and he goes on to list a whole host of other things, none of these]...**will inherit the kingdom of God.**
- **Galatians 5:19**: *The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity...*[again, quite the list. About all of them he says]... **those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

In other words, **this is not an issue of how we interpret one particular passage in the book of Ephesians**. This is a trademark of Paul's, to talk about it this way. **Anyone who develops a pattern of sexual sin, anyone who settles into them as a way of life—has revealed they don't really stand with Jesus.**

Now, Paul **anticipates** that we will have **pushback** on this. So he addresses it—look at v. 6:

[6] Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ["Sons of Disobedience," by the way—would be a great name for a motorcycle gang—somebody needs to camp on that domain name real quick]

Paul says, "listen. **People will try to tell you** that this stuff is not a big deal. You might even tell yourself that it's not a big deal. You'll think 'everybody messes around—it can't matter *that* much.' You'll think 'God would never expect me deny myself, deprive myself like that.'" There is no shortage of external and internal justifications when it comes to sexual sin. *But*, Paul says, **don't buy it**. Don't buy into the empty logic people are selling you. **Sex is too powerful and too important to let people pull the wool over your eyes.** So don't be deceived.

We've told you guys this story before, but a while back I had a friend go on a mission trip to **India**. And while he and his team were there, they attended a church service where the Indian pastor was preaching on Colossians 3:19, where it says "husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them." Simple enough passage. But as this Indian pastor **was teaching his church this passage, you could just tell that he was working his way up to something he was really nervous about saying**. Beads of sweat started to form on his forehead, he got more and more anxious and jittery, the color drained out of his face a little—and at the climax of the sermon, he said "now, husbands—this means you can't beat your wives." And then he closed in prayer. Now, immediately, my friend and all the other Americans there looked at each other and were like "wait. That was the big thing he was working up to? Why? I mean of *course* that verse means you can't beat your wife. How could anyone even argue that it *doesn't* mean that?" But when they asked the pastor about it later, he said "no, you guys don't understand. **In our culture, almost all husbands beat their wives regularly. Out of the men in attendance at the service today, I bet 75-80% of them have physically abused their wives in the last week.** And all of them have the audacity to still call themselves followers of Jesus. I said what I said today because I'm concerned for their souls."

Now to most all of us, that just **seems absurd**. How could people who claim to follow Jesus be that blind to something the bible plainly teaches? **But listen—here's what has happened** there in India. These men have been so shaped by what is acceptable in the culture around them, that they can ignore and justify something as anti-gospel as abusing their wives. **What is acceptable in their culture has lulled them to sleep in regards to what the bible actually teaches**. But here's my question—if **that's possible for them to do with violence, how possible is it that we in America could be doing the exact same thing in regards to sex?** How easy would it be for us, in America, where sex is everywhere and everything? How easy would it be for us to look around and go "come on, it can't be that big of a deal—everybody's doing it." **But as we do that, we look more and more like those men sitting in church in India, convincing ourselves that our sin isn't really that bad.**

"Let *no* one," Paul says—even your own *conscience*—"deceive you with empty words, for *because of these things the wrath of God is coming*." I'm aware "wrath" isn't exactly our favorite word when it comes to describing God. We tend to bristle some when the bible talks about it. But listen—**it is not wrong for God to have anger towards destructive things in our world**. When God sees human beings *he created* being objectified by other people, that *should* make him angry. When God sees men and women and children he created being preyed upon by others, that *should* make him angry. **A god who could witness those types of things and be not be emotionally affected by them would not be a god worth worshiping**. But Paul says that God *is* emotionally affected by them. He's angered by them—and he's not going to just overlook it.

This type of thing is a big deal to God. And so in light of that, Paul gives two simple instructions to followers of Jesus in Ephesus regarding lust. Two things we should do about it: **1) Avoid it so it doesn't happen, and 2) Expose it when it does happen.**

1. Avoid it so it doesn't happen.

Paul says as followers of Jesus, we should **avoid** any type of lust with everything in us. Look at v. 7:

[7] Therefore **do not become partners** with them; [8] for at one time **you were darkness**, but **now you are light in the Lord. Walk** as children of **light** [9] (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), [10] and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

“Do not become partners with them.” Now, **your translations** might say something like “don’t associate with them.” I think that’s actually a poor interpretation of what Paul says. He’s not saying don’t *hang out* with people that don’t know Jesus— that would be inconsistent with Jesus’ entire ministry—what he’s saying don’t become *participants* with them in their sin. **Don’t inherit their way of thinking and living. Don’t live your life the same way they live theirs.**

And please, please, please, do not miss **why he says we should live like this**. Here’s the reason he gives for avoiding lust: because in Jesus, *that’s not who you are anymore*. “Once you were darkness,” he says. “But now you are *light*.” So follower of Jesus, if you don’t hear anything else I say today, hear this: **the command to put off lust is not a call to simple behavior modification—it’s a call to live into who Jesus has made you. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has made you an altogether new human being.** So Paul says “live *out of* that new identity.” Which means *avoiding* lust with everything we’ve got.

You know it’s interesting to me, **most types of sin** in the bible we’re told to *resist*. *Fight against* this sin, *War against* that sin, *resist temptation* towards sin. When it comes to sexual sin, here’s what we’re told to do: *Run. Flee*. Jesus says *cut off your hand* if that’s what it takes (which is a bit graphic, but point taken). All other types of sin we’re told to resist. When it comes to sexual sin, the bible’s like “bruh, you better just run. You better get out of there.” We are called to *avoid* sexual sin before it happens.

But at the same time, **Paul isn’t naive**. He knows that for most all of us, there will be *some lust* present in our lives even if we’re making efforts to run from it. And because of that, we’re told to...

2. Expose it when it does happen.

[11] Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead **expose them**. [12] For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. [13] But when anything is **exposed by the light**, it becomes **visible**, [14] for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Even in our best efforts to flee, there will be times that we fail. There will be times when lust is still present in us. And so here’s what Paul says to do when that happens: expose it to the light. Because we are *light*, any time we spot darkness in ourselves, we should expose it. The bible’s language for this is **confession**: **being honest before both God and others about our sin.**

The **quintessential passage** in the bible about confession is 1 John 1, which you’ll see sounds a lot like Ephesians. Take a look at it on the screen:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. [So] if we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

If we say we have fellowship with God—in other words, **if we say “yeah, I’m a Christian, I’m a follower of Jesus”—while having sin in our life that nobody knows about and we are doing nothing about, John says the only explanation is that we are lying.** Followers of Jesus don’t have sin in their life that no one knows about. But then John goes on:

But if we walk in the light [or in Paul’s language, “expose our sin to the light”], as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

So if we bring our sin into the light, **if we expose it, two things will happen: we’ll have fellowship with one another, and Jesus will cleanse us from our sin.** If you are in the room right now and you have hidden sexual sin, there are two things I immediately know about you. I know them because of the bible, but I also know them because I’ve been there before. Here’s what I know: I know that you 1) feel isolated from others. Maybe in big ways, maybe in small ways. You just have this feeling that the only way people like you is because they don’t know the real you. And I also know that you 2) are isolated from God. Whether you *feel* it or not, you are isolated from him. Because “in God there is no darkness at all.”

But here’s what I’m telling you, and more importantly the Scriptures are telling you: **those can both be over with today. The isolation from others and the isolation from God can be finished this morning if you will bring your sin to the light.** If you’ll just expose it. Confess it to God and other people. And here’s what you’ll find: **you’ll find a Savior whose blood is more than enough to cover every bit of your sin.** Every single thing you’ve been caught up in, whether it’s been for weeks or months or years or decades, doesn’t matter—all of it can and will be forgiven. And at the same time **you’ll find a community of people more than willing to meet you right where you are.** A group of people ready to respond without shaming you, without condemning you, but by embodying God’s grace and compassion *towards* you. And you’ll probably find a bunch of people whose stories sound a lot like yours and are more than willing to tell you about it, and walk with you through it, and tell you what they’ve learned in the process.

And I realize there are probably those in this room today for whom that all sounds **too good to be true.** There are people right now that are so accustomed to darkness that the promise of the light sounds like fantasy. Maybe you’ve been so beaten down by the darkness, so exhausted by it, that they’re praying they would just get caught so it would be over.

But here’s the good news of the gospel—**you don’t have to wait until you get caught. You can expose it to the light now.** Jesus is ready for you *now*. This community ready for you *now*. So if you’re here, please, don’t go one more day in the darkness. If there is sexual sin in your life, no matter how big or small—find a way to expose it. Confess it to God and to other people. If you’re in a LifeGroup, grab a person in your group after the Gathering, or text them right now and say “make me talk to you about this this week.” If you’re here and you don’t know who to talk to about it, send me or our other pastor an email, contact us via our website, or come and talk to us today. We would love to talk to you about it or connect you with someone else who can. But whatever you do, don’t go one more day in the darkness. “Awake O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Let’s pray.