

The Enthronement of Desire

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Series: [Faith And Everyday Life: Ephesians 4:17-5:20](#)

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Ephesians 5:3-6

But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

It is utterly crucial in approaching a text like this that we see not only what the Scriptures forbid, but also HOW and WHY they forbid it. It is plain that Paul is eager to eliminate certain behaviors and attitudes from the Christian life. But HOW does he attempt to eliminate these things?

If we don't see the HOW, then we don't see the gospel. And without the gospel, the prohibitions become the letter that kills instead of the Spirit that gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6). And this is true no matter how well we succeed in getting these things out of our lives. Success in morality without the gospel is suicide.

So we must devote our earnest attention this morning not only to what the apostle prohibits, but also to how he motivates this prohibition and how he enforces it and how he replaces it with something else.

What Paul Is Trying to Eliminate

But let's begin by making clear just what it is that Paul is trying to eliminate from our lives. He mentions six things in verses 3 and 4: "Immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you . . . Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity." Let's take these six things one at a time and ponder what they refer to and whether any of them are in our lives. This is not a test of your vocabulary; it is a test of your purity. Are there any of these that need to be eliminated from your lives?

1. Immorality

First he mentions "immorality." This is a broad term for sexual sin, but in the New Testament it seems to

focus on fornication, that is, the fulfillment of sexual cravings before marriage. So what I want to stress this morning is that this word and this text clearly teach that premarital sexual intercourse is wrong; it is contrary to the revealed will of God.

Let me try to show you why I am persuaded that this word refers to premarital sexual intercourse and not just to (or even mainly to) adultery or marital unfaithfulness. There are at least three other texts where the word *porneia* clearly refers to premarital sexual intercourse.

First, in 1 Corinthians 7:2 Paul says, "Because of the temptation to immorality [*porneia*], each man should have his own wife and each her own husband." In other words BEFORE you marry you are tempted to *porneia*. The sin in view is not adultery, but premarital sexual intercourse. In the preceding chapter (6:18) Paul says this is to be shunned: "Flee immorality."

Second, in Matthew 15:19 Jesus says, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication [*porneia*]." Notice how adultery is listed along side this word *porneia* and so is different from it. It is so clear that the RSV goes against its usual translation of "immorality" and calls it "fornication." Jesus goes on to say that it is these things that defile. In other words our Lord himself was crystal clear on this matter of premarital sexual intercourse: it comes from an evil heart and is a blatant contradiction of God's will that sexuality be preserved for the lifelong union of one man and one woman in marriage. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9 where Paul uses fornicators, *pornoi*, and adulterers, *moichoi*, the same way Jesus uses *porneia* and *moicheia*.)

Third, in John 8:41 Jesus is in a heated discussion with the Jewish leaders. Jesus pushes them so hard to recognize their own inconsistencies that they resort to an ad hominem argument and say, "We were not born of fornication!" The word is *porneia* and the point is: WE weren't born that way; YOU were. In other words they are calling Jesus a bastard, because everybody knew that Mary and Joseph were not married when Mary became pregnant. And so since they did not believe in the miracle of the virgin birth, the popular rumor was that Jesus was an illegitimate child of Mary by who knows whom. The only point I want to make from this is that the word for "fornication" in John 8:41 is the same as the one in Matthew 15:19 and 1 Corinthians 7:2, and in all these texts the meaning is premarital sexual relations.

Therefore this is the natural meaning to give to the word here in Ephesians 5:3. Fornication should be eliminated from your life if you are a Christian. It should be shunned like a dangerous disease. For it is far more dangerous than AIDS. AIDS can only kill your body. Fornication can kill your soul as we will see from verse 6 in a few moments.

2. Impurity

The next thing to eliminate is "impurity" or "uncleanness" (v. 3). This is a word Paul uses a half-dozen times in relation to sexual sin (Romans 1:24; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:19; Colossians 3:5). The word is probably added to fornication to emphasize the kind of degradation common in Ephesus and Minneapolis. I think he included sexual activity like homosexuality. This is the meaning he gives to the word in Romans 1:24.

Paul is talking about the kinds of things that come into a culture when it exchanges God for the creature. He says that people start exchanging the natural for the unnatural. Verse 24: "God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their own bodies among themselves," which he goes on to identify as homosexuality and lesbianism. Verse 26f.: "He gave them up to dishonorable passion. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men."

So even though our own culture may be returning to the debauchery and license of the first century near-Eastern paganism, those who have been called by Jesus Christ into his kingdom and glory will stand firm and pure against fornication and homosexuality.

3. Covetousness

The third thing Paul mentions in verse 3 is covetousness. This must be eliminated too from the Christian life. It generally refers to greed for money but is really much broader than that. It means strong, inordinate craving; an inability to be content and satisfied with the necessities of life and ministry (cf. Hebrews 13:5; 1 Timothy 6:8). It may be a craving for money, or it may be a craving for sex, as it seems to be here.

The same word was used back in 4:19 in this same sense. Paul refers to unbelievers in that culture as people "who have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness." Literally: "they gave themselves up to licentiousness to do every kind of uncleanness in covetousness." Covetousness is what drives the pursuit of unclean behavior. It is the craving that ought to be conquered by a new and more powerful affection. Thomas Chalmers called it "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection."

If you are a Christian, these things must go: fornication; homosexuality; and the dominating power of all the cravings in your life that are not cravings for God.

4. Filthiness and Flippancy

The next three things to eliminate we can take all together for the sake of brevity. Verse 4 says, "Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity." Paul seems to be concerned mainly about two related errors: treating things as gross or treating things as trivial; filthiness and flippancy.

There are people who are so dirty inside that they can hardly refer to a tree or a cloud or a fish hook or a brake pedal without treating it as filthy: they may do it with some gross language or simply with a despising attitude and demeanor.

And there are people whose vision of the world is so superficial that they trivialize everything.

Paul condemns both of these and says, "Get rid of all filthiness and coarseness on the one hand, and all foolishness and levity on the other."

It is good for us to be warned not to make light of God's creation. You don't have to trivialize the world in order to enjoy it. [Charles Spurgeon](#) has some wise words on the difference between humor and levity.

We must conquer our tendency to levity. A great distinction exists between holy cheerfulness, which is a virtue, and general levity, which is a vice. There is a levity which has not enough heart to laugh, but trifles with everything; it is flippant, hollow, unreal. A hearty laugh is no more levity than a hearty cry. (*Lectures to My Students*, p. 212)

In sum, then, there are six things that this text of Scripture eliminates from the Christian life. The first three are fornication (premarital sexual relations); uncleanness (gross sexual distortions like homosexuality and lesbianism); covetousness (not merely the simple urge for sexual experience which is normal and good, but the dominion of this desire that controls the behavior and elevates the pursued pleasure above the revealed will of God). The last three are filthiness, silly talk, and levity, and together they show that the good gifts of God should not be treated as filthy or as flippant.

What He Replaces These Things With

Now before we look at HOW the apostle motivates his prohibitions, let's notice carefully what he puts in the place of these six sins. Keep in mind the model of 4:22–24: take off the old self and put on the new self. We are to take off and throw away fornication, homosexuality (and, by the way, Paul says very plainly in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 that some of the believers in the church HAD BEEN homosexuals; he believes that change is possible, as does OUTPOST here in our own city). We are to take off the old self of fornication and homosexuality and covetousness and filthiness and silly talk and leviety. And what are we to put on? THANKSGIVING! It comes at the end of verse 4: "Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor leviety, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving."

Would you have chosen gratitude or thankfulness as the opposite of all these sexual and verbal sins? Why does Paul? Here's what I would suggest is the reason.

Why He Replaces Them with Gratitude

If fornication and impurity are driven by covetousness, and covetousness is a deep discontented craving that dominates your life and even leads you to go against the will of God, then it is clear that the opposite experience would be thanksgiving. If you are overflowing with thanksgiving to God, then you are not dominated and driven by discontentment at what you have been denied.

Gratitude is what you feel when you believe God is for you and not against you. It's what you feel when you believe that he gives you only what is good for you and withholds no good thing (single or married!). It's what you feel when you trust him, that the tragedies of your life are not evidences of his meanness or his incompetence; but rather that they are the discipline of a loving Father who values your holiness above your fleeting worldly happiness. That's why verse 20 goes so far as to say, "Always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

So you can see how thanksgiving is the alternative to a life driven by cravings for what you don't have (whether sex or money). Thanksgiving says, in God I have all that is good for me, and I will not be driven to dishonor the worth of his name just to get a few sexual sensations or a few new toys.

And you can see easily how thanksgiving is also the opposite of treating God's gifts as filthy or as trivial. When you are truly grateful for something, you don't despise it and you don't trivialize it. Just test yourself: when your heart is overflowing with gratitude to God, do you use filthy language or make light of things? No. Gratitude is what you feel when you have been given eyes to see that all of life is the work of a sovereign and gracious God. It is not for trifling and it's not for defiling.

So we should strip off the old garment of fornication and impurity and covetousness and filthiness and silly talk and leviety and in its place put on the garment of gratitude.

Dethroning God

There is one other way to describe this change implied in this text. Notice in verse 5, about half way through, that a covetous person is called an idolater: ". . . one who is covetous (that is, an idolater)."

In other words, the root problem about being driven by the domination of earthly desires is that it dethrones God. That is why I entitled this message, "The Enthronement of Desire." So when Paul puts gratitude in the place of covetousness, he is simply putting God in the place of man, and specifically he is putting God in the place of self. Gratitude is the opposite of covetousness because it enthrones God. Gratitude says that God is the satisfaction of all my longings. Covetousness says that God is not adequate as a satisfying treasure; I must have money or I must have sex—God will not suffice!

And so perhaps the most important thing for us to see today is that even in the most physical, ordinary struggles of our lives, the central issue is GOD. When Paul calls the dominion of our craving "idolatry," he is saying in effect, God should be everything to you. God should be your pleasure and satisfaction and hope and joy and master. And all your life should be governed by an overflowing gratitude to him for his goodness and glory and grace and power and wisdom.

How Paul Motivates Us to Do This

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?

What He Doesn't Do

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.

What He Does Do—Two Times

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 (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 any more the way we are.

The Root of Gospel Obedience

On this Reformation Sunday let the great [Martin Luther](#) express the root of gospel obedience. In his magnificent essay called "The Freedom of a Christian" (published in 1520), 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? (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960, p. 304)

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.

Why Paul Threatens Hell for Not Doing This

One final question remains: if the Paul's goal is to motivate Christians to obey with this kind of inner, free, joyful gospel obedience, why does he now threaten that if they don't, they will miss heaven and go to hell?

For this is indeed what he does in verses 5 and 6:

Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

What does the deceiver say? Who do you think it is today that does what the deceiver does in verse 6— "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience"?

I would answer that the deceiver is the person today who says that gospel obedience can't be motivated by these words in verses 5 and 6. The deceiver is the person who says that the preaching of wrath belongs only to the law, and produces only legalistic fear.

This is not true. If it were true, Paul wouldn't warn his readers—professing Christians—about the danger of falling short of the kingdom and falling under the final wrath of God. The point of introducing the wrath of God and the danger of missing out on the kingdom of Christ is not to enslave people to unwilling and burdensome obedience. The point is this: evangelical obedience from a renewed mind and a heart brimming with joy and thanksgiving is not optional.

Jesus said the same thing in John 3:3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This kind of warning is not a summons to legalistic fear and slavish, cowering obedience. Just the opposite! Both Jesus and Paul are warning us that getting rid of our legalistic fear, and getting rid of our slavish efforts to obey God, is infinitely serious. They are saying that it is a matter of eternal importance whether you are really renewed in the spirit of your mind, and whether you are really born again, and really full of gratitude and joy and freedom in your obedience.

When God reveals his wrath, his intention is not to contradict or hinder the gospel motives of faith and freedom and joy. Just the opposite: the revelation of his wrath is the intensification of his demand that we trust in his mercy and delight in his grace. "He threatens terrible things if we will not be happy!"

Put off the old self of fornication and impurity and covetousness and filthiness and silly talk and levity; be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and put on the new garment of gratitude to God that knows and does what is fitting for the saints.

For on this great spiritual transaction in your heart hangs the inheritance of heaven or the torments of hell. O how serious and earnest and heart-searching we should be to make our calling and election sure and to know that we are born of God!

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