

How to Pursue Sexual Purity (Part 1)

Ephesians 5:4b

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Several years ago, I came across a compelling story that I shared with you at the time, but I'm going to do so again this morning because it's so appropriate for our study of sexual sin from Ephesians 5. Thomas Costain, in his work entitled *The Three Edwards*, tells the story of a man named Raynald the Third. Raynald was a fourteenth century duke in what is now Belgium. Raynald's younger brother, Edward, led a successful coup against him. And when Edward captured Raynald, he didn't kill him; instead, he built a special room around him in Newkirk Castle. And he promised his brother that he could regain his title and all of his belongings as soon as he was able to leave that room.

Now that wouldn't have been difficult for most of us. The room had several windows, had a standard sized door for the time. None of them were barred or locked. The problem was Raynald's unusual size. He was in fact grossly overweight. He was commonly called by his Latin nickname Crassus, which means "fat" or "the fat one". So, to regain his freedom and his crown, all Raynald needed to do was lose the necessary weight to be able to exit the door of the room that had been constructed around him. But Edward knew his older brother, and he knew his weaknesses. And so, every morning and every noon and every night, he would bring into that room or have brought into that room the finest and most delicious of foods all day every day. Instead of dieting his way out of his prison, Raynald grew fatter and fatter.

Whenever people accused Edward of cruelty, his response was something like this: "My brother's not a prisoner. He can leave whenever he wants." Raynald stayed in that room that had been built around him for ten years. He wasn't released until after his brother Edward died in a battle. By then, Raynald's health was so ruined that he died within a year's time of leaving that room. Raynald was really a tragic figure. He was a prisoner of his own appetite.

As I thought of that story, I was reminded of the fact that that is really an apt portrait of all of us before Christ. We were slaves to sin, including our sexual sin. Raynald had a free will as we had

a free will if you want to call it that. That may be a bit grandiose of a tag for what we had. We all made choices, but at the same time, his will was not free because his will was in bondage to his own sin and his own appetites. He would not choose to leave the room. He could not choose because he was compelled by his appetites.

In the same way, our wills were in bondage to our own appetites, but the good news is, in Christ, we have been set free and now God has given us all the resources we need to grow in spiritual maturity and in sexual purity. That's Paul's message in Ephesians 5 in the paragraph that we're examining together as we continue our journey through this wonderful letter. Ephesians 5 - let me read the paragraph for you. It begins in verse 3,

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; *there must be* no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light, (for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.

For this reason it says,

“Awake, sleeper,

And arise from the dead,

And Christ will shine on you.”

The theme of this paragraph is in verse 8, "... you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light." As Paul continues to tell us how to walk worthy of the position we have in Christ, he says if we're to walk worthy of Christ, worthy of what He has done for us, then we must walk in sexual purity.

In this passage we've just read together, our Lord provides us with several practical strategies that are absolutely essential in our daily battle for sexual purity. Last week, we'd begun to look at just the first practical strategy, and that was this: adopt God's standard of moral purity, adopt God's standard of moral purity. Verses 3 and 4,

"But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; *there must be* no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather the giving of thanks."

As we learned last week, Paul here addresses several categories of sexual sin. First, in the first two words, he addresses the sexual sins of action. The word "immorality" is the Greek word "porneia" from which we get our English word "pornography". This word, as we discovered, forbids all illicit sexual intercourse with another entity and all of those sins that we looked at last week, and I won't recite again for you this morning.

The second word, "impurity", includes all of the other misuses of the gift of human sexuality that are not included in the word "porneia". It includes all kinds of sexual aberrations including things like fetishes and sadomasochism and other perversions. So, with these first two words then, immorality and impurity, Paul forbids any sexual acts except the honorable enjoyment of a sexual relationship within marriage.

There's another category and that's the category of sexual sins of thought. You find it in the word in verse 3 "covetousness". This word occurs only one other time in Ephesians - in Ephesians 4:19. There Paul clearly uses it of sexual sin. He talks about pursuing sensuality and the fulfillment of our lusts with greediness (it's the word "covetousness"). So, in other words then, here the word "covetousness" is not a desire for things. It is the sexual desire to have

someone other than your spouse. It is sexual coveting or, as we use the English word, lust. It is sexual lust.

The most common expressions this sin takes we saw last week – physically looking at another person and sexually desiring them. Similar, but slightly, slightly different is the word or the sin pornography. And the third expression that it takes (we looked at last time often for women is sinfully craving a relationship and often the physical intimacy that comes with it), a relationship with someone other than her spouse. Those are the sexual sins of thought.

The final category are sexual sins of speech. You find those listed in verse 4. “Filthiness” – that refers to that which is obscene. We are not to speak in a way that evokes illicit sexual images in the minds of others. We’re not to have a sexually dirty mouth. “Silly talk” – this refers to crude, sexual humor. Foolish talking describes someone who uses base sexual humor, someone who tells dirty jokes. No subtlety, instead, his humor betrays a crass, vulgar mind. The third sexual form of speech is “coarse jesting”. This is smooth, intelligent, witty repartee about sexual things. This is sophisticated sexual innuendo and double entendre buried under a supposed level of class.

So, those are the six, six sins then that Paul spells out here that we are not to have anything to do with. And notice the command itself about these six sins. This gives us God’s standard of sexual purity. Verse 3, “... [they] must not even be named among you.” That is God’s standard of sexual purity. These sins should be so foreign to us that the labels don’t even have to be used. I think the NIV best captures Paul’s meaning here, “But among you there must not be even a hint of (these things)” – not even a hint. That’s where we left off last time.

Now, I want to continue on this point about adopting God’s standard for just a moment because it is absolutely crucial to understand this in our battle with sexual sin because we are prone, each of us, to set our own standard: “Well, you know, I would never do that or that or that, but you know, here’s where I draw the line.” The problem is because we are fallen, and because even as believers, we still have the flesh; we tend to draw the line in the wrong place. Invariably, we leave ourselves a margin of error. There is some kind of action or some kind of thought or some

kind of look or some kind of speech that we will tolerate. When we do that, we have set ourselves up for failure.

We must adopt God's standard of not a hint. Why is that? Well, because sexual sin is like a drug. Some of you were saved out of a drug culture. You understand this. Others of you have read about this. A person who starts on a certain illicit drug, they start with a particular kind of drug and a particular amount, and that brings them amazing, sometimes amazing satisfaction for a while. Then the day comes when that just isn't enough. You can only get the same thrill, the same high, by increasing the amount or increasing the frequency. And you keep doing that until pretty soon you've discovered that eventually no matter how much of that drug you take, it just doesn't bring the same high that it used to bring. So, you have to change then. You need a more potent drug to achieve the same high.

You know this is how it works with drugs. Folks, this is the same way it works with sexual sin. To keep producing the same high, you have to increase the amount, increase the frequency. And eventually, you have to change to a different kind, a more perverted kind, to bring the same level of thrill, the same high.

To change images, sexual sin is like a cancer in the soul. If you tolerate a few cells, it will eventually metastasize and spread throughout your soul. That's why we have to have a zero-tolerance policy. The only way to deal with cancer is to kill it all. That's why if we're going to overcome the sexual sin in our lives, we have to adopt God's standard. It's absolute purity, not even a hint of these things in our lives. Notice what Paul says in verse 3, "(let it) not even be named among you, as is proper among saints..."

Folks, Paul spent the first 3 chapters of this book telling us that we are saints, that we have been set apart unto God, we are His special possession. And here he says act like it. We must have a zero tolerance for acts of sexual sin, for thoughts of sexual sin and for speech that is filled with sexual sin. It's not okay to tolerate a little - an occasional act, an occasional thought, an occasional look, an occasional comment. Can I just be frank with you? Maybe the reason you are

failing in your battle with sexual sin and temptation is because you have adopted the wrong standard, your own standard, and you are simply letting the cancer grow and fill your soul.

In the end, God's standard of sexual purity is a person, Jesus Christ. In 1 John 3:3, John reminds us that we're looking forward to the day when Jesus appears. And when we see Him, we'll be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. And then he says this in 1 John 3:3 – "... everyone (every Christian) who has this hope (that is, the hope of Christ's return and being with Him and being like Him, everyone who has this hope) *fixed* on Jesus purifies himself (and here's the standard), just as He is pure." That's what we're pursuing. It's not okay. In the way of salving your conscience, the battle gets too intense to redefine sexual sin, to lower the standard, to adopt your own standard and to allow a few things as long as you don't go beyond this. It will destroy your soul. Adopt God's standard. That's the first practical strategy, and it's absolutely essential for the battle with sexual purity.

There's a second practical strategy that is crucial as well in our daily battle for sexual purity. It's use the biblical means for moral and sexual purity. Use the biblical means for sexual purity. You see, God has not left us on our own in this battle. He's given us wonderful resources that, if we will properly use them, will allow us to make progress in this war. I'm reminded of what Peter said, you remember, in his letter. He said, "God has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness." We have every resource we need. You have every resource you need to make progress in this war. But we need to know what those resources are. We need to know how to use them. And we're going to do that, we're going to introduce that today and finish it the next time we have together.

But before we look at the biblical means of dealing with sexual sin in our lives, I think it's important to do what one of my mentors, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, often did and that is to clear away the rubble. Let's first talk about the wrong means. Let's look at the ways you and I try to solve our struggles with sexual temptation in the wrong ways, and it ends up in utter failure. So, the wrong means – what are the wrong strategies for dealing with sexual sin? Well, there are many human strategies that are very common, and they are also utterly and entirely ineffective. Here

are a few of—the more popular ones among Christians. See if you have tried to use one of these weak and ineffective weapons in the battle with sexual sin.

Number one: compromising with sexual temptation, compromising with sexual temptation. Maybe you have been a lot like Augustine, who wrote in his “Confessions” before his conversion, this is what he prayed, “God, give me chastity and [continence], but not yet.” We think of it as something not that important, not that large, not that important in our lives.

James Stalker, the famous Scottish preacher, wrote this: “The great tempter (that is, Satan) has two lies with which he plies us at two different stages. Before we have fallen, Satan tells us that one fall doesn’t matter. It’s a trifle. We can easily recover ourselves again. After we have fallen, he tells us it’s hopeless, we’re given over to sin, and we need not attempt to rise.”

Isn’t that how it works? We can be tempted to think that it’s not really that big of a deal, tempted to permit certain sins under the illusion that allowing them will help us stay away from the more serious sins. For example, and I’ve talked to people who, wouldn’t state it quite this bluntly but who essentially held this view. We can convince ourselves that lust in the heart is only a sort of harmless peccadillo. It’s a little, inconsequential sin. And in fact, it might protect us from actual acts of sexual sin.

It’s like the games we play with ourselves when we’re on a diet. Now maybe I’m speaking for myself here, but I expect there are a few others like this. We tell ourselves, ‘You know, I need to drop a few pounds. I’m sitting too much, studying too much, and you know, if I’m going to stay on this diet, I can’t be too rigid with it because then I won’t stay on it. So, you got to indulge a little bit. So, I’ll just have one cookie. Okay, just one more. Well, another one won’t hurt. I mean, after all, I did have a smaller lunch today.’ You get the picture.

If you’re talking about dropping a few pounds, perhaps that’s relatively harmless. But if you’re talking about flirting that way with sexual sin, it is utterly destructive. That is why it is so important that we adopt God’s standard: not even a hint. Compromising with sexual sin never works.

In fact, look at the parallel passage in Colossians that Paul wrote the church in Colossae at the same time from the same prison cell, covered many of the same topics. And in Colossians 3, notice what he says in verse 5, “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity (and then he adds a couple of other words), passion (that’s kind of a strong, driving passion for the perverted. It’s used in Romans 1 of homosexuality), evil desire (which is simply evil cravings) and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”

But notice what he says to do with these. If you have a *New American Standard Bible*, and you have notes in the margin, you’ll notice there’s a note in the margin for verse 5, “literally *put to death the members which are upon the earth*.” In other words, kill these sins in your life. Don’t tolerate them to live. Don’t compromise with sexual sin.

There’s another wrong means for pursuing sexual purity, and it’s practicing legalism, practicing legalism. This is really common. We convince ourselves that if we establish a list of rules and keep those rules, we’ll become morally pure. And like the Pharisees, it starts with a good motive. We don’t want to break God’s law, and so we set up these rules to keep ourselves from breaking God’s laws. We tell ourselves, “I can do this. Here’s a list of what I will do. Here’s a list of what I won’t do, and we can keep these.”

Listen, folks. Your legalistic, man-made rules are of no power in overcoming your flesh. Look at Colossians 2. There was in the church in Colossae a group of false teachers, and they taught a number of things, but one of those things was this whole idea of a near asceticism. If you merely make rules, deprive your body of certain things, then you will be in control, and that will be the key. Colossians 2 (and by the way, it’s not that there isn’t an element of truth to that.) Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9 that he gave his body a black eye. He didn’t mean literally, but he meant I keep it in control so there’s a sense in which that’s true, but not man-made rules about what you’re to do. Look at verse 20, Colossians 2,

If you’ve died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit ... to [the world’s] decrees their

man-made rules, things like], ... “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ...
[those are] the commandments and teachings of men?

Why are you submitting to those man-made rules? And then he goes on in verse 23 to pass his judgment on them. He says you know, they look like they’re wise. It’s kind of a “... self-made religion and [this] self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but* [and here’s the key, these man-made rules] “*are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Listen. When you make your rules, it’s not the Spirit of God. That means it’s in the power of the flesh and the flesh has no power to control the flesh. In fact, you make rules, and it awakens the flesh. I was, for a number of years, in a place where there was heavy legalism, and I saw this. People were more creative than you can imagine at getting around the man-made rules because rules awaken the flesh; they don’t defeat it. The flesh has no power to control the flesh.

Alexander Maclaren writes,

No asceticism, no resolve will subdue the flesh. Much repression may be effected by sheer force of will [in other words, you can do some good, you can repress some activities], [but then he says] it is like a man holding a wolf by the jaws [get that picture in your mind for a moment. It is like a man holding a wolf by the jaws]. The arms begin to ache and the grip to grow slack, and he feels his strength ebbing and knows that as soon as he lets go, the brute will fly at his throat. Repression is not taming. Nothing tames the wild beast in us but the power of Christ. [Legalism won’t do it.]

There’s a third wrong means for pursuing sexual purity. It’s practicing isolation. This is very common, a common way people attempt to fight this sin. In fact, the nunneries and monasteries of the Catholic Church have often had this as part of their goal. If we can isolate ourselves, then we can stay pure. If you’ve read any church history, or frankly if you’ve just picked up the newspaper and read of the scandals in recent years, you know that the church, the Catholic Church, hasn’t protected itself from sin by isolation. Instead, it has only intensified the temptation. Folks, if isolation were the key, then no one has ever been in a better situation to say

“no” to sin than Adam and Eve. They were in a perfect environment. They were surrounded by perfect people and God, and still they sinned.

The New Testament makes it clear that isolation is not what God has in mind as the tool for us to use. Look at Jesus’ prayer in John 17. You remember the High Priestly Prayer as He prays for His disciples and then for us who will believe through their word? Notice what He prays for them - John 17:15. He says, “Father, I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*.” Verse 18, “As you sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” [Jesus says], “My prayer isn’t that You snatch them away, that You isolate them from the world.” In fact, their mission requires that they go into the world.

Paul makes this same point in 1 Corinthians 5. He had written them, and they had misunderstood his letter. And in 1 Corinthians 5:9, he says,

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people [well, they had thought he meant to isolate themselves from people of the world. He says,] “You misunderstood); I *did* not at all *mean* (verse 10) with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world [he said, I wasn’t saying isolate yourself from sinning unbelievers’]. But actually (verse 11), I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother [that is, a professing Christian who’s living in a pattern of unrepentant, unbroken sin] - not even to eat with such a one.

Isolation’s not the answer. Why doesn’t isolation work? Because our problem isn’t primarily an outside problem; our problem is primarily an inside problem. In Mark 7, Jesus says, “From within, out of the heart of men, proceed fornications, adulteries, (etc.) ...” James 1:14, “... each man is ... [enticed and] ... carried away (what?) by his own lust.”

By the way, can I just as an aside here talk to you parents? It’s right that we protect and shield our kids from evil influences. That’s right to do. But if you think by isolating your kids, by putting them in a private Christian school or home schooling them - those are fine things to do, but if you think by doing those things, you’re going to keep them from sexual immorality, you

are in for a rude awakening. Your carefully protected children are capable of every kind of sexual sin. Sin in all its shapes and kinds comes from our hearts. You can run from others, but you can't hide from what's in your heart.

Martin Luther learned that lesson, you remember? He tried to, in a sense, run away from his sin in a monastery before he came to Christ. Listen to his counsel. I love this. Martin Luther writes:

It does not help you at all to run away from other people, for within, you are still carrying the same old scoundrel, the lust and evil appetite that clings to your flesh and blood. Even if you are all alone with the door locked, you still cannot deny your father and mother, nor can you discard your flesh and blood and leave them on the ground.[Lock yourself in a private room and you can't get away from the problem. It's in your heart. Isolation is not the answer.]

There's a fourth wrong means of pursuing sexual purity: praying for, hoping for sudden, miraculous deliverance, praying for or hoping for sudden, miraculous deliverance. Seneca, the great Roman philosopher and statesman, the one-time tutor of Nero, wrote this: "Oh, that a hand would come down from heaven and deliver me from my besetting sin." That's a prayer that many Christians have prayed. Many people want to find a fix, a quick fix for sexual temptation. They want God to give them immediate, permanent victory. So, they read books that promise this. They keep praying that God would just, in a moment, take all the temptations in this area away, but that doesn't happen, and folks, it won't happen because God hasn't promised to do that. And when it doesn't happen for that person, then it's easy to become cynical and to doubt if true purity is even possible in this life and even perhaps to give into it more.

You know what happens as we mature in Christ? God changes our understanding. We come to understand that the pursuit of sanctification, the pursuit of sexual purity is not a one-time battle. It is a lifelong war. Folks, I hate to tell you, but get used to the idea you are in a war that will last as long as you have breath in your body. You will battle sexual temptation your entire life, and you can't just get used to the idea of the enemy occupying part of your soul. You have to fight. You have to keep a wartime mindset your entire life. Through the power of the Spirit of God, we

need to root out sexual sin from our lives day by day, inch by bloody inch. Forget a miraculous deliverance. Sanctification is a lifelong process.

In Ephesians 4, as we went through there, you remember Paul compared spiritual growth to physical growth. Doesn't that at times seem like a forever process when you're growing up? Well, the same thing happens in the spiritual world. It doesn't happen overnight. The struggles continue. You will struggle your whole life. You can win, you can make progress, you can see advancement, but the war will always be there.

You want to see the war? Look at Romans 7. I'm convinced, by the way, for several reasons that, in the second half of Romans 7, Paul is describing himself as a believer battling with sin. He talks about having a humble heart. He talks about loving the law of God. He talks about being, having a desire to do what is good. None of those things describe an unbeliever. But notice how he describes himself, verse 14 of Romans 7,

... we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I'd like to *do*, but I'm doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to *do*, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but [the] sin that dwells in me.

Paul, by the way, wasn't copping out. He was saying, "It's not the new true self that I am in Christ. It's my flesh that I still have that's expressing itself."

For I know (verse 18) that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

Now here's the point I want you to see. That is the apostle Paul. You know when he wrote the letter to the Romans? It was around the mid-fifties - 55, 56 A.D. By the time Paul wrote those words, he had been in Christ for nearly thirty-five years. He had been an apostle for most of that

time. He had gone on the three missionary journeys that you read about in the book of Acts. My point is get used to the struggle, get used to the war. You need to keep a wartime mindset your whole life. Don't expect some miraculous deliverance. It's okay to pray, but not for miraculous deliverance; instead, for progress in sanctification.

The fifth wrong means for pursuing sanctification: thinking that marriage alone will get rid of all sexual temptation. This is where a lot of young people and singles fail. They get tripped up here, and it comes from a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 7:9. There it reads, "But if you do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Now there's a great truth there and marriage does play an important role in our purity. Lord willing, we'll get there the next time that we have together, and we'll look at that passage in its context. But marriage, listen carefully, will not solve the problem of all lust or sexual sin, sexual temptation.

Why do you think adultery is mentioned so often in the Scripture? Why do you think there are even so many, sadly, tragic examples of it in Scripture? It's because sexual sin and temptation continue even after we enjoy the wonderful gift of a physical relationship in marriage. So young people, if you're not married, you better learn to deal with sexual temptation now because it's not going to go away magically when you say, "I do". And if you are married, you need to understand that part of God's means for sexual purity is the wonderful joy of married love, but that is not the only means that you must use, and we'll talk about other means.

Number six: focusing your entire spiritual energy on defeating sexual sin and temptation, focusing your entire spiritual energy on defeating sexual sin, focusing solely on a sin or a sin habit to the exclusion of pursuing spiritual maturity. Often, we want to be rid of a particular sin not because of holiness, but because we're ashamed of it, or it's producing too much trouble in our lives, or it hurts our self-esteem. And we tend to fight only the sexual sin that brings the greatest feelings of shame and guilt, and then we can be fairly tolerant of other sins.

Listen. Understand this. God isn't just concerned about getting the cancer out of one part of your soul. He isn't concerned just about the one sin that bothers me. His standard is purity like that of Jesus Christ. His goal is likeness to His Son. Remember why He chose you? In eternity past

(Romans 8:29), “He predestined us [He predetermined our destiny] to be conformed to the image of His Son.” That’s what He wants. Battle sexual sin, but at the same time use all of the spiritual resources God has given you to grow up in Christ, to know God. Be in the Word, be in prayer, enjoy corporate worship, Christian fellowship. Get involved in service, get involved in evangelism. And all of those resources God will use to grow you up. Don’t spend all of your energy on one front of your spiritual life.

This year my family and I had a chance to go down to San Antonio again, and we went to the Alamo yet another time to see it. I was thinking this week as I was thinking about this point: “What if the two hundred or so men there in the Alamo trying to defend it against Santa Ana had concentrated all of their forces and all of their firepower on just one wall?” We’re going to put it here. We’re going to, we’re going to stand here. It would’ve quickly fallen. They had to defend the whole thing. Don’t wage war against your flesh on only one front.

The last, number seven, (of the ways that we wrongfully pursue sexual purity) is trying to shift the blame, trying to shift the blame. James 1, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’” You know what? We do this, don’t we? Calvin writes, “This warning is very necessary, for nothing is more common among men than to transfer to another the blame of the evils they commit.” Let no one say I am being tempted by God. You know, most of us don’t say that. Most of us would never say, “God, it’s Your fault. You made me this way” although we can be tempted to do that, can’t we? Normally, it’s a little more subtle. Instead of blaming God directly, we blame something else. We blame our heredity, “You know, it’s a genetic predisposition. That’s why I am the way I am.” We blame just our nature.

Last week, a church in our area, a large church in our area hosted a debate with a man who has a social networking site where you can go on this site and arrange an affair. Now what the church was thinking when they had this man in front of their congregation, I have no idea. But one of the excuses that was thrown out in that context was: “Hey, it’s just, it’s just the way we are. We’re born to cheat. We just can’t help it.” That’s what we love to do is blame something other than ourselves. We blame our environment, “You know, I just can’t help it. I mean, look at, look

at everything. Look at the world we live in. Look at the culture. Look at all the things that are thrown at me.”

Circumstances, “I’m single. I mean, I don’t have, I don’t have, I’m not married” or “I’m in a bad marriage” or, or “I have an unattractive spouse”. Or we blame other people, “You know, it’s, if, if women were just more sensitive to their dress. It’s their fault.” And you know what? The Bible teaches women should be modest in their dress, but it’s not their fault.

This blame-shifting has been going on from the beginning. Eve said, “The serpent deceived me.” Adam said, “The woman You gave me to be with me, she gave me from the tree.” But folks, listen to this. If we blame anything but ourselves, we are truly blaming God. In Proverbs 19:3, it says, “The foolishness of man ruins his way, And his heart rages against the LORD.” I make a mess of my life, and I’m looking for somebody else to blame.

Listen to how David took full responsibility for his sexual sin with Bathsheba. You remember Psalm 51? Listen to what he wrote, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” David says, “You know, I didn’t sin because I got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s not because I’m really a good person who had a weak moment.” No. David says, “God, the reason I sinned with Bathsheba isn’t outside of me. It’s not her fault” (if only she hadn’t been there doing what she shouldn’t have been doing). He says, “No. I sinned, God, because it’s who I am.” We can’t try to shift the blame.

Those are all the wrong ways to battle sexual sin, and they are utterly useless when it comes to achieving God’s standard. So how do we become sexually pure? How can we get from where we are to where God wants us to be? What are the legitimate ways to pursue sexual purity? We’ve seen the wrong means. The next couple of minutes, I want to just introduce you to the right means, the biblical means to sexual purity. There are a number that are revealed in Scripture. Only one is found here in Ephesians 5, but it is absolutely crucial in our battle with sexual purity. I’m just going to introduce it to you for the next couple of minutes, and we’ll look at it more fully the next time we’re together.

You remember back in chapter 4, Paul said the process of true change involves three steps – lay aside or put off the sin, be renewed in your thinking, and put on a new virtue in its place. You remember that? Well, in chapter 5, Paul tells us the six sexual sins to put off. What does he tell us to put on in its place? It's found in 5:3 and 4. Look at it again,

But immorality, ... impurity, ... greed must not be named among you ...
filthiness ... silly talk, or coarse jesting ... but rather giving of thanks.

That is one sentence. These six sins are not to be named, and then at the end of the verse, he adds "but rather." It's a strong adversative in the Greek text. He's saying, "In place of those six sexual sins of action and thought and speech, I want you to actively give thanks." I know what you're thinking. You're saying, "That's it? That's, that's God's help? That's Paul's solution to my struggle with sexual sin? Doesn't he understand?" Just wait a minute. Let me ask you, where is your confidence? Is it in your own solutions? How well have those worked out for you?

The apostle Paul is speaking here under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. He is telling us what our Lord, our Creator, wants us to know, and he says we're to put off all forms of sexual sin. And if we want to make progress in our pursuit of sexual purity, in their place, we are to develop a habit of giving thanks to God.

Now why would habitual thanks to God be a help in the battle of sexual sin? Well, think about it. What lies at the root of all sexual sin? The lust of the heart, the covetousness, the desire. What is covetousness or lust? It is a craving to have what I don't have. What is thanksgiving? Expressing thanks to God for what I do have. Do you see how it makes perfect sense that it's the "put on"? It's very effective. Develop a pattern of life of thanksgiving.

Let me just ask you. When's the last time you, in a concerted, purposeful way, spent time literally thanking God for the things that He's done for you in your life – the resources that He's provided you, for the goodness that He's shown you in your life? But not only a habit of it generally, but in the moment of sexual temptation when it comes, immediately turn your heart to actively thanking God? If you're married, the moment that sexual temptation comes, thank God

for marriage. Thank Him for the gift of sexuality. Thank Him for your spouse. Thank Him for the physical relationship that you can enjoy in holiness and purity.

If you're not married, the moment that sexual temptation comes, thank God for His grace that equips you to deal with temptation. Thank Him for Christ and for sending Christ to pay for every time you have sinned. Thank Him for His providence in your life and for His promise to provide what you need in His time.

Paul says if you want to pursue sexual purity, turn from craving and coveting and, in its place, develop a habit of thanksgiving. The Bible has a lot to say about this. You're going to be very surprised at how this theme of connecting these two issues of sexual sin and thanksgiving come up. We'll look at it in more detail next time. We'll also look outside of this passage and at other means the Bible gives us for pursuing purity.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for how directly it addresses all the issues of life. Father, we thank You that in Christ and in Your Spirit and in Your Word, You have given us everything that pertains to life and godliness. Lord, help us to turn away from our own feeble efforts and our own wrong human means to pursue sexual purity.

And Father, in their place, in the place of these sins that are a part of our old life, Father, I pray that You would help us to put on the pattern, the habit of giving thanks. Father, may we see Your wisdom even as we seek to obey this straightforward command. Father, may we see the hold of sin loosen in our lives as we follow the means You have provided.

We pray this for the glory of Christ. We look forward to the day when we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. Until that day, O God, help us to battle inch by bloody inch, pursuing holiness and the fear of Your name.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.