CLEAN UP YOUR ACT!

Ephesians 5:3-6

By

Steven J. Cole

June 1, 2008

© Steven J. Cole, 2008

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation
Clean Up Your Act!
Ephesians 5:3-6

The way that God designed our five senses so that they adjust to minimize harsh stimuli is amazing! Your eyes adjust to bright sunlight so that it doesn’t seem so bright or to a dark room so that it isn’t so dark. Your ears filter out certain noises so that you don’t even think about them. In Dallas, our apartment was on a busy freeway. We got so used to the noise that it seemed weird to wake up in the middle of the night when it was quiet. Then a car would go by and we’d realize that the usual freeway noise was missing.

Your sense of smell works the same way. When I used to paint houses, the customers would come home and complain about the terrible smell of the paint. I honestly couldn’t smell anything, because I had grown used to the smell. The same thing happens with your sense of taste. Not many people like the taste of coffee at first. It’s too bitter. But after you develop a taste for it, the bitter tastes good. And, your sense of touch develops calluses so that what at first felt rough no longer bothers you.

Our spiritual senses also work like our physical senses, but with a crucial difference. While it is to our advantage in most cases to adjust to harsh physical stimuli, it is to our disadvantage spiritually. When we first hear of some terrible sin, we shrink back in horror and disgust. But if we are exposed to this sin repeatedly, so that it becomes commonplace, we tend to accept it or at least shrug it off. Alexander Pope (1688-1744) saw this when he wrote (“Essay on Man,” in Familiar Quotations, by John Bartlett [Little, Brown, and Company], 13th ed., p. 317),

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien [appearance]
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

I fear that the American church is in grave danger of pitying or embracing the sexual immorality that has engulfed our nation. (From here on, this message is probably rated PG-13, although I’ll
try to keep it to a PG rating!) Twenty years ago, *Leadership* journal did a survey on sex and the American clergy. Of the pastors responding to the survey, 20 percent said that they looked at sexually oriented media (print, video, or movies) at least once a month (Winter, 1988, p. 24). This was before the Internet made such material easily available in your own home or on your laptop computer when you travel! And 38 percent of these pastors said they find themselves fantasizing about sex with someone other than their spouse at least once a month.

The same survey asked these pastors, “Since you’ve been in local church ministry, have you ever done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate?” Twenty-three percent answered yes. The inappropriate behavior was left undefined and could have ranged from unguarded words to flirtation to adultery. When asked specifically about adultery, 12 percent of pastors answered yes (since entering local church ministry)! *Leadership* asked the same questions of readers of *Christianity Today* magazine who were not pastors. The incidences of immorality were nearly double, with 45 percent indicating that they had done something inappropriate, and 23 percent admitting to extramarital sex (p. 12)!

Again, this survey is now 20 years old. I’m sure that the increases in the availability of pornography, along with the increasingly degrading content of movies and television, have not improved those statistics! Several years ago, Al Mohler wrote (cited without reference by Ligon Duncan, June 4, 2006, accessed at: http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Ephesians/20b%20ephesians_5.3_4.htm):

The statistics are truly frightening. According to industry studies, 70% percent of 18-24 year old men visit pornographic sites in a typical month. These young men represent something like one-fourth of all visitors to pornographic sites on the internet. The next largest group of users are young men in their 20’s and 30’s, 66% of whom report being regular users of pornography...

Today the average teenage boy is likely to have seen thousands of explicit sexual images, ranging across the spectrum of sexualities and perversions. Many of these boys and
young men are driven by sexual fantasies that previous generations of young men would not have even known existed. Today Americans rent more than 800 million pornographic videos and DVD’s every year. About 20% of all video rentals are pornographic. At least 11,000 pornographic videos are produced annually, amounting to revenue for the adult film industry estimated at between 5 and 10 billion dollars a year.

Mohler also cites a November, 2003, “60 Minutes” report that many of the largest hotel chains, including Hilton, Marriott, Hyatt, Sheraton, and Holiday Inn, make most of their in-room profits from the sale of pay-per-view porn—with half of all guests purchasing erotic video products (http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2003-12-02).

Since we’re all swimming in this filthy cesspool, the apostle Paul’s commands in our text become even more urgent, that as God’s saints, we eliminate sexual impurity from our thoughts, words, and deeds. The reasons that he gives for his commands are not so that you will have a happy marriage (although eliminating this filth is an essential part of a happy marriage). Rather, he tells us that those who practice such things will not be in heaven, but will come under God’s wrath! Thus is it to your eternal advantage to understand and apply Paul’s words here. He is saying that...

**The saints must not be immoral or greedy, but rather thankful, because the immoral and greedy will incur God’s wrath.**

Verse 3 begins with “but,” drawing a contrast with the command to walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us. He wants to make it clear that the love to which Christ calls us stands in stark contrast with the lust of the pagan world. The Greco-Roman world of that day, including the city of Ephesus, was noted for moral corruption. The temple of Artemis offered ritual prostitution as part of its “worship.” Sexual promiscuity was commonplace. The Emperor Nero was openly homosexual and was known to have been sexually involved with his own mother. So it was imperative for the church to be distinct from this immoral culture that was facing God’s judgment.
So that we all are perfectly clear, let me point out that being a moral person will not get you into heaven. Of course, none of us has been perfectly moral, because Jesus raised the standard to mental purity when He said that if we even look on a woman to lust, we have committed adultery with her in our hearts (Matt. 5:27-28). But even if you can claim always to have been faithful to your spouse or to be chaste as a single person, it will not qualify you for heaven. As we saw (Eph. 2:8-9), “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” So the task for the church is not to crusade to make our culture more moral, but rather to get people saved. God’s transforming our hearts is the basis for pleasing Him by a holy life. Paul makes three points:

1. The saints must not be immoral or greedy (5:3-4a).

Paul writes (5:3), “But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.” Saints is Paul’s common word for believers and means, holy ones. The Bible never uses the word to refer to a special class of believers who are a notch above the rest. It refers to the fact that as a believer, you are sanctified or set apart as holy unto the Lord. Now you are to live as a saint.

A. God’s standard for moral purity is absolute, not relative, and thus is not debatable.

We live in a day when even most professing Christians deny that God’s moral standards are absolutely true and binding on all people in all cultures. As far back as 1991 (and I’m sure the percentages have not improved since then!), only 23 percent of “born again” or “evangelical” Christians expressed a strong belief in absolute truth (from George Barna’s What Americans Believe, cited by James Dobson in a newsletter, Dec., 1991). In our culture at large, 47 percent now approve of homosexuality, although that breaks down into 83 percent of liberals versus 23 percent of conservatives. Among liberals, 89 percent approve of sex between an unmarried man and woman; 33 percent of conservatives agree. Having a baby out of wedlock is acceptable to 83 percent of liberals and 33 percent of conservatives (The Washington Times [6/5/2007], p. A6).
But God’s standards for moral purity are not up for popular vote! He designed the sexual relationship for a man and a woman in a lifelong committed marriage. When practiced within these boundaries, it is a good gift from God, not something dirty. He gave us His commandments for our good. When we violate His standards, it results in short term pleasure (that’s why we’re tempted to do it), but long term pain and problems. Keeping God’s commandments is often difficult in the short term, but deeply fulfilling in the long term.

B. God’s standard includes moral purity in thought, speech, and behavior.

Jesus said that immoral behavior comes out of the heart (Mark 7:21-23), and so we must deal with it on the heart level. Paul uses six terms here to refer to sins that the saints must not practice:

(1) Immorality

This is the Greek word ἁπατία, which refers to any type of sexual immorality. It includes premarital sex, extramarital sex, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, and the use of pornography. Any sex outside of the lifelong commitment of marriage is not rooted in love (as I defined it in our last study, “a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved”), but in lust. Outside of marriage, sex devolves into using the other person for your own gratification.

(2) Impurity

This word means “dirty” or “impure,” and was used to refer to the pus around an infected wound. In the moral realm, it refers to that which contaminates others and is repulsive and disgusting. Paul used it in 4:19 to refer to the ungodly behavior of the Gentiles, who had “given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.”

(3) Greed

As in 4:19, Paul lists greed right beside sexual sins and in 5:5 he equates it with idolatry (cf. Col. 3:5). The greedy man has a lust for more, whether it is money, material possession, or sexual conquests. Greed is motivated by selfish pleasure apart from God. It is idolatry because it seeks to find pleasure in something other than
God, while rejecting God’s commandments. Sex outside of marriage is always based on greed, because its goal is to exploit the other person for your advantage, not to enrich her.

Paul says (5:3) that these three sins are “not even [to] be named among you, as is proper among saints.” He obviously does not mean that they should not be discussed, because he is discussing them here. The Bible also contains stories of sexual immorality, as well as a vivid fictional depiction of it (Proverbs 7). Rather, he means that these sins should be unknown among Christians. We should not be feeding our minds on these sins by watching movies or TV programs that depict them. We should not read juicy accounts of sexual sin in the press. Certainly, we should not view pornography in any form. As Paul says (Rom. 16:19b), “but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.”

(4) Filthiness

This refers to any indecency, obscenity, or shameful thing. It comes from the same word root as “disgraceful” (5:12).

(5) Silly talk

This word comes from two words that mean, “foolish speech.” We get our word moron from the word root. In the Bible, the fool is not someone who is mentally deficient, but rather someone who is morally deficient because he ignores God’s Word. In this context, Paul is referring to speech that disregards or makes light of God’s moral commandments.

(6) Coarse jesting

The word literally means, “to turn easily.” It has the idea of someone who can make a quick comeback, using clever words with a double meaning. So he can turn something into a dirty joke or ribald humor, as many stand-up comedians and TV sitcoms do. Christians should not joke about sex for the same reason that we should not joke about God—it is a sacred subject. The sexual relationship should be reverenced among God’s people, not degraded or made light of.

Thus God’s standard is absolute and it includes moral purity in thought, speech, and behavior.

C. God’s standard must be your standard as a saint.
Sexual purity is not an infrequent theme in Paul’s letters. He mentions purity or warns about immorality in Romans (1, 13); 1 Corinthians (5, 6, 7, 10); 2 Corinthians (6, 7, 12); Galatians (5); Ephesians (4, 5); Colossians (3); 1 Thessalonians (4); 1 Timothy (1, 3, 4, 5); 2 Timothy (3); and Titus (1, 2, 3). Since all of these letters are addressed to professing Christians in the church, God intends that you as a Christian be reminded of and be on guard against the sexual temptation that tempts us all.

To be morally pure, you’ve got to commit yourself to God’s standard and fight to maintain it. To fight for purity, you must guard your thought life and restrict the kinds of media that you expose yourself to. You must be accountable in your use of the computer. Guys, you must make a covenant with your eyes (Job 31:1), so that you stop checking out every attractive girl who walks by. It is a battle and it won’t happen automatically. You must actively fight against it. Cut off your hand! Pluck out your eye if you need to (Matt. 5:27-30)!

D. We must model and teach God’s standard to our children.

A 1996 survey revealed that 46 percent of Michigan fifth-graders and 55 percent of eighth-graders had engaged in sex! The study showed that sex is far more common among both age groups than alcohol or drug use. The leader of the study speculated that the high rates of intercourse could likely be attributed to television exposure (World [6/8-15, 1996], p. 10). As far back as 1988, Josh McDowell did a survey that showed that 43 percent of 18-year-old church-attending youths had had sexual intercourse. When you broaden it to “acts of sexual intimacy,” the number went up to 65 percent among church high school seniors.

If these statistics alarm you (and they should, especially if you’re rearing children), you must model and teach your children the ways of the Lord. Don’t assume that the church will do the job, although we want to back you up. It’s your job, not just to tell your kids that sex outside of marriage is wrong, but also to explain the wholesomeness of sex as God designed it. You must have an open relationship where your kids can share their own struggles and temptations without fear of an angry tirade. You also must protect your family from harmful influences. Don’t watch R-rated (or most PG-13) movies. Don’t watch filthy TV shows. Don’t have trashy
magazines that tell about all of the movie stars’ latest sexual escapades lying around the house.

Also, teach (and set the example for) your daughters to dress modestly (1 Tim. 2:9), as young women who want to please the Lord. To speak directly to you young women, you are not helping your brothers to moral purity when you dress seductively. Tight fitting, low-cut tops or low-riding pants that show off your midsection are designed by the world to turn guys on. Scripture is clear that you are not to set a stumbling-block before your brothers. Please, ignore the world’s sensuous fashions and dress in a manner that pleases the Lord. Paul’s first point is clear: Christians must not be immoral or greedy.

2. The alternative to immorality and greed is to give thanks (5:4a).

You would think that Paul would say that we are to replace sexual impurity with purity. That is true, of course, and he will state that (5:9-11). But here, he says that the alternative to sexual immorality and greed is to give thanks. Why does he say that? What does thankfulness have to do with moral purity? A lot!

To be thankful, you must be in submission to God’s sovereignty over every detail of your life. If you’re grumbling or complaining, you’re really saying that you know what’s best for you better than God does. If you’re grumbling about being single or about being married to the “wrong” person, you are not just complaining about your circumstances, but really about God’s goodness and wisdom in these aspects of your life. The same goes for discontent in the financial area.

Satan tempted Eve by getting her to doubt God’s goodness in withholding the forbidden fruit from her. When she bit into Satan’s lure that the fruit would really be good for her (contrary to what God had said), she yielded to sin. Satan will use the same ploy to tempt you to fulfill your sexual desires in disobedience to God. If you read Paul’s account of the degradation of the human race in Romans 1:18-32, at the root of it was (1:21), “they did not honor Him as God or give thanks.” So by faith, you must bow before God’s sovereignty over your circumstances and give Him thanks.
If you’re single and burning with sexual desire, pray for a mate (1 Cor. 7:1-9). If you’re married, thank God for the mate that He has given you and work on your relationship. By the way, sexual satisfaction in marriage is very closely tied with relational intimacy. God designed it that way. So to guard yourself against the temptation of adultery, guard your relationship with your mate. Work at it constantly. Develop a thankful heart for all of God’s blessings, including the sexual relationship in marriage.

3. The immoral and greedy will not be in God’s kingdom, but will incur His wrath (5:5-6).

Paul makes two points here:

A. You know for certain that no immoral or greedy person will have an inheritance in God’s kingdom (5:5).

It only makes sense: there will not be immoral or greedy people (who are idolaters) in heaven. It wouldn’t be heaven if they were there! While genuine Christians may fall into these sins, no genuine Christian can continue in such sins. As John states plainly (1 John 3:7-8), “Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”

B. Don’t let anyone deceive you about such things, because the end result is God’s wrath (5:6).

Paul knew that many, including many Christian leaders, would say, “You’re under grace. God is a God of love who won’t condemn you. He understands your weaknesses.” By such enticing words, they lure unsuspecting people to eternal ruin (2 Pet. 2:13-22). The phrase, “sons of disobedience,” refers to those whose lives are characterized by disobedience, not to those who have fallen, but repented. If someone professes to be a Christian, but he lives in habitual disobedience to God’s moral standards, it is evidence that he has not been born again (1 John 3:9). Unless he truly repents, he faces God’s eternal wrath and judgment. Don’t be deceived by anyone who says anything else (Gal. 5:19-21)!
Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul makes a similar point: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.” But, don’t stop reading there, or you might despair if you have committed any of those sins! He continues (6:11), “And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Praise God! There is hope for every sinner at the cross! Don’t let your moral senses be dulled, so that you go along with our cultural drift into increasing immorality and greed. Let your senses be trained by God’s Word that shows us His paths of righteousness, which are for our eternal joy and good. Trust in Christ and repent of your sin and He will wash you from all your sins.

Application Questions

1. There are professing Christians that argue that the Bible permits committed, loving homosexual relationships. How would you counter this with Scripture?
2. Some Christians justify going to R-rated movies by saying, “I need to understand where our culture is at. Your response?
3. Where is the balance between being in the world, but not of the world (John 17:15-16)? How can we keep a check on ourselves so that we don’t cross the line?
4. Some argue that genuine Christians may fall into habitual immorality or greed and that the consequence is, they lose their rewards, not eternal life. How would you interact with this?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2008, All Rights Reserved.