

Pastor Steven J. Cole

Moral Purity In A Polluted World
Genesis 39:1-20

I recently read that there are 19.5 million unique visitors per month on the top five pay for porn web sites. That jumps to 98.5 million per month on the top five free porn web sites. There were over 100,000 commercial porn sites in 1998, with 200 per day being added. It used to be that to view pornography, you had to take the trouble and risk the embarrassment of being seen to go into a pornographic book store. Now, anyone with a web connection can view it in the privacy of his own home. We live in a culture obsessed with sex. Of course, sexual immorality is nothing new. But it used to be hidden and generally viewed as wrong by our culture. Now it's blatant and shrugged off as no big deal.

It would be wonderful if Christians, especially Christian leaders, had resisted this moral breakdown, but that's not so. Many well-known pastors (and more not-so-well-known) have fallen into sexual sin. A *Christianity Today* ([10/2 /87], pp. 25-45) survey reported that one out of eight pastors admit to committing adultery since being in the ministry! Among CT's subscribers who were not pastors, it was one out of four! In answer to, "Since you've been over 21, have you ever done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate?" 45 percent of lay persons and 23 percent of pastors answered "yes." Remember, this wasn't with Christians in general, but with subscribers to *Christianity Today*, a magazine aimed at church leaders. The survey was done long before the internet became commonplace. I'd cringe to find out how many Christian leaders frequently succumb to the temptation to view online pornography.

When you hear of statistics like that, you begin to wonder, Is it possible to be morally pure in our polluted world? Thankfully, the story of Joseph in Genesis 39 says, "Yes!" If Joseph, a young man reared in a society as morally corrupt as ours, who had no Bible, no church, and not much parental training, alone in a foreign culture, could resist the repeated, direct propositions of his master's wife, then we can resist sexual temptation.

We CAN be morally pure in a polluted world.

But it's not going to happen accidentally. You don't win wars without knowing your weak areas, knowing the enemy's tactics, having a strategy, and being willing to pay the price. I want to give you four principles from our text that will help you gain and maintain moral purity in this polluted world.

1. Be aware of situations where you're vulnerable.

The stage is set in verses 1-6. Joseph had been sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. He was the security chief, also responsible for executing anyone Pharaoh didn't want around. You wouldn't want to get on Potiphar's bad side!

Because the Lord was with Joseph, he did well under Potiphar. There is no mention of the struggles this 17-year-old boy must have gone through when he arrived. He was torn from his father, taken to a strange culture where he couldn't understand the language, and sold as a piece of property to this powerful man. Yet with God's strength, he adjusted to the situation. By the time he was in his mid-twenties, Joseph had been put in charge of everything Potiphar owned. Potiphar trusted Joseph so much that he didn't even check up on him. And, as the NIV translates, "Joseph was well-built and handsome." That sets the stage for the temptation that follows. Satan hits you with temptation when you're most vulnerable. Joseph's situation reveals four situations where you're vulnerable:

A. You're vulnerable when you're in different circumstances, where no one else will know.

Joseph was a single man in his twenties, with the normal sex drive of any young man. He was a country boy in a sophisticated foreign capital, working in a home frequented by the rich and famous. He had no friends who shared his belief in God. As far as he knew, this tempting situation was private and would never be known to anyone else. He didn't know that his story would be recorded in the world's most-read book. He was vulnerable!

If you travel alone, where you're alone in a different city where nobody will know if you give in to sexual temptation, be on guard! Satan will hit you. You may think that no one will ever find out, but the Bible warns, "... be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). Sin is never private.

B. You're vulnerable when you're successful and good-looking.

Success always opens up new temptations. We read, "after these events" (Joseph's success) Potiphar's wife looked with desire at Joseph (39:7). It wasn't just his good looks, but also his success that attracted her.

If you're good-looking, be on guard! Only three men in the Bible are called good-looking: Joseph, David, and Absalom. Joseph was the only one of the three who did not sin sexually. If God has given you good looks, you need to be careful not to dress seductively (that applies to men as well as women) or to use your looks to manipulate people. When you peel away the veneer, pride is always at the root of sexual sin. You are flattered that others find you attractive or you flaunt your looks to feed your pride. Remember, good looks are God's gift to be used for His glory, not to be exploited for our selfish gratification.

Studies have shown that besides good looks, women are attracted to men who are financially successful, confident, competent, who have power and influence, and public recognition. Also, women are attracted to men who are compassionate, gentle, and attentive listeners. Except for financial success, most of those qualities should fit pastors and missionaries. Men in ministry need to be careful! Most of these are fine qualities to develop. But be on guard! Joseph didn't let his success or good looks cause him to fall

C. You're vulnerable when you're alone with an emotionally needy woman.

Potiphar's wife was needy. Her husband was busy with his important job. Every time Pharaoh traveled, he was gone, sometimes for weeks at a time. Being a "macho" man, Potiphar probably didn't excel in sensitivity to his wife. Her bitterness bleeds through when she blames her husband for her problem with Joseph (39:14, 17). This neglected wife longed for attention and intimacy. She mistakenly thought she would get it through sex outside of marriage.

Any time someone of the opposite sex begins sharing their marriage frustrations with you and telling you how kind and sensi-

tive you are, look out! If you're not careful you'll think, "Why that no good brute she's married to! She deserves better than him. If I were her husband, I'd treat her kindly." You're vulnerable to sexual temptation. Also, men, you need to refuse to counsel with women who want to share intimate marriage problems. Refer such a woman to a godly woman for counsel.

D. You're vulnerable when you're emotionally needy.

Joseph must have felt lonely. He wouldn't have had any friends who understood or shared his background. Any normal young man desires the companionship of a woman. After the way his older brothers had treated him, he may have wrestled with feeling rejected. His mother had died. He could have felt a need for affirmation. Potiphar's wife could have met all those needs. But Joseph didn't yield!

Sexual temptation is never just physical. There's always the good feeling that comes from being desired and cared for by someone else. God designed marriage and sex within marriage to meet our needs. If we try to meet our needs through sex outside of marriage, we'll have immediate pleasure but long term pain. We end up enslaved to sin.

If you're married, prevent temptation by cultivating and maintaining a close companionship with your mate. Don't let emotional drift set in. If you're single, pray for a wife! And use lonely times to deepen your intimacy with the Lord, while maintaining your commitment to moral purity. The first step to moral purity is to be aware of situations where you're vulnerable.

2. Be aware of how temptation works.

First, as we've seen, the stage is set: *A needy woman and a vulnerable man* who is also *a servant of God*. Satan won't leave that situation alone. Next, there is *flattery and surprise*, the direct approach: "Lie with me." Probably she had dropped hints before, but now it hit him head on. Joseph must have felt strangely good: "This important woman desires me?" But Joseph said no and the problem went away. Right? Right on the first count, wrong on the second.

The next stage was her *persistence*: "... she spoke to Joseph day after day" (39:10). She tried to get him to reconsider, to wear him

down by sheer repetition of the idea, the way TV advertisers do. That's how Delilah caused Samson's downfall.

The last step was her *sudden ambush*, where Joseph had a split second to give in or flee. She waited until he was alone in the house. Concentrating on his work, Joseph probably didn't realize that the two of them were alone or he would have taken precautions. But she knew. She grabbed him by the coat and again said, "Lie with me!" Joseph left his coat in her hand and ran outside.

That's how temptation often works: You're vulnerable; there's a surprise opportunity which flatters you; if you resist that, there will be other opportunities, pressure to get you to reconsider; then, there will be the sudden ambush, where you hardly have time to think. You must act immediately, and your decision in that instant determines everything.

Because of that, the third step toward moral purity is the most important:

3. Make a commitment to purity and develop a strategy before the temptation hits.

Joseph's resistance wasn't accidental or natural. He had made a previous commitment to moral purity and he had a strategy for resistance already in place.

- A. Make a commitment to integrity in all of life.

Joseph was a man of integrity in all areas of life. He could be trusted with Potiphar's business matters. Verses 4-6 repeat four times that all Potiphar owned was in Joseph's charge.

Integrity affects all of life. If Joseph had been cheating on business matters, it would have been easier to cheat with Potiphar's wife. Any time there is adultery, there is deception. If you'll make a commitment to integrity and complete honesty across the board, it will be easier to maintain that integrity when the opportunity to cheat sexually comes knocking.

- B. Make an up-front commitment to inner purity.

When Potiphar's wife surprised Joseph with her offer, he just said no. If he had been toying with it in his mind, he could have yielded. He had thought about it and the answer was no. A lot of

men want to be delivered from temptation, but they'd like to keep in touch. But you've got to decide up-front that you want to be a morally pure man of God. It begins by confronting lustful thoughts. No one ever committed adultery who didn't first entertain it in his mind. There is no such thing as a godly man going from moral purity and a close walk with Christ to adultery in a sudden blow-out. It is always a slow leak, and it always begins by entertaining lustful thoughts (Mark 7:20-23). If you judge sin by "plucking out your eye" and "cutting off your hand" on the thought level (Matt. 5:27-30), it will not go any farther.

Derek Kidner points out that Joseph's arguments for refusal (39:8-9) are the same that another man could have used for yielding. His master trusted him, so he was free from close supervision; he had control over all matters except this one—why not take it too? Many men would view sex with a prominent woman like this as the path to social and political opportunity. Besides, she was his master's wife. Shouldn't he submit to her?

It's easy to rationalize sin. With the same circumstances, you can construct arguments either in favor of obedience to God or against it. It all depends on your focus, on what you're aiming for. You've got to decide beforehand that you want to be a man or woman of God and that you will say no when temptations to sexual immorality come, as surely they will.

C. Focus on your responsibilities, not your needs.

When Potiphar's wife propositioned him, Joseph didn't think about his needs; he pointed out his responsibilities toward his master, toward her, and toward God (39:8-9). If he had focused on his needs, he could have built a case for yielding.

I've found this helpful in dealing with sexual sin on the thought level, where it always begins. I have responsibilities as a Christian witness, as a father, and as a pastor. Even if you're single, you never sin alone; your sin tarnishes the name of Christ. If I confront lustful thoughts, it stops right there. If I entertain them, rationalizing that "I've got needs," I'm opening many others to Satan's attacks. If I fail morally, I'm failing my family, my church, the lost, and my God. So I've got to be responsible to judge my lustful thoughts.

D. Consciously live in the presence of God.

Joseph was alone with Potiphar's wife in Egypt, far from his family. But he knew that he was not alone, that if he gave in to her desire, he would sin primarily against God. Four times in this chapter (39:2, 3, 21, 23) it says, "The Lord was with Joseph." Of course, being omnipresent, the Lord is with everybody, but that's not what this means. It means that God was with Joseph in a special way. Joseph lived with an awareness of God's presence. He didn't want to trade that blessing for the passing pleasure of sin.

Ask God to give you a constant sense of His holy presence. All sin is done in His sight and is primarily against Him. He knows every lustful thought we have. To walk with God, we must judge all our sin and allow nothing that would cut off fellowship with Him. If we covet God's blessing in our lives, we will fear Him and flee temptation.

E. Call sin sin.

Joseph calls this "a great evil," a "sin against God." One of the ways Satan gets us is by swapping the labels on sin, so that it doesn't sound quite so bad. How often in the press do you read about an adulterer committing a great evil? Usually it's called an affair or a fling. It sounds fun! Satan minimizes the consequences by calling sin something interesting.

When you're tempted, focus on the evil of the sin, not on its pleasure. All sin has its attractive side, or we wouldn't give it a second thought. Adultery has a certain thrill. But it also wrecks destruction and tears apart families, not to mention the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, which can be fatal. It can nullify years of fruitful ministry. When Eve was tempted, she focused on the attractiveness of the fruit and she fell. Joseph focused on the evil of adultery and stood firm.

F. Avoid the opportunity to be tempted.

We read that Joseph "did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her" (39:10). This relates to the up-front commitment to be pure. If you want to be pure and you know that someone or someplace will tempt you, then avoid that person or place. If you're tempted by pornography, don't go into a store where it's readily available. If you struggle with the internet, get a porn filter

and ask your mate to check the history file daily to hold you accountable. If a woman is flirtatious, avoid her as much as possible. Don't lead her on by listening to her. Give strong signals that you're not interested. The man in Proverbs 7 would not have ended up in bed with the promiscuous woman if he had not first gone near the corner where she lived.

G. Flee when you need to.

When she finally went so far as to grab Joseph's coat, he ran. The Bible never says that we should stand and pray and quote precious verses when sexual temptation hits. "Flee immorality!" (1 Cor. 6:18). Resist the devil (James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:9), but flee youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22). As one of my older professors in seminary said, "Men, they aren't just youthful." You've got to flee them all your life. You won't yield while you're running the other way.

So, Joseph ran away and God rewarded for his righteousness. Right? Not quite. That leads to the final step toward moral purity in a polluted world:

4. Be willing to pay the price for your convictions.

Potiphar's wife was humiliated by Joseph's refusal and her humiliation quickly turned to rage. As the poet wrote, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned." So she framed Joseph and he spent the next few years in prison.

There is reason to think that Potiphar didn't believe her story. If he did, he would have executed Joseph that day. The text says that his anger burned (39:19), but not that it burned against Joseph. He could see his wife's flirtatious ways. He knew Joseph's integrity. But he had to do something to get her off his back. He would lose a servant who had brought him great prosperity, but he couldn't let it slide. If he believed Joseph over his wife she would have made life difficult for him. Potiphar couldn't have missed the way she blamed him: "This Hebrew slave, whom *you* brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me ..." (39:17). She was blaming Joseph and her husband.

Because the world is so polluted, you can expect to pay a price when you take a stand for purity. People will slander you. They'll blame you for their sin. You could even lose your job. Joseph had

plenty of time sitting in prison to replay the scene and think about what he would do if he had the chance again. Satan always comes to you after you've done the right thing and suffered for it and whispers, "See how your God takes care of you. Next time just give in and all this won't happen."

But Joseph still had the presence and blessing of God, even in prison (39:21-23). It wasn't worth trading that, even with prison, for the fleeting pleasure he would have enjoyed with Potiphar's wife.

Conclusion

An old priest was asked by a young man, "Father, when will I cease to be bothered by sins of the flesh?" The priest replied, "I wouldn't trust myself, my son, until I was dead three days."

The battle for moral purity in a polluted world is a lifelong war. But it is winnable if you'll be aware of situations where you are vulnerable and be on guard; be aware of how temptation works; make a commitment to purity and develop a strategy *before* temptation hits; and, be willing to pay the price that purity in a polluted world has cost every disciple of Jesus Christ.

Some of you may be defiled and ensnared by sexual sin. The first step out is confession and repentance. You do not need to join a 12 Step group for sexual addicts, but you do need the godly *biblical* counsel of a mature Christian brother or sister. Christ will deliver you and give you victory if you turn to Him. No sin is beyond His grace. To every sinner who comes to Him, He says, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more" (John 8:11). Let's commit ourselves to be men and women who are pure in thought and deed!