

“Ancient Advice on Sex and Money”
Ephesians 5:3-14
April 26, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Since it's been a few weeks since we've been in Ephesians, let me review for just a minute the big picture of what Paul writes. Similar to many of his letters, he begins with theological truth and then moves to ethical application. Paul always starts with the staggering truth that God loves his people unconditionally. Through faith in Jesus, all past sins are forgiven, the present is filled with meaning, purpose and joy, and a bright future is secured and can't be lost. In a word, we are free. Based on that theological truth, Paul then calls us to obedience. A God who loves us so much will not leave us to try to figure out how to live our lives. We still have sin natures that lead us in the wrong direction, along the path of self-centered living. Like a loving parent, God instructs us about the kind of life that will flourish in every way. The first thing he said about this, throughout much of chapter 4, is that we must live in loving community. Since we are created in God's image as social beings, we will never flourish outside of community. The Church is the place where we are to show what good community is like, and Paul instructs us on the kind of people we are to be in order to have vibrant community in the Church. You will not grow to maturity as the person God calls you to be outside of the Church.

In today's passage, Paul focuses his attention on two sins that are as old as human civilization: sexual immorality and greed. How many public figures have gotten into trouble in areas related to sex and money? I can tell you that I have known many preachers who have gone off the rails in these two areas. While everyone will acknowledge that sins related to sex and money are not new, we often tend to think that they are worse today than at other times in history. I doubt that is the case. In Ephesus during the time in which Paul wrote this letter, the goddess Artemis was worshiped. She was a fertility goddess, and sexual orgies were regularly associated with her worship. Greed was also a powerful force in Ephesus. You may remember that the book of Acts records that Paul's gospel efforts in Ephesus were so successful that the silversmiths and craftsmen who were made wealthy by making and selling various components associated with the idolatrous worship of this goddess experienced a serious downturn in their business. Motivated by greed, they stirred up a riot in Ephesus. So these are not new sins, but they are destructive ones. Let's look at them more carefully, and consider Paul's advice regarding them.

I. Two Sins to Flee

Paul gives the most attention to sins related to human sexuality, addressing behavior, heart attitudes and words. He begins with the general category that is translated in our versions “sexual immorality.” It’s the word *porneia* in Greek, and it refers to all sexual intercourse outside of marriage between a man and woman. So it would describe such things as premarital sex, adulterous sex and homosexual sex. The next word, “impurity,” is a little broader and covers all sexually deviant behavior. It would include such things as pornography and associated behaviors.

In the next verse, Paul expands this to address our language in the area of sexuality. He forbids what he calls “filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking.” All of these relate to the area of sexuality. It is the opinion of some Christians today that it is cutting edge and relevant for Christians to use vulgar language. There are some preachers even who will let drop in their sermons the kind of language you might more often associate with a locker room. Paul says that there is a type of language that ought to be used about human sexuality, the language of gratitude. **“Instead, let there be thanksgiving.”** Christianity is sometimes falsely accused of being negative about human sexuality. That could not be further from the truth. Paul commands here the language of thanksgiving for human sexuality and forbids the kind of language that cheapens and degrades sexuality.

Imagine, for example, that you have some kind of kidney disease that requires you to have a kidney transplant in order to save your life. A donor must be found with a close match, and your brother agrees to donate one of his kidneys so that you might live. It is a precious gift, and there is a type of language that is keeping with such a gift. The language of thanksgiving is as appropriate to this gift as the language of joking is grossly insensitive and inappropriate.

Paul instructs the Christians in Ephesus not just to refrain from all sexually inappropriate behavior and language, but goes further to command a distancing from this sin. It **“must not even be named among you.”** It’s another way of saying what he said to the Corinthians when he told them to **“flee from sexual immorality”** (1 Cor. 6:18). Paul was a Jewish scholar, and the Jews were famous for something called “fencing the law.” To fence the law meant to erect some kind of barrier before one could get close to breaking the law. Sometimes they went too far with this, such as in their Sabbath laws, and they ended up sinfully adding to God’s law. But it makes sense in many areas of temptation to fence the law by being careful not to put oneself in a position where temptation grows more powerful.

Kent Hughes tells the story of a little boy whose mother had just baked a fresh batch of cookies and placed them in the cookie jar. She then told everyone that the cookies were not to be touched until after dinner. Not long after that, she heard the lid of the jar move and called out, “Son, what are you

doing?” A meek voice replied, “My hand is in the cookie jar resisting temptation!” It’s almost impossible to resist temptation with your hand in the cookie jar.

Paul also addresses more briefly the sin of greed or covetousness. This is a sin that is possible for both the rich and the poor. The poor show their greed when they resort to unlawful measures to get more money, measures such as stealing. The rich exhibit greed by being stingy with their money and refusing to give of it generously to help the needy. Whether in the case of the rich or the poor, such greed stems from an idolatrous heart that loves money more than God. When you worship something, you love it, you dream about it, you make sacrifices for it, you trust it. That describes the attitude that rightly belongs to God alone, but one that is often given to God’s greatest rival, money.

II. Two Reasons to Flee These Sins

The first reason Paul mentions for fleeing these sins is a reason appearing frequently in the Bible, especially from Jesus. It is the reality of the wrath of God upon those who practice such sins. Apparently, there were present in Paul’s day the same kind of scoffers present in our own, those who scoff at any notion of God’s wrath. So Paul has to introduce this warning with an emphasis: **“for you may be sure of this”** (v. 5). And then he calls out those who deny God’s wrath as deceivers (v. 6). The truth is that those who practice such sins as sexual immorality and greed have **“no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God”** (v. 5). This is not works righteousness. It’s not the case that people earn their way to heaven by refraining from sexual immorality and greed and other sins. Heaven is an inheritance, and no one earns their inheritance. It comes because of a relationship. Those practicing these sins give evidence of the fact that they have no relationship. It is certainly possible for Christians to fall into these sins from time to time, but he is talking about the **“sons of disobedience”** who don’t inherit the kingdom of God. This is Paul’s phrase for unbelievers who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-2). Christians can and do get caught up in these sins. But if the Holy Spirit of God is within, they cannot stay in these sins. He will lead them to repentance.

Notice that Paul speaks of this wrath coming in the present tense. **“Because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”** The verb “comes” is in the present tense, meaning that God’s wrath is here now. Paul doesn’t mean to deny the future revealing of God’s wrath, and that future wrath is a million times more severe than in the present. Where do we see the wrath of God now upon these sins? We see it simply in the natural effects of these sins. Sexual immorality and greed lead to loneliness and isolation, and one of the principle features of God’s wrath is the darkness of isolation. These sins, like all other sins, are self-centered. The wrath of God is when God turns people over to their sin and its effects. Think

of Charles Dickens' Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. In his greed, he was a lonely man, while after his transformation he was enriched in his relationships. What we see in this world is the drops of God's wrath in these punishments. But in the next life, at the great judgment, it is the flood of God's wrath. Paul wants us to be very clear about this and take sin very seriously. He also wants us to flee to Jesus as the only refuge from the wrath of God. Jesus has taken God's wrath in our place, that we might escape this wrath. God has sent me to tell you about this wonderful provision that you might come to him and trust him.

A second reason to flee these sins is our nature as children of light. **“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”** He then goes on to talk about the fruit of light as **“all that is good and right and true”** (v. 8-9). Paul is speaking here about the effect we have on others. Notice that he says “you were darkness,” not “you were *in* darkness.” Their nature was that of darkness, and their effect upon others was negative. On the contrary, the children of light exhibit this fruit of doing that which is good and right and true. They bring good to others rather than harm. Sin grows in the heart that thinks that others exist for me. Sexually immoral people say that others can be used for my physical pleasure. Greedy people believe that others exist to enrich me, and I have no responsibility to help them. The children of light are just the opposite, believing that we are called to be like God, pouring ourselves out for the good of others. We are to be like the family of the famous 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards. In her book on the marriage of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Elizabeth Dodds reports, “Probably no two people married since the beginning of the 18th century have been the progenitors of so many distinguished persons as were Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierrepont.” She goes on to report how through several generations the family provided “college presidents galore, headmasters of prep schools, theologians, poets, linguists, musicians, [and] publishers.” The children of light, even if we are not as gifted as the Edwards family, bring good to many as we follow God.

III. Two Ways to Help Those Trapped in These Sins

Paul doesn't call out these sins just to scold people, but to help them. He teaches that help is found in two activities. The first one is to expose the deeds of darkness. **“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them”** (v. 11). We are not called to expose people, but to expose their deeds. How are we to go about exposing these sinful deeds? Nobody likes nosy busybodies who get in other people's business. Surely we are not being called to a kind of moral police who are always poking around trying to catch people in sin so we can tell on them. No, that's not what Paul is telling us to do. We expose these sinful deeds simply by doing what he says in the first part of the verse, refusing to take part in unfruitful works of darkness. That alone is enough to expose these deeds.

Two summers during college, I had a job driving a delivery truck in Memphis. There would typically be two of us on each route, and many of my co-workers were quite obscene in their talk. They would rarely see an attractive woman without making some lewd remark. I was a new Christian at that time, and they thought I was strange for not joining in with them in this. I think it brought some conviction to them. Most of these co-workers were married, and I did notice that they would tone it down some when working with me. Unwittingly, I exposed their sinful deeds simply by not taking part in them.

Why does Paul want these deeds exposed? Exposure of these deeds is a necessary part of repentance. It is only when they are exposed that they lose their power over us. I read a story a while back about a man who committed adultery while on a business trip. It was just a one-night stand, and it left him with tremendous guilt and regret. At first, he decided to tell his wife as soon as he returned home, but then changed his mind by the time he saw her. For the next thirty years of his marriage, he lived with this secret between them, lurking in the shadows. As a result, something in his marriage slowly died until there was very little intimacy left.

The second way to help people trapped in these sins is to be raised from the dead. **“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”** (v. 14). It is a metaphor for faith in Christ and for conversion. Paul is simply saying that if we want to overcome such sins as sexual immorality and greed, we need simply to tell the truth about our sin and take it to Jesus. We need the new heart that only Jesus can give to us.

The gospel answer to our sins is so different than all other answers. Some would say, “Your problem is that you are just too uptight about your sin. It’s not so bad. Everyone’s doing it, so just accept it.” In other words, float along with the current until it sweeps you over the waterfall to your death. Others say, “Discipline yourself to overcome these sins. You’re just not trying hard enough.” The gospel is so liberating. Come out of the shadows into the light. Admit the truth about your sin and just hand it all to Jesus. It is too mighty for you, but not for him. Through Jesus, it is possible to live with complete openness and transparency with nothing to hide or fear.

CONCLUSION:

Have you ever noticed how people whose finances are out of control dread trips to the mailbox? The reason is the fear of finding another notice of an overdue bill that can’t be paid. But imagine that you have someone providing you with money, and your benefactor happens to know exactly how much you need each day for your bills and puts in your mailbox every day an envelope with the cash needed. That is exactly our case. We need fear no longer the exposure of our sins, because we have Jesus taking care of them all.