

# Purity

## Key Passage: Ephesians 5:3-14

<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

## Introduction

It doesn't take long to realize how pervasive lust is in both in our own culture and in the church. Even secular authors have described our culture as “pornified.”<sup>1</sup> What they mean is that aspects of pornography and sexual immorality have thoroughly permeated our culture. What was once only found in “dirty magazines” behind the counter in a drug store is now celebrated openly and freely on the internet and in virtually every sphere of advertising. Beyond that, sexual misconduct barely even spoken of in previous generations—things like homosexuality, and human trafficking, and even pedophilia—are all commonplace in our society today.

Just listen to a few of these jarring statistics about pornography.<sup>2</sup> It's estimated that every second, 28,000 Americans look at pornography, with 40 million Americans visiting these sites on a regular basis. And the sites aren't hard to find. There are 24.6 million pornographic websites on the internet (12% of the internet). And the allure is appealing, as evidenced by data related to internet searches. Approximately 25% of all internet searches are porn related (68 million per day). In fact, the words “sex” and “porn” are among the top five most frequently searched words on the internet for children under 18. That's sobering for us parents. If those stats aren't devastating enough, it's estimated that 116,000 people search every day for illegal child pornography. But the problem isn't just an American one—it's worldwide. It's estimated

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “pornification” was coined by author Pamela Paul in her book *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/august/pornification-just-facts.html>

that about \$100 billion dollars (\$100,000,000,000) is spent each year worldwide on pornographic material, with \$13.6 billion being spent in US alone. The US is the fourth largest porn purchaser in the world, behind China, South Korea, and Japan. Do you see why even secular writers are referring to our culture as “pornified”? The estimates are almost unbearable to hear.

How can this market exist? Because there is an insatiable demand. Fallen human beings have a deep desire to consume it. Pornographic images would hold no power without a craving in the viewer to consume them. That’s simple supply and demand. But how did it become this way? Paul gives us a very clear answer in Romans 1:21-25. In this passage, Paul describes for us what happened to humanity when we rejected God in the beginning, and, especially relevant to us, *why* it happened. Consider what Paul says in Romans 1:21-25:

<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

In verse 24, Paul says God gave up humans in the lusts of our hearts to impurity. God created marriage and sexual intimacy within it as an incredible gift to us. But we rejected this design in our folly, and our hearts have given rise to all manner of sexual perversions. But why? Because we did two things: (1) we exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and (2) because we worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator (1:25). Here is what this means: we want to be sexually perverse because (1) *we’re deceived*. We don’t know what’s true. We think something is good for us when it’s actually death. And this passage tells us we want to be sexually perverse because (2) *we’re idolizing something*. We are actively worshipping a false god who makes false promises. We’re paying homage to a satanic counterfeit, posing to be god.

So, ultimately, the problem lies with us—our own hearts. In other words, the ultimate problem is not an external one, but an internal one. This means you can’t *merely* remove devices, or cut off the internet, or get filtering programs. Those are helpful first steps to remove sinful influences and close off tempting portals, but the problem is ultimately on the inside. Until our hearts change, there will be no lasting deliverance. Or, to use Paul’s language in Romans, we could say it like this: until what we *believe* changes, until what we *worship* changes, we won’t have any lasting transformation.

Additionally, Paul’s statements in Romans show us the ultimate problem isn’t merely biological—it’s moral. This means you can’t take cold showers, or just think you need a hit of dopamine to be lastingly different. Even having sex in marriage won’t fix a habitually lustful heart. Paul says here the problem stems from idolatry and deception, not your biological makeup.

So, what do we need? Paul tells us in Ephesians. Sinfully dead humans (Eph. 2:1-3) need to be fundamentally *remade* into new creatures in Christ through the gospel (Eph. 2:4-10). We need to have new life imparted to us. We need radical forgiveness from all our defilements and to be placed in Christ (Eph. 1:7-8). We need the power of the Holy Spirit operative in our lives, illuminating truth and its application for us (Eph. 1:13-14). And, if you've believed in Jesus, that's exactly what you have. God has rescued you and given you brand new inclinations and new power to obey him. And it doesn't stop at conversion. We also need *continued truth in community*. We need the church—pastors, mature believers and faithful friends—equipping us and helping us learn to live by the truth (Eph. 4:7-16).

In the passage of this study (Eph. 5:3-14), Paul gives us some very specific directives to help Christians battle sexual lust. Instead of cultivating true, self-sacrificial, love (cf. Eph. 5:1-2)—love that focuses on giving for the benefit of others—Paul knows the church is still tempted toward a counterfeit love, a satanic perversion of love that's really not love at all, as we'll see in this passage. Even though we are new creatures in Christ, Paul knows we still are plagued by the old man, that corrupted nature that's full of deception and evil desires (cf. Eph. 4:22). And he also knows how easy it is to deceive ourselves into thinking that we can be Christians and live in all manner of sexual filth. So, after laying out biblical love in its most pure and Christlike form (Eph. 5:1-2), he takes some time to double down on its perversion: idolatrous lust. He provides the church with six clear directives for how to battle it. And he laces these directives with motivations—with truth intended to renew our minds and liberate the most enslaved among us. Let's unpack each of them below.

## 1. Raise the bar on sexual sin in the church (5:3-4a).

<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place...

Paul gives a list of all kinds of sexual sin—behaviors, desires, and even speech—and he says there shouldn't even be a hint of this in the church. Not a whiff of it. Pure on the inside and pure on the outside. Paul's saying that any form of sexual deviancy is totally antithetical to the church, the saints, the holy ones of God.

Now, we immediately feel the impact of this directive, don't we. What just happened? Paul set the bar where it needs to be, where it ought to be, as God's church. That's the because the Ephesians and every other believer is tempted to lower the bar, to make excuses for sexual sin, to be deceived about the evils of it, to treat it causally, to *normalize* it in the church. But that's precisely Paul's point: *it should be the furthest thing from normal in the church!* But we'll come back to this in moment.

But first, let's take a look at exactly what Paul is condemning in this verse. We'll take them one by one.

- **Sexual immorality** – Paul starts the list with a broad term that encompasses any type of illicit sex—meaning any type of sexual interaction outside of marriage. Things like adultery, prostitution, and fornication.
- **All impurity** – He follows it up even more broadly with the term “all impurity,” meaning absolutely *anything* that is filthy and dirty. This includes any immoral thoughts, fantasies, and ideas, not to mention tangible expressions like porn, messing around with your girlfriend or boyfriend, or any other behaviors that tend to go along with these lusts.
- **Covetousness** – Next, he hits one of the central taproots of sexual sin: covetousness. What is this? It’s greed. It’s the insatiable desire that wants more than God has provided. And in this context, it’s manifested in sexual greed. This person “assumes that others exist for his or her own gratification.”<sup>3</sup> The covetous person consumes selfishly. So, we’re beginning to see how this is the furthest thing from Christlike love, from true love that gives of itself for the benefit of others. [Quick word to wanna-be husbands?]
- **Filthiness** – In verse four, Paul adds a few more sinful expressions to the list. “Filthiness,” is any form of indecent or shameful behavior. These kinds of sexual sins are often done in secret due to the shame and embarrassment they bring when publicized. It’s those kinds of things done in the dark, in secret, those things that you shirk away from exposing, that Paul is talking about here.
- **Foolish talk** – Paul also condemns not just our actions and attitudes, but also our sexually charged speech. Foolish talk has the idea, in this context, of base speech or a gutter mouth. Someone who speaks with obscenities that are particularly sexual in nature.
- **Crude joking** – And finally, Paul rounds it out by condemning even our coarse joking. Now, Paul isn’t condemning laughter and having a good time. What he condemns is the sexual innuendo—someone who takes anything, no matter how innocent, and turns it into a sexual joke. Paul forbids this here because it’s wrong and it quickly leads us down a path of more sexual filth. We shouldn’t trivialize one of God’s most precious gifts to his people in the marriage relationship. Instead of coarsely joking about it, we should hold it in the highest esteem.

And Paul’s point here is that none of this is appropriate in the church. He says it doesn’t fit her. It doesn’t match with the nature of the bride of Christ. It used to characterize us before we knew God, before we had the Spirit, before we understood what is true and good and beautiful and noble and joyful, back when we were satanic and perverted by nature. But as believers we’ve been washed, given a new nature, and provided with new power. We are God’s saints now in Christ. Sexual immorality shouldn’t characterize us anymore. That’s what Paul means when he says twice that it isn’t fitting, or that these things are out of place for the church.

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew T Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 322.

But Paul isn't just hammering us here. This is incredibly hopeful. How? Paul's not out of touch with reality. What he's commanding here is actually possible, very possible, and in fact is the *norm* of every genuine believer! God is able to transform you, to renew your mind, and to teach you to put to death these sin patterns, so that there won't be a hint of sexual immorality in your life! Not that you will be forever free from every temptation to lust—you won't be. But in a very real way, in a very tangible way, in a very measurable way, God intends to liberate you through his truth, so that this can be true of you.

## 2. Replace lust with contented thanksgiving (5:4b-5).

<sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

We've got to raise the bar. That's Paul's first directive. But he doesn't stop there. Something needs to replace sexual sin, and it might surprise you. That's Paul second directive in this passage is that we should actually *replace* lust. What should take the place of sexual sin? Paul's answer is gratitude. Thanksgiving. To be thankful is essentially to express gratitude for some kind of benefit or blessing, especially when we realize we don't deserve it at all.

Now this begs another question: how exactly is gratitude the opposite of sexual sin?<sup>4</sup> Well, I think for Paul, like we saw earlier, covetousness or greed produces a lot of sexual sin. We see something, we perceive that it's good for us, and we want it. And when God has forbidden the thing we want, yet we want it anyway (right now, apart from marriage), and we sin to get it, that's greed. That's a proud heart, that thinks I know better than God. It's a discontent heart, because I think I need more than what God has provided.

But gratitude, on the other hand, springs from an entirely different heart. Gratitude springs up from a heart that is **content** with what God has provided. From a heart that **trusts** God's goodness and recognizes his provision and good gifts all around us. Gratitude comes from a **humble** heart, that recognizes we don't deserve *anything* from God given our high-handed rebellion against him. One author says it like this: "Thankfulness is the opposite of lust because the thankful heart has stopped prowling around for everything it doesn't have and is overwhelmed with appreciation for all the good things it already possesses."<sup>5</sup> To say it a little differently, gratitude springs up from a worshipful heart. Thanksgiving is at the heart of what it means to worship God instead of worshiping self.

---

<sup>4</sup> A great resource on this topic is Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), chaps. 8, "Using Gratitude to Fight Pornography".

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

So, gratitude is a powerful weapon against lust and sexual sin. And that means we need to think through how we practically cultivate gratitude. Here are a few ways:

- **Remember what you actually deserve.** We can always go back to this, beloved. We deserve hell. Our hearts outside of Christ are fundamentally characterized by idolatry and covetousness. We wanted to gratify our own selfish impulses all the time. We were sexually immoral. Look in v. 5. Paul says these kinds of people do not inherit the kingdom!
- **Remember what God has graciously given you** (v. 5). If unbelievers *won't* inherit the kingdom, it means you will, as a believer. That's the implication of this text. Even though you were once a participant in unrestrained covetousness, you've been forgiven, cleansed and seated at God's right hand. You've been adopted into his royal family and will reign with him one day in the kingdom. God is actively preparing you to reign with him through all the difficulties here, and remembering this will produce some serious gratitude in your heart and on your lips.
- **Notice all the expressions of God's undeserved goodness around you.** When we are coveting, we myopically focus on the one thing we don't have and we neglect the infinite undeserved graces all around us. If we can pan out in that moment and recognize the lavish goodness of God expressed tangibly toward us, we will be grateful. Make this part of your daily meditations to recount the undeserved benefits the Lord has given you.
- **Experience God's goodness all around you and thank him for it (Ps. 34:8).** This goes beyond merely recognizing it, but enjoying God's good gifts unto his glory. Enjoying the friendship and thanking God for providing it. Enjoying the good meal and thanking God for gifting that to you. Enjoying rich body life and thanking God for the church. Experience it, or as the Psalm says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8).
- **Experience the peace and joy that come from contentment.** It won't take long until you realize that living a contented life, thankful with what God has given you, is absolute freedom and joy. Lust and constant coveting robs you of joy. It aggravates your conscience. It produces perpetual guilt and erodes your assurance. A discontent person is very unhappy. But resting in God produces joy and contentment and peace. So experience it! You can have it if you repent of your coveting and rest in God.

That's a start—a few ideas on how we can begin to cultivate gratitude in our hearts. So that's Paul second directive. We should replace sexual sin with gratitude.

### 3. Fight deception with truth (Eph. 5:6).

<sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Paul knows that even though we're new creatures, we're still plagued by the old man, the old adamic nature. Earlier in the letter, he said that old nature is corrupt through "desires of deceit" (4:22). What he means is the old man, who we once were, is a deceived person. That's also what we saw in Romans 1. So here, Paul's urging the church not to fall into deception about these things, not to give way to the empty words that people are saying.

But what's the particular deception in this context? What are the empty words? Apparently, people were trying to downplay the seriousness of sexual sin, saying God wasn't going to punish it, or that he would overlook it, or that grace would cover their lack of repentance. Notice what Paul says in verse six: "because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." God is going to pour out his wrath on this evil. The sons of disobedience, meaning the ones whose lives are characterized by this kind of sin, will experience God's wrath if they don't repent. Paul looks us square in the eyes, warning us not to fall prey to the kinds of lies that downplay sexual sin. Let's just spell a few of them out together:

- Don't believe the lie that says **certain forms of lust aren't sinful**. This happens in a lot of ways. We rename our lust a sexual disorder, and we act like it is strictly a biological or hereditary problem—something to be cured or coped with. This also minimizes the fact that judgment is coming, doesn't it? Some people, some Christians and counselors, will even go so far as to say things like masturbation isn't always sinful. These are all modern-day equivalents of the empty words Paul warns us about here in our text.
- Don't believe the lie that **minimizes the seriousness of lust**. "Everyone does it, so we will all cut each other some slack here." What's actually being said in this minimization is this: "Is God's wrath *really* going to come down on people for this? Look how hard the struggle is!"
- Don't believe the lie that **you're not actually responsible for lust**. It's not your iPhone's fault, or your boyfriend's, either. It's not a result of some repressed childhood experience that happened to you. Of course, there are circumstantial factors to our sin, but these are the ultimate cause. That's another form of this lie: "You're not responsible, so God's wrath won't come down on you."
- Don't believe the lie that you **can live in unrepentant lust and still be a Christian**. This is probably one of the most pervasive lies in evangelicalism, that you can continue with your porn addiction, or sexual escapades, and simultaneously be a Christian. This lie says you can run headlong into sin, without any restraint of lust, and simply assume that grace covers your sin. Think about what's actually said here. It's like saying you can worship Molech and Yahweh at the same time. Paul said earlier that a covetous person, someone whose life is characterized by coveting/greed, that person is an idolater. That means they're worshipping a false god. They are enslaved to their desires and must have them at all costs. Instead of looking to God, they always look to sex to provide for what they need in the moment. Instead of loving God, they are in love with sex. It feels like you can't exist without it, that you'll die without it. That's the language of worship. You have

another god, and it isn't Christ. Something else is ruling your life and calling the shots. So let this text rattle you, and cause you to see clearly. To begin repenting truly, and trusting God. To begin walking in a new life. Eternal wrath is certainly coming for you if you don't reject this lie. But truth is here, at your door. There is so much hope for you and love in Christ for you even at this moment. Christ himself absorbs all the wrath for his people, for prior porn users. Will you trust him now?

So, Paul warns us not to be deceived, as the church. Will we struggle with lust? Yes. Will we be fighting against it until the day we die? Yes. But the fundamental difference between us and fake believers is that we see our sin, we are humbled by it and confess it to God, we ask for his help, we trust in Christ, and we continue in the battle to renew our minds. Will growth be hard, slow, and at times imperceptible? Yes! But if you zoom out, you'll see the fundamental difference between a believer and someone who is pretending is there is a Spirit-wrought humility in the soul that is broken and trembles at God's word.

#### 4. Don't participate in the darkness you no longer belong to (Eph. 5:7-8).

<sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Paul tells us here not to join up with those who will experience God's wrath for these kinds of sins. We shouldn't partner with them in this kind of rebellion because that's not who we are anymore.

But what exactly does Paul mean when he says we shouldn't be partners with folks who commit these sins? He's *not saying* don't associate with them in any way. Paul says in 1 Cor. 5:10 we would have to leave this world to completely disassociate with all unbelievers! Of course we have relationships with unbelievers: we work with them, we go to class with them, we are in the same biological family with them, we are neighbors with them. We want to influence them with truth. But what Paul *is saying* is that we should not participate in sexual immorality alongside them or even with them. We should be separate from their unholy lifestyle. We shouldn't be characterized by the same sins as them. That's what Paul's getting at when he says we should not "become partners with them."

This language of partnering with evil is very vivid, isn't it? It's as though Paul wants us to understand that we're joining up with evil, like a business partnership. We're helping to advance the cause of darkness by indulging in lust. Next time you're tempted to look at pornography, imagine sitting down with the creator of the website, and Satan sitting beside him at the conference table, and saying, "Sir, I'd like to partner with you in this sinful enterprise. I'd like to help promote your website, help to advance this filth, help enslave more people, to help the cause of the enemy of Christ is this world. Where can I sign?" When we indulge, we become partners with them. Don't do that, Paul says. Don't join up with them.

And we shouldn't partner with them because we are fundamentally different from them now. Notice what Paul says next in the verse: "for at one time, you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." You're no longer like the unbeliever. You're no longer shrouded in darkness. You're no longer deceived. You're no longer dead. You're no longer enslaved. Instead, you ARE light. Now, that's an interesting way to talk about our identity. He doesn't say we are in the light, but that we ARE light. I think this is another way that Paul is getting at the idea that we are part of the new creation. God has separated light from darkness, he has brought us from darkness and made us light in the new creation in Christ. It means we are illumined, we can see, we know the truth, we are breathing the free air of the kingdom of Christ.

This means there has to be a fundamental mindset change in the struggle against lust. Too often, genuine believers feel utterly defeated and helpless, and they identify with the lust (or darkness) vs. the light. And that's certainly how it feels. But even though you still struggle, you are a saint now if you've believed in Jesus. You are light now because of him. You have the renewed capacity to grow out of this and actualize the purity that now belongs to you. Even when you falter in unbelief, even when you sin, this reality motivates you to repent, to get back after the fight—not to become light, but *because you are light*. Because you want to reflect the light that you are in Christ. Does that make sense? That's what Paul is saying here.

Now, if you are going to break away from your former lusts, you have to, at a minimum, close the portals that lead to lust. We have to be willing to deal radically with temptation and the circumstances that make it difficult for us to withstand. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27-30:

<sup>27</sup> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

What's Jesus' saying? Not that we should literally cut off our body parts. He's speaking in hyperbole. His point is that we should be willing to close any portal to sin, even if it's as inconvenient as losing our eye or hand (some of our most essential body parts). To put it in the language of our passage, you've got to be willing to break all partnership ties.

Here are a few examples of what taking radical measures could look like. Are you in a relationship characterized by lust? Are you willing to end it, or at least seek biblical counsel about the best path forward? Are you looking at pornography? What are the portals of access? Have you definitively closed them? Now, obviously this doesn't fix your heart. BUT it is a first step, an act of faith in the truths here that call us to deal decisively with the portals and partnerships we've had with evil.

So that's Paul's forth directive. And as important as this is, there's more. Avoidance and breaking ties are not enough. We must be proactive. We must cultivate something in its place. That's where Paul's fifth directive comes in.

## 5. Cultivate a fruitful lifestyle (Eph. 5:8-10).

<sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

I love Paul's Spirit-inspired wisdom here. Paul says the fight against lust is also a fight *for something*—it's a fight for usefulness, a fight to cultivate purity, a fight for a new and glorious kind of life. Or, the way Paul says it here, to walk as children of light. Like we saw earlier, Paul is continuing to use this new creation imagery of light, and he's in essence saying we need to cultivate a pattern of life that reflects that new creation, that reflects Christ. That's what it means to walk as children of light—that our lives are characterized by what characterizes light.

It's so important we grasp this as we think about our own growth and also helping others grow. It's not enough to simply tell them to avoid immorality and lust. The Bible gives us a grand and noble vision of what we could become if we simply believe God and act accordingly, if we simply seek to imitate him in this life. And the image is radical fruitfulness. And that's where Paul goes next. He mixes metaphors. He says that light produces tangible fruit: "for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true." We could translate verse 9 like this: "for the fruit of the light *is manifested (or shown)* in every act of goodness and righteousness and truthfulness." He helps us understand what he means when he tells us to walk in the light. He's telling us to produce the fruit of Christlikeness.

Then he summarizes this fruit. He gives us the shorthand version in three words. The fruit of light is found, initially, in all goodness. Goodness, as you might imagine, has the idea of doing good to others in all kinds of practical ways, and especially toward those in need. All righteousness refers to every behavior that is morally excellent and upright. All truth is dealing with others with honesty and sincerity, as well as speaking words that are truthful, words that build up and enrich others. And to reiterate: the focus in these terms is representative. These are *examples* of a truly fruitful life, a life that walks in the light.

This means we need to be intentional with our lives. We should be intentionally seeking to produce eternal fruit with our time, not with wasting it on things that ultimately won't endure. When you indulge your cravings for sin, you're living ultimately for yourself—specially to gratify yourself. But when you do good to others instead, you're cutting at the root of self-indulgence with sacrificial service. This means you should have productive things to do, things that will directly benefit others, *instead of* lusting and giving in to your cravings. Write out prayers for others, or notes of encouragement, if you're tempted to lust as you're going to bed. Go do dishes for your roommates, or clean your apartment, or meet up with someone to hear

how they're doing. Work on a skill that you can use to earn money and directly benefit others. The list of good works is literally endless. Find anything that is good, and right and true and get after doing it *instead of* wrecking your life with lust. Each temptation then, becomes an opportunity to cultivate the fruit of light in that very moment. It becomes an opportunity to advance Christ's kingdom instead of Satan's, to add to your growth and joy instead of polluting your conscience, and to earn eternal and lasting reward than receive the short-lived pleasure of sin.

Do you know what else is incredible about this? Every single faith-filled decision to cultivate fruit instead of filth—every single time you choose to pursue goodness instead of promiscuity—you are actively and progressively increasing your discernment. This is exactly what Paul says next:

Walk as children of light...<sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

The translation above (ESV) makes this sound like a command: "and try to discern what's pleasing to the Lord." But it's just a participle. If we were to translate it woodenly, it would sound like this: "Walk as children of light...*discerning* what is pleasing to the Lord." He's continuing to elaborate on walking as children of light. And I think the better interpretation is that he's giving a *result* of cultivating the virtues he just described. It would sound like this: "Walk as children of light...resulting in discerning what is pleasing to the Lord."

In other words, as you grow in doing good, as you grow in righteousness and truth, in the little daily moments of your life, your discernment of good and evil grows. You begin to learn to practically navigate this life as you grow in learning to please the Lord in these daily decisions. You more quickly recognize the lies in your heart, or the lies coming to you in that advertisement, and you more quickly run to the truth. You're building spiritual muscle as you choose to trust and act in these ways and Paul says you become more discerning.

Here's an example of what we're talking about. In the past, when life got hard, or the circumstances of life began to bear down on you, you began to pity yourself. You thought about how bad you've got it, how other people don't have it as bad as you, how you deserve a little pleasure. How God is holding out on you. How some indulgence won't hurt you.

In the past, that would lead you down the path of sexual sin. But now, you're beginning to recognize the lies. "No," you say, "I don't deserve *anything* from God. And in fact, he's given me way more than I deserve. I remember when I indulged last time, and my conscience was so messed up afterwards. I felt guilty and dirty and even more demoralized, and I was even more tempted to look at it again. It's a viscous cycle that leads to death. I know I'm self-pitying right now, and really not wanting to give these burdens over to the Lord in this moment. So instead of indulging, I'm going to be productive for the kingdom. I'm going to advance Christ's work by writing an email to a church friend to encourage them. Then I'm going to do the dishes for my roommates. I know that Christ sees me, and he will reward me in his time."

Every time you choose goodness, every time you choose righteousness, every time you choose truth, you *increase* your discernment for next time. And when your discernment increases, you become a dangerous threat to Satan's schemes, and a useful instrument in the Master's hands (see 2 Tim. 2:20-22). This brings us to Paul's final directive for battling lust in this text.

## 6. Redemptively expose sexual sin (5:11-14).

Not only does Paul want us to walk in the light, but God wants us to be actively involved in the redemption of others from the pit of sexual sin:

<sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

I love where Paul goes here at the end of this passage. And it's really no different than what he's said about the other areas of our lives. Remember what he said to the person who used to steal? Stop stealing, work hard, so that you can be generous to those in need (4:28). He's saying the thief is to repent and become part of the solution. The same is true here. The person once enslaved to sexual sin is to learn to come out of that, to walk in the light, and then be used by the Lord to free others from the same enslavement.

Paul begins by telling us not to participate in the unfruitful works of darkness (5:11a), clearly talking about sexual sins. This is similar to what he told us just a few verses ago (not to be partners with them). But here, he adds something else: he says we should instead "expose" these unfruitful works of darkness. There are a few important questions we need to ask as we're trying to understand exactly what Paul means here.

Initially, who is Paul telling us to expose? Is he saying we should expose believers, or unbelievers? Well, I think if Paul were here with us today, he would clearly say that if believers are doing these things in the church, we should definitely move toward them in gracious ways to help expose them and see the evil of what they're participating in, to help them turn and grow. We're called in 4:25 to speak the truth with each other, because we're members of one another. But I think what Paul primarily has in mind in these verses are *unbelievers*, those around us who are fully deceived, who are in darkness. In other words, Paul wants us to help unbelievers see these realities for what they really are. Paul wants us to have a burden for those outside the church who are enslaved by sin, and to move toward them in love, exposing sin for what it is in an attempt to motivate them to repent and trust in Christ.

This raises another question, what exactly does Paul mean by "expose"? The word itself can mean rebuke, like someone would rebuke a false teacher (cf. Titus 1:9, 13) or it can mean to bring something to light (cf. John 3:20). I think in this context, it has the idea of rebuke or

reproof which brings exposure. But I think the translation “expose” fits really well here given the darkness and light imagery through this passage, and it fits Paul’s thrust. Paul wants us to get to know unbelievers, to move into their lives, and to help them see the sinfulness of their own hearts so that they might repent. As lights, he wants us to shine into the darkness of their lives so they might come to forsake their sin and receive Christ’s illuminating work.

Notice Paul goes on to say the shame of this kind of sin is off the charts:

<sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

So what do we do with this kind of sin when we know it’s happening? Paul says it needs to be exposed by the light so that it becomes visible:

<sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible,

For these sexual sins to be made visible doesn’t just mean they are made known (“Hey, hey, everyone, he’s sleeping with his girlfriend”), but it means they are shown to be utterly sinful and in rebellion against God. Do you see that distinction? It means we’re helping people understand the danger they are in by showing them the sinfulness of their behavior and heart attitudes.

But once people begin to be convicted of their sin—the conviction that comes from genuine exposure—Paul says this leads to their conversion. Notice how he puts it here:

<sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light.

Anything that becomes visible—meaning anything that is shown to be sin against God—Paul says it “it is light.” What does he mean? I think it’s Paul’s very shorthand way of describing someone’s conversion. When an unbeliever’s sin becomes utterly visible to him, it leads to his repentance and faith in Christ. The unbeliever has experienced what we’ve experienced. They’ve gone from darkness to light. So, Paul says, whatever is becomes visible is light.

If there’s any doubt, Paul underscores this by appealing to a theme in the book of Isaiah:

...Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

What Paul appears to be doing is stringing together a number of passages in Isaiah into one composite reference. He’s doing biblical theology and summarizing it for us in this quote. These texts in Isaiah call to God’s people to wake up from their sleep by repenting of their sin. It’s often pictured as new life from the dead. And the Lord’s glory is then promised to shine on God’s people as they are raised up and exalted, as they reflect God’s own glory to the world. All these things were promised in the New Covenant blessings, according to Isaiah. So here, Paul summarizes these themes. He shows us that what has happened to us can and will happen to others in this world. God will use our own witness to rouse his people who are asleep, his elect

people who are presently dead in their sins, he will raise them to life. Christ will shine on them as he teaches them to live in purity now, and later when he comes in glory.

So, what does Paul mean by expose? He wants us to demonstrate with our lives and explain with our words the sinfulness of these deeds of darkness that unbelievers are involved in, with the hope that they repent and come to saving faith in Christ.

But what in the world should this exposure look like? How do I begin going about it? I think there are several components:

- **Expose wisely (cf. Col. 4:5)**. In Colossians, Paul tells us to live wisely before outsiders, making the best use of the time. I think he means, here, that there are times to have these conversations and there are times not to. And it takes wisdom. If you've just met the person, it's probably not a wise idea to launch into full exposure mode. If you're on the clock, again, probably not the best idea to have a long and drawn-out convo with a co-worker, esp. if it's affecting your productivity. But this passage emphasizes our need to be intentional, to be wise, to take advantage of those opportunities to begin to raise questions, to get unbelievers thinking seriously about their lives and their culpability before God.
- **Expose graciously and humbly** (cf. Col. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:25). Again, Paul says our speech must be gracious. Why? Because God's been gracious to us. We were in the same condition as them, and God was merciful to us. For us to be harsh, critical and impatient with unbelievers is a massive contradiction. So, when we seek to expose, we must do it with extreme care, grace, and especially humility. We were once enslaved just as they are, and we still struggle with the same kinds of things. We must be motivated by love and nothing else.
- **Expose clearly and boldly** (cf. Eph. 6:19-20). At the end of this letter, Paul asks the Ephesians to pray that he would be bold in evangelism. The idea here is that he would not shirk away from saying what is necessary in proclaiming the gospel out of fear. Paul's desire was to be clear with truth, so we should seek to be bold and clear when the Lord gives us opportunity. And part of this boldness needs to be clarity on what's coming at unbelievers if they don't turn. You're exposing these sins as "unfruitful works of darkness" (v. 11). You're clearly articulating that the wrath of God is coming upon them if they don't repent (v. 6). You're clearly helping them see they're idolaters, trusting in false gods (v. 5). You're clearly articulating they have no hope in the world to come if they don't repent (v. 5). Listen guys: in order for people to come to Christ, they must come forsaking their idols. That's the only way someone is truly born again. That means, at some point, we have to be clear with our fellow human beings on the nature of sin and the danger of their souls.
- a. **Expose redemptively**. Our exposure, like this text says, is aimed at their repentance and faith in Christ. That is the sole aim of our exposure, our ultimate motivation for even

speaking in the first place, that they would experience the full benefits of the free gospel of Christ. We articulate God's unending mercy, his willingness to forgive the sexually immoral, and his desire to transform them.

These are some qualities, a few of them, that our exposure should be characterized by. That's the flavor, or what it should look like according to Scripture.

Wow, this is all pretty incredible, isn't it? Paul has clearly equipped us in this passage to battle sexual sin. The Lord doesn't just desire us to stop being sexually immoral (he does, to be sure). But he's teaching us to live gloriously fruitful lives, increasing our discernment, and he ultimately wants to use us in bringing other sexually immoral people to faith in Christ.

## Conclusion

As we wrap up, I want to end with even more hope. If you are enslaved to any form of sexual sin, by God's providence you are reading this, and that means, if you'll trust him, he'll deliver you. He can and will begin a process of transformation in your life as you learn to submit to him, as you learn to be a committed member of his church. We're definitely not perfect here, but we will commit to walk alongside you and will seek to be the Lord's instruments to help you become more obedient in this area. And it's truly a joy filled path, as anyone who has experienced life in this area can testify.

Remember, the Lord is able to do far more than we could ever ask or think, says Paul. So, let's commit afresh to be a church that is pure, even more, a *college ministry* that is pure, where these things aren't even named among us. And let's pray the Lord uses us at our workplaces, in our communities, and on LU's campus in redemptive ways.