

NEW MORALITY OR ANCIENT FOOLISHNESS? (Part I)

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the burning issues of our day is sexual morality. A college coach in a Christian school told me not long ago of a young man in his school who said, "I'll follow the school rules in almost everything, but nobody is going to tell me what to do with my sex life." Once that kind of an attitude would have been an exception, but today it is almost universal. Even churches today are advocating what is called the "New Morality," the idea that what formerly was regarded as misconduct be tolerated, and even, in some cases, be directly approved of by religious authorities.

Yet is it rather deeply significant that exactly the same problem arose in the 1st century in the midst of strikingly similar conditions to those which prevail today. Listen to this familiar passage from Romans 1, a 1st century description of life in the Roman Empire:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.
{Rom 1:26-28 RSV}

That sounds up-to-date doesn't it? That could have been written in this decade of the 20th century. It is as up-to-date as tomorrow morning's newspaper. In the face of that fact I should like to ask, "Where is all our vaunted progress in twenty centuries?" If this 1st century document can so accurately describe what 20th century life is like, then where is the progress we say we have been making? What becomes of the claim that proper education will cure conditions like this? Why is it that after two thousand years of research, and of growing human knowledge, these conditions are as rampant as they ever were? And not only rampant among the poor and the uneducated, the so called lower classes, but equally rampant among the cultured, the privileged and the highly educated today.

With those questions ringing in our ears, let us come to Paul's treatment of this theme in Ephesians 5 -- the problem of sexual morality. I shall read the whole passage that we may compare it with the description I have just read from Romans 1, and see how totally diametric the Christian position is.

But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light [or, rather, "anything that makes visible is light"]. Therefore it is said,

"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,

and Christ shall give you light." {Eph 5:3-14 RSV}

The apostle is here declaring the absolute incompatibility of sexual looseness with the Christian faith. The two cannot mix. There is no mincing of words in this passage. Here we have the truth as it is in Jesus, i.e., the reality of things as they are. This is an enlargement by the apostle on the teachings of the Lord Jesus himself. Remember that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that adultery and fornication were evil. Even the eye that is attracted or the hand that is involved should be cut off (in a figurative sense), lest it lead us into evil. Even the thought, he says, that leads to these activities, is wrong. Paul is simply enlarging upon this teaching of our Lord. God's intention for man is either marriage, with complete faithfulness to the partner, or total abstinence from sex. The Bible allows no deviation from this. It makes it clear that this is the Christian position: Nothing less; nothing more.

Now here Paul shows why this must be so. This is one of the most helpful passages in all the Bible to enable us to get our bearings amidst the confused and muddled thinking that exists today in this area of sexual morality. Here the apostle gives us five illuminating and consistently logical reasons why sexual looseness is wholly incompatible with a Christian profession. We shall examine them one by one. I shall not try to cover them all in one message, but let us make a beginning.

The first of these reasons is given to us in Verse 3.

But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. {Eph 5:3 RSV}

Here he is saying that sexual looseness is incompatible with Christianity because it is defiling and debasing of humanity. Look at the terms he uses to define what we have called, in general, sexual looseness: *Immorality*, that is the most common and widest term in the Bible for any kind of sexual misbehavior. It is the most frequently used term for sex misconduct. *Impurity* is literally "uncleanness," and refers to anything that is rotten, or filthy, or obscene. "All impurity," he says. The word *covetousness* we frequently take to refer to greed about money, but here it refers to greed for another's body. Perhaps the better translation would be *passion* or *lust*. It is explained in that connection in Verse 5 where he refers to "one who is covetous (that is an idolater)." One who makes an idol of another person's body, that is the idea. All this we shall lump together under the term, "sexual looseness." You will notice that these things are forbidden to be even named among saints. It is not only the acts themselves which are prohibited, but even to talk about them.

All these terms, of course, refer to sex outside of marriage. There is never any prohibition against discussing sex. The Bible never condemns that. It is the distortions of sex that are prohibited. We are told not to talk about or discuss them in general conversation, but we are never told not to mention or discuss sex. The twisted concept of many about Christianity is that it forbids even the discussion of sex, but anyone who has read the Bible knows that it freely and frankly discusses sex. It approaches it in the most open way, and never sanctions Victorian prudishness about it. The Bible reveals the fact that sexual powers are God-given. God likes sex. He engineered it. He designed it. The fact that our sexual drives are among the most powerful in human life is God's idea, not ours. He made us that way, therefore he has a purpose in it. The Bible faces these facts. It never treats sex as deplorable or shameful. Christianity, almost alone among all the great religions of the world, thoroughly approves of the body. It tells us that God once entered into time in a human body, a body complete with sex organs, and it finds no shame or cause for shame in that fact. The Bible makes clear that within marriage sex is beautiful, wholesome, and God-approved.

But the Bible is equally clear in its declaration that sex outside of marriage is debasing and defiling; it is harmful to our basic humanity. God's prohibitions about sex are therefore not designed to keep us from something helpful and good, but to make possible something helpful and good. They are to keep us from that which would prevent us from enjoying the best. Sex outside of marriage is so injurious, in fact, that, as the apostle makes clear here, even passing references to it among Christians can be inflaming and dangerous. The Christian position is exactly what the Apostle Paul says here. There must be a putting aside of even the desire to talk about the sordid, lurid details of these wrong acts.

Now this statement was made in a day when sexual looseness was even more widely tolerated and accepted

than it is today. In this very city of Ephesus, to which this letter is addressed, there was a temple to a pagan goddess, the worship of whom was made possible by a multitude of young priests and priestesses who gave their bodies to whoever could pay the price, as an act of worship. The whole city accepted sexual intercourse as an act of worship and regarded it as normal and proper, even religious -- a sign of dedication. That was going on in this city of Ephesus. That is how tolerantly they looked upon these things. Yet to these Christians, living in such surroundings, the apostle addresses this admonition:

Immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. {Eph 5:3 RSV}

That charge to Christians must have seemed even more unrealistic and incapable of fulfillment to the pagans of Ephesus than it does to Americans today. But there it is.

Well, why is it there? Not because, as we are often told, Christianity is negative and prudish. It is never that. The whole of Scripture is written for the welfare of man. God's whole purpose in telling us the truth is that we might fully enter into life. Jesus, said, "I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly," {John 10:10 KJV}. We have already seen that Christianity is not negative about sex.

Well, then, why is this passage here? It is because, as Paul says, the absence of this kind of activity and of this kind of talk among Christians is *fitting* among saints. The word he chooses is a word that means "becoming," "wholesome," "attractive," "refreshing." Who of us has not had the experience of being exposed, either deliberately or involuntarily, to something filthy, obscene, or improper in sexual matters, and coming from that experience feeling dirty and unclean. What a refreshing thing it has been to come into a company of people who talk about wholesome matters. Their time and talk is filled with that which is wholesome, healthy, and refreshing. Now that is what the apostle means. By implication, of course, to indulge in improper talk is unwholesome, unfitting, uglifying, debasing, defiling.

That is an idea that is being directly challenged in our day. We are being told today that all sex is beautiful and natural, that it is in the same class as any of our bodily desires or urges, and, therefore, we should feel free to satisfy it as openly as we do any other of our bodily needs, without shame or apology. We are subjected to a constant barrage of propaganda which links sex acts with the idea of wholesomeness, naturalness, frankness, youth, and vitality.

Therefore, we are told, we can perform a sex act with whomever and whenever we find it mutually agreeable. The only thing wrong with it, we are being told, is if we force it in any way upon someone else. As long as it is mutually agreeable, it is right. This is the propaganda of our day.

Now this idea that sex, all sex, any sex, is natural and beautiful is a lie. It never was true. Like all powerful lies, it derives its strength from being based upon a partial truth. It is true that sex is a natural urge. It is true that sex is related to our physical body like hunger or thirst, or the need to urinate, or to sleep, or any other physical urge. But what is never said is that these other urges also require regulation and control. They are not indulged in at will, any time, any place. We don't eat in any manner that we choose. We don't sit down at the table and begin to grab with our hands and stuff food into our mouths, we learn to eat with a knife and fork that we might not be offensive. We learn to regulate our eating, and control even the way we eat as well as what we eat. We don't sleep whenever we please, even though we may be awfully sleepy. (Some of you may be controlling that instinct right at this very moment!) And even though we see many signs and pickets demanding the right to sexual freedom, we never see people picketing for the right to urinate publicly, or any time they will. We even insist that our puppies and kittens learn to do otherwise.

Therefore, just because sex is like our other natural desires, because it is nothing to be ashamed of, then, like these other natural urges, it requires regulation and restraint. And the intended regulation of sex is marriage! That is all the Bible says. Marriage is the way to regulate sex so that it is right and wholesome and beneficial. Anything else becomes a violation, not only of propriety in Christian society, but of elementary humanity as well.

One thing is clearly true: Sex is obviously much more complicated than any other of our natural urges. It

requires a partner, which no other urge does. And it is not only a physical union, but a psychological union as well. In fact, and this is what is so often forgotten, it is the psychological union which is the more important of the two.

All you need do to prove that is to sit in a marriage counseling room and listen to the dreary stories, repeated endlessly, of married couples who experience physical union but have never known what it means to enter into psychological union in sex. Their lives are empty and barren as a result. Sex is a complicated process, intended to be a total union of two beings, and only in marriage is such a total union possible. It is not merely a physical union; it is primarily a psychological union. It is the giving of two people to each other totally, body, soul and spirit, with all their possessions, their name, everything they own. Only in marriage is that kind of a union possible.

C. S. Lewis says something very helpful along this line.

The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside of marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the physical) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.

C. S. Lewis goes on to point out that, today, our sexual instincts are horribly inflamed and distorted, even in the best of people, because of the age in which we live, and the generations of sexual distortion to which we have been exposed. Suppose we treated our other urges as we do the sex urge. Imagine a country, he says, where you could fill a theater by bringing a covered plate onto the stage and slowly lifting the cover to let all see, before the lights suddenly go out, a lamb chop or a bit of bacon. Imagine the whole audience titillated by this sight of a bit of food exposed to them. Would you not think that there was something terribly wrong with their appetite for food, that it had become awfully distorted? There is nothing to be ashamed of in enjoying food, but there is everything to be ashamed of if food is your main interest in life, and you spend your time looking at food pictures in magazines and smacking your lips and drooling over every page.

The apostle has more to say about this inflaming character of sexual evil in the next verse. But, before we leave the point he makes here, that all sex outside of marriage is debasing and defiling, look at a further argument suggested in this verse: Note that Verse 3 is a continuation of the thought of Verse 2. It begins with a conjunction *but*, and is really part of the same sentence. His complete thought demands they be read together:

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, {Eph 5:2-3a RSV}

That adversative conjunction, *but*, puts everything in Verse 3 in contrast to Verse 2. What the apostle is saying is that any sexual looseness is a violation of love. You cannot truly love another and practice sex with him or her outside of marriage. It is impossible; they are mutually contradictory.

Now, that directly contravenes one of the major contentions of the New Morality cult of our day. They say that sex relations are justified as long as love is present, that true love makes everything right. This is heard on every side today. But, Paul says, that is impossible. If anyone really loves another, he would never practice sex outside of marriage. To do so would injure the other because sex outside of marriage is incomplete, abortive, unfulfilling, injurious. Therefore, you cannot combine the two. There is no such thing as sexual relations outside of marriage done in love.

Dr. Henry Brandt says, "Becoming involved sexually short-circuits the judgment, and one of the most important decisions of your life -- whom you will marry -- is made under pressure of disappointment, one-sided affection, or over-involvement." Every psychologist, psychiatrist, or marriage counselor has heard endless stories of what has happened when young people, refusing to believe this, think that because the first two or three acts were so wonderful, and felt so great, nothing is happening, nothing is wrong, and they go on

to end up in the inevitable sequence of injured feelings, over-involvement, frustration, and, often times, impotence in sexual matters. It is easy for a boy to tell a girl that he loves her. But if that is not accompanied by a desire to do her no harm, and a willingness to exercise self-restraint till the proper conditions are obtained, then he is simply deceiving himself and her. He doesn't love her. He loves himself, and he wants her to satisfy his own desires. That is why sex outside of marriage is, as the apostle makes clear, totally incompatible with Christian love. True love is concerned about another's welfare and desires no harm in any way to the other individual. Therefore, sexual looseness and love are irreconcilable.

Sometimes we hear that it is necessary to experiment with sex before marriage in order to see whether or not marriage will work. This is another common argument of our day. But again this is a lie. It mistakes the physical union of sex as the primary thing in marriage which, as we have already seen, is not the case. Physical union is not the most important thing about marriage by any means.

Second, it is impossible to test marriage that way because the essential conditions that make up marriage are not there.

Therefore, it is impossible to tell whether or not marriage will work by sexual union before marriage. It doesn't prove anything. It is beside the point.

As someone has well pointed out, it is like trying to test a parachute by jumping off a 30-foot building. That simply isn't enough room for the parachute to operate. The only way to test a parachute is to go up and jump out of an airplane. And the only way to test the proper function of sex is to be married.

The apostle goes on to point out another reason for the incompatibility of sexual looseness and Christianity.

Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. {Eph 5:4 RSV}

That is, sexual looseness is incompatible with Christian faith because even the talk that leads to sexual looseness is inconsistent and pointless. He says, it is not fitting. In Verse 3 he had said, "These things must not be named among you, as is fitting among saints." Here in Verse 4 he says, "These things are not fitting." But this is a different word than the one in Verse 3. The first word meant something that was a disgrace, a defiling thing, as we have already seen. This word means something that is not consistent, inappropriate, wasteful, pointless. In other words, the apostle is essentially asking the question,

- What do Christians gain by this kind of an exposure?
- What can you expect to gain by reading sexy literature or by attending lurid movies or discussing sexual perversions or indulging in dirty stories or double-meaning jokes?
- What can you get out of that?

His answer is, "Nothing. It is pointless, wasted. You learn nothing of value from such kind of talk."

Here again this contradicts one of the common arguments of our day. We are being told that if we don't explore these distortions of sex, if we don't attend sexy movies, if we don't understand what people are doing and why they do it, we cannot properly defend against these. We cannot understand what sex is, and, therefore, we cannot defend against these abuses. We must expose ourselves, we are told. We must learn how the world thinks. We must share its views in some degree, in order to understand, and even to help. But the apostle directly challenges that. He says it is not true. Those things are "not fitting." They are not appropriate. They are pointless. They are a waste of time. You do not learn how to avoid sexual looseness by talking about it, or by joking about it, and laughing about it, and exposing yourself. He says this is a dead end street. It is wasted time and effort. You never learn the true nature of sex by studying its perversions or its distortions. You learn the true nature of sex from the revelation of God. There we see what sex was intended to be. That is where we learn the truth, the truth as it is in Jesus.

Someone has well said, "Virtue, even attempted virtue, brings light, but indulgence brings fog." The truth of this is amply manifest by the times in which we live.

When we indulge in this kind of talk or this type of activity, through movies, books, and ribald literature, then the sex drive which is designed to be channeled and kept within bounds, to make us men and women as God intended men and women to be, breaks over its boundaries, overflows its banks, and becomes a flood which inundates the whole landscape, in which we find ourselves wading continuously. Eventually sex loses its attraction and its power to attract.

What do the facts reveal?

- If the trouble lay in Christian prudishness,
- If it is true, as we are being told, that the cause of declining morals is that we have hushed up sex and no one has talked about these things,
- If what was needed was awareness of sexual practices and the knowledge of what was taking place in secret places in our great cities,

then God knows that during the last thirty years we have had plenty of exposure. What have the results been?

Well, for one, we know no more about sex now than we did thirty years ago. We do not understand true sex any more than we did then. We know no more about true sex after the Kinsey Report was published than we did before. As Paul says, these things have proved to be empty, vain, profitless. Rather than stopping these abuses, they have increased until today our cities are flooded with sexual emphases, and our own area has gained a reputation across the country as one of the centers of sexual perversion.

Here are but two of the five mighty reasons Paul gives why every type of sexual looseness is totally incompatible with Christian faith. He makes the position absolutely clear. There is no doubt left.

If we take his words at face value, Christians have no choice in this matter. If any man takes another position than what the Apostle Paul takes, he is thereby declaring that he knows more about life than the apostles of our Lord knew and that Jesus Christ himself knew. The apostle's position is only the enlargement and further explanation of what the Lord himself has said. Anyone who takes a different position is challenging the authority of the Lord Jesus, the One who knew life as no other has ever known it.

Christian people, this is an important subject and we must regard it with all solemnity. We are being engulfed by a tidal wave of sexual propaganda designed to undermine the foundations of morals and Christian faith. Unless Christians are ready to take a stand in obedience to what God has said, there is nothing we can do to stem this tide.

History has shown that wherever the gospel of the grace of God has gone, and men and women have believed this gospel, then, even in the midst of the most depraved sexual practices, islands of purity have been created which have spread and touched whole cities and ultimately transformed the sexual practices of empires.

This is where the power of the church lies, in the willingness of its people to obey the word of the living God.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that we may heed these important words and take them to heart, not to read them lightly as we have read them in the past, or to go out and forget them and give ourselves to improper practices, improper thoughts, improper reading, and improper viewing. Grant to us Lord that we be free and open and frank in our discussions of sex itself, but teach us Lord to beware these dangerous areas, these areas of defilement, of debasement, of harm. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: New Morality or Ancient Foolishness? (Part I)
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Christian in the World
Scripture: Ephesians 5:3-4
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 125
Date: Unknown date during April - July, 1966

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