

NEW MORALITY OR ANCIENT FOOLISHNESS? (Part II)

by Ray C. Stedman

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are considering the section where the apostle relates the great principles of life to the thoughts and practice of a pagan world. He tells us how to live a Christian life in the midst of a blinded, confused and sick society. You cannot read this section of Paul's letter without seeing that the world has not changed essentially since the apostle's day. Oh, I know we can send messages around the world in two seconds. We can view events that happen anywhere in our world today by means of satellite television, and we are able to put men on the moon. These seem to be impressive capabilities, but there is not one whit of difference between the moral problems we face in this 20th century and those faced in the 1st century. We confront the same issues in society that they confronted; we struggle against the same forces they struggled with, and react in exactly the same way. Human nature has not changed one bit in twenty centuries. You only need read this ancient account to see how true that is, and also, therefore, to see how up-to-date, relevant, and pertinent the Scriptures are to our own time.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we face today a crisis in sexual morality, for the world has had such crises in the past, from time to time. Paul's letter to Timothy says there will come recurrent times of stress throughout history. We have had sexual crises from place to place and from time to time in the world history before, but now we are facing one of world-wide extent. There is a great revolt going on everywhere in this matter of sex mores. Long-standing restraints are now being challenged as they never have before. Long-accepted standards of sex conduct are being overthrown.

Now, as always, the New Testament cuts through all the fog and haze and distortion, down to the basic facts. This is what makes the Bible such an exciting, marvelous book. Because it is the truth, and reveals facts as they really are, it helps us to measure and evaluate the trends, the currents, the sweeping movements of our day or any day. Here we have "the truth as it is in Jesus" {cf, Eph 4:21}, who is the ultimate revelation of truth, things as they really are, the foundational reality of life.

In the section we are looking at, the apostle gives us five great reasons why sexual looseness is wholly incompatible with Christian faith. In our last message on this passage, we examined the first two of these reasons, suggested in Verses 3 and 4 of Ephesians 5:

We saw that the word he uses to describe the unfitness of sexual misconduct suggests that all sex outside of marriage, and even all discussion of the lurid, sordid details of it, is debasing and defiling to our essential humanity. It is not that it is merely proscribed by Christian society, it goes deeper than that, it affects our basic humanity.

Then, further, it is pointless and profitless. Nothing is learned from it. It does nothing to cure the problem. Despite the Kinsey Report and its attempts to explore the sexual malpractices of the American male and female, and other such quasi-serious studies, and despite the tons of sex literature that have flooded this country for the past thirty years, we know no more about what sex really is, and can do no more about sexual misconduct, that we could before all this began.

In other words, what we have tried to discover by investigating the wrong practices of sex has been pointless, just as the Apostle Paul said it would. It has not achieved anything. The problem instead grows worse. Pornography, and even serious studies of sexual distortions and deviations, are essentially a waste of time, as far as curing the problem is concerned. That is the apostle's claim, and that is what our experience has amply confirmed. That is arresting, isn't it? Men think they can diminish the problem by learned studies, but they do not. Instead we are faced with a continually increasing problem in this direction. Sexual deviations and immorality are spreading rapidly and widely in our country and in other countries of the world, and all our efforts to arrest them seem to be unavailing.

Now we come to the last three of Paul's five great statements about the Christian and improper sex:

The third of these is given to us in Verse 5.

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. {Eph 5:5 RSV}

Notice that he takes up the same three categories he refers to in Verse 3 -- immorality, impurity, and covetousness. As we have seen, "covetous" here is not greed for money, as it is frequently in the Scriptures, but is passion, greed for another's body, desire to possess another for exploitative use. Any man, he says, who practices immorality, impurity or body-greed -- and he puts it flatly and bluntly -- has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God!

In other words, sexual looseness is incompatible with Christian faith because continuance in it reveals an unregenerate heart. Notice how he reinforces this. "Be sure of this," he says, and he goes on in the next verse, "Do not let anyone deceive you about this." You cannot be a Christian and knowingly, deliberately practice sex outside of marriage, for the one cancels out the other.

Oh, I know a Christian can do these things. God knows, the record is all too clear in this regard. Even in the Scriptures we have the account of David who, after years as a believer, as a man after God's own heart, fell into the sin of adultery and took another man's wife. We have other accounts of it in Scripture, and there are plenty of modern examples. How often the Christian world is startled and shocked by some prominent pastor or Christian leader who succumbs in this area and stumbles and falls into sexual immorality. I know this can happen. But the point the apostle is making is that no professed Christian can do this repeatedly, certainly not defiantly, or shamelessly, and really be a Christian. The true Christian, if he does fall into this kind of folly, will abhor himself and loathe his sin and will repent and turn back and forsake it. The man who defends it, and who justifies and excuses this kind of activity, or even glories in it, as some do as a mark of their personal liberty or freedom is, in the light of this statement of the Apostle Paul's, not a Christian despite all his profession, and he never has been a Christian. Let me read it again.

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. {Eph 5:5 RSV}

That does not mean such cannot come into the kingdom of Christ. There is a passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that refers to sexual sins -- homosexuality, and other things that are listed there -- which goes on to say,

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. {1 Cor 6:11 RSV}

God's grace reaches out to those who are practicing these things, true, but the point the apostle is making here is that no man can profess to be a Christian and continue in these things, for if he does his practice denies his profession.

I know of a man, raised in a Christian family, graduate of an evangelical seminary, whose brother is a fine Bible-teaching pastor, who himself was a professed Christian for many years. Recently he startled his friends by renouncing his faith, abandoning his family, and going off with another woman. He confessed, after the matter had come to full investigation, that he had been sleeping with other women all during the time of his studies in seminary and during the years he was making a Christian profession. That activity proved, in the light of this statement of the apostle, that he never had been a Christian, that he had been deceiving his own heart as well as others. He remains as one example among many today of those pathetic, pitiful slaves of their own passions who have never been delivered from the bondage of Satan by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The point the apostle makes is that a Christian can have nothing to do with sexual immorality or he disproves his claim to be a Christian.

There is a fourth reason also, following immediately on this,

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons 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 [or rather, in one word, "discover" or "discern] what is pleasing to the Lord. {Eph 5:6-10 RSV}

This argument asserts that all sexual misconduct is incompatible with Christianity because a Christian no longer has any excuse for indulging in it. He is not a child of ignorance anymore; he is not caught up in the web of deceit that is spun widely across our age; he is not self-deceived or brainwashed by the subtle propaganda that is abroad. He knows the truth about sex. That is what becoming a Christian has introduced him to. Therefore it is unthinkable that he should deliberately go back from light into darkness.

Notice again how clearly the apostle draws this picture. If a man or woman is born again by faith in Jesus Christ he has, as the apostle makes clear in this letter, been translated out of the kingdom of darkness, out of the power of Satan, and brought into the kingdom of light, into the power of God. He has been removed from helpless bondage to the deceiving, alluring propaganda of the satanic lie that has kept him helpless, and he has been brought into the power of God. This is the whole Christian gospel. If that has not happened then you have not been born again, for that is what the new birth does. Now, he says, it is unthinkable that a Christian who has been delivered from darkness and brought into light should turn his back on the light and go into the darkness; it is wholly incompatible with Christian profession.

He suggests very plainly here that a Christian knows things that a non-Christian does not know. The Christian in his confrontation with society is always to remember that he knows secrets about human life that those around him who are not Christians do not know. That is why he is expected to act differently, to think differently, and to react differently than they.

Well, what are some of the things in this particular area that the Christian knows or should know?

For one, he should know that sexual misconduct will be the subject of subtle and deceitful, but very powerful, propaganda. That is why the apostle warns, "Let no man deceive you with empty words." They will certainly try!

We are being assaulted today by a tremendous barrage of propaganda, all subtly designed to make us think that the standards and evaluations of sex that the world in general holds are right, proper, true, helpful, and wholesome. We can hardly realize how powerful this propaganda is. There are whole magazines in our society today openly dedicated to making improper sex look manly and sophisticated:

The Playboy philosophy is the basic outlook of many of our young people today. I do not say this in blame, I am merely stating the fact. They are under the control, in their thinking, their attitudes, and their mentality, of a subtly devious propaganda system that presents improper sex in an attractive and alluring light that makes a powerful appeal to them.

One book, among many that might be mentioned, *Sex And The Single Girl*, assures unmarried girls that they can enjoy sex with a long line of attractive, eligible, handsome males with never a care about losing status or damaging their reputations; nothing evil is going to happen to them.

This is the current philosophy about sex that is widespread in our day. It is a reflection of the most ancient lie the world knows, the lie of the tempter in the Garden who said to Adam and Eve, "You shall not die; nothing is going to happen to you. God said you would die if you sinned, but you're not going to die, nothing will happen," {cf, Gen 3:4}. The Christian ought to know that in this area there is going to be loosed against him a specially successful and powerful barrage of propaganda. Therefore, do not let anyone deceive you with empty words.

But the Christian knows something else that the world never cares to remember, which the apostle goes on to state for us. It is particularly sexual wrong which evokes the wrath of God against the society which permits or encourages sexual misconduct. That is why he says, "for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

This term, "the wrath of God," is greatly misunderstood today. Almost invariably people think of it in terms of lightning bolts from heaven, sudden catastrophes, or a great judgment day that is coming eventually when all these things will be brought to account. Now it is not that there will not be a day of judgment, the scripture makes that clear, but that is not what is in view here. The apostle Paul declares in his letter to the Romans that the wrath of God is going on right now. In his opening chapter to the Romans he says,

For the wrath of God is now revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. {Rom 1:18 KJV}

The wrath of God is something happening now. What is it? Well, as the apostle goes on to make clear in that first chapter of Romans, it is simply God saying, "All right, if you want to have it this way, go ahead." It is God giving men up to their own passions, refusing to exercise his gracious restraint of man's evil. In other words, it is the inevitable effect of moral wrong on the individuals who indulge in it, and not only the effect upon them, but upon their children and their children's children. We live as part of a great bundle of life tied up together and what one generation does directly affects the generation that follows, and the one that follows that.

To put it as plainly as I think I can put it, the wrath of God is the animalizing of humanity, the brutalizing of our essential manliness or womanliness, and the disorientation of human personality which results.

The manifestations of it are boredom, restlessness, a sense of despair or uselessness, a sense of emptiness within, accompanied by neurotic fears and unexplainable anxieties, sudden urgings to violence or injury to others, among any other things. Man was never intended to know these things; he was never intended to live like this. It was never God's intention that we live out our days in a tempest of anxiety and neurotic reaction. These are a result of God's withdrawing, and restraint, of grace when he gives men up to their passions. In extreme forms it results in a total loss of manliness or womanliness.

As Paul makes clear in Romans 1, in the case of sexual deviants, it results in an exchange of manliness for womanliness, or womanliness for manliness. It is a result of God's giving them up, permitting them to have their way, refusing any longer to restrain the evil of man's heart, in order that man might see for himself the hideous results of human folly.

This too is why society has always sought to regulate sex, and why this present revolt against the restraints of society in this respect is the mark of a sick and dying civilization. We are being told today that sex is something private, that it is a matter which no state or institution has any right to regulate, it is a purely private matter. That again is part of the great satanic lie. God has given society the urge to regulate sex because it is society which suffers when sexual misconduct becomes widespread. Just as society regulates every other phase of its life where its best interests can be threatened, so it is right that it should regulate this. Sex is not a private matter. It never was and it cannot be. No man is an island, living unto himself. It is amazing how liberals love that philosophy when it applies to civil rights, and other things, but absolutely renounce it when it comes to the matter of sexual conduct. They say sexual matters are private and we have only ourselves to regulate. But no man can live unto himself. What each one does affects all, and, furthermore, affects the next generation, and the one after that. Humanity is one unbroken stream of life. What we do, and what we think, in private relationships is not private at all, for our influence and the attitude of our life is constantly rubbing off onto others, touching others. That is why a moral infestation, an infection like this, rapidly spreads throughout the whole fabric of human society. And that is why it is quite right that these things should be regulated, as far as regulation can be obtained, through law and ethical restraints on society.

Now, lest you think this is merely a crabbed, Christian point of view, let me share with you a quotation I ran across in a memorandum issued by the Provost of a nearby university to his students:

The sex act is the most complex and precarious and personal, despite Shaw, of all personal human relationships. Just as it is potentially the most rewarding, it can also be the most damaging. Entered into carelessly or casually it can have devastating effects on individuals involved. This is why all societies have surrounded the sexual relationship with moral codes or taboos of various kinds. These are testimony to the importance of ordering and defining the relationship in such a way as to protect both the individuals and the community of which they are a part. For young unmarried persons to enter into sexual relations not intended to culminate in marriage is, at best, to take chances with their own psychic health. One hears frequently of idealistic young people who begin sexual relationships with solemn promises not to hurt each other, with assurances of mutual respect and, often, affection. But it is very naive indeed to believe that such assurances can be counted on to protect the individuals involved from acute unhappiness. The sexual relationship needs the support, the nourishment, and the stability that marriage provides. What is involved basically in a successful sexual relationship is what is -- or should be -- involved in all human endeavors: a strong sense of decency, a regard for the personal worth and integrity of others, and an understanding of the nature of obligation. You seriously diminish your own humanity when you engage in casual and ill-considered relationships. A man's careless or carefree sexual use of a woman is simply exploitive. Correspondingly, the foolishly promiscuous woman trivializes and degrades her deepest self.

That is but a reflection of the truths and basic realities set forth here by the Apostle Paul. A Christian is to understand these truths. He knows this about sex, that it is a very sensitive, a very important area of human life, drastically affecting our entire society.

Also, the Christian knows, or should know, that he cannot identify himself with these false ideas. As the apostle says, "Do not associate with them." Now this does not mean association with people. In his letter to the Corinthians he makes that clear. He says, "I can't tell you to withdraw from contact with the adulterer and immoral person of the world, for that would mean escaping the world, going out of the world," {cf, 1 Cor 5:9-10}. When he says, "do not associate with them," he does not have people in mind, but their practices. Do not become a partaker with them in these things. That is what he is saying.

Well, someone says, "Look, if I don't go along with these practices my friends will think it's strange and I'll lose status with them."

Well, which do you prefer? Are you interested, as a Christian, in pleasing deceived, deluded, darkened and foolish people, or pleasing the Lord of light and glory? That is the essential choice the apostle sets before us. "Walk," he says, "discerning what is pleasing to the Lord, for the fruit of light is good and right and true." Don't go back on the light now that you have been called out of darkness.

His fifth and last reason why sexual looseness is incompatible with Christian faith is given in Verses 11-14:

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 makes visible is light. Therefore it is said,

**"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,
and Christ shall give you light." {Eph 5:11-14 RSV}**

Sexual looseness is incompatible with Christian faith because the Christian is directed to expose the true character of sexual evil. You cannot expose something and indulge in it at the same time. It is utterly inconsistent. The church of Jesus Christ is directed by the Holy Spirit to be a source of correct information on matters of sex. Paul says the church is, "the pillar and ground of the truth," {1 Tim 3:15 KJV}. I do not hesitate to say today that it is only the church which can teach the world the true nature of sex. As the apostle makes clear in this letter, even the serious worldling, intent in utter sincerity on trying to alleviate the problems of society, does not see clearly; he is deluded and deceived. Therefore, we cannot accept statements from the world and worldly authorities in these matters without checking them against the truth of Scripture.

But the job of the Christian is to speak up in these areas. Let him challenge these false ideas. He is to tear away the mask from these wrong concepts, and reveal the truth, God's great truth about sex.

If we needed any justification at all for a message like this, here it is: The apostle says, "Take no part in the

unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." Bring them to the light, make them visible. It does not mean to denounce them. The world is utterly unimpressed by people who go around denouncing. What the church ought to do is helpfully to show the truth about these things, tear away the lies, reveal the basic facts, and let men see that what God has intended for sex is wholesome, beautiful, wonderful, and only properly protected by the bonds of marriage. Within that area there is no limit to the enjoyment of man in the areas of sex. God has made provision amply for it.

Young people are always looking for a cause to espouse. In common with much of our society, they want to rebel against something. Well, may I suggest something? Rebel against the rebellion! That is exactly what Christians are called to. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed..." Revolt against the masquerade of truth that is so current today. Tear away the veils from these elusive phantasmata that grip men today and make them hope that they will find something beautiful and healthy and wonderful in the exploitation of sex. They will not find it at all. Help them to see that. Tear away these veils.

But wake yourself up first, that is the word here. "Therefore it is said, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead...'" Alert your minds and hearts. Realize that in the Word of God you have the facts as they are, truth as it really is. Christ will give you light. Then tell somebody about it. Blazon it abroad. Talk about sex. Capitalize on the universal interest in this subject today -- it is perfectly proper. Help people to see that this is part of God's great yearning heart of redemptive love which is ever seeking to draw men away from that which destroys and ruins and blasts and creates unhappiness and misery, back into wholeness and fullness and joyfulness and the living of life as God intended man to live. Expose these things. "Anything that makes visible is light." Anything that tears away the false, the masquerade, and exposes the facts, is light. There is nothing wrong with that. Paul calls us therefore to crusade positively against sexual lies and to talk about these things.

Notice how he puts it in his letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 2:14 he says,

Do all things without grumbling or complaining, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish ... {Phil 2:14-15a RSV}

"Oh," you say, "in order to do that we must go into a monastery somewhere or get away in a Christian conference ground, that's the only safe place." No, no, look at it!

... children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, {Phil 2:15b RSV}

Or as the Amplified Version puts it, "in the midst of a generation of crooks and perverts."

What a cause! What a call! What a challenge!

Can you not hear the sound of the trumpet in that? I am rapidly moving beyond that period of time known as youth, but I feel in my veins this call to young blood to respond to a cause that demands everything of a man or a woman, a boy or a girl.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for this truth, so factually, so plainly, so bluntly put to us. What a joy it is to realize that every time we come to this Word this is what we experience, the blunt truth, the revelation of things as they are, the facts about life. Help us then to have the grace to believe, because it comes from One who loved us and who gave himself for us, who has withheld nothing from us. May we therefore walk as this verse suggests we walk, shining as lights in a dark place. We thank you for the privilege of it in this, our day or darkness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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