

December 30, 2012

Colossians 4:2 / Philippians 4:4-7 / Ephesians 5:3
Holiness Defined (#5): Sexually Chaste, Pure and Content

Today Paul gives us three more aspects or elements of holiness. And I have to say each one is an aspect where Christians in our culture seem to struggle the most / or fall the furthest short of approaching God's righteous standard of holiness. They are the areas of being sexual chaste / pure (both sexually and otherwise) / and content with what we have.

And since there's a lot of ground to cover in regard to each one, I want to jump right in and see what these verses have to teach us about holiness.

And as I do, the **FIRST** thing I need to stress that the overarching aspect of holiness spoken of in today's verses is PURITY. Purity of heart, purity of mind, purity of motive, purity of speech, purity of desire and purity of action.

It's all about the need for all God's holy people (or as Paul puts it, "all the saints") to be a bit more saintly. To BE different and LIVE differently than those in the unbelieving culture all around us. And not just in some small, barely noticeable, slightly lower percentage way (as I mentioned a few weeks back when I shared how the latest statistics revealed that evangelicals lag behind unbelievers by only a few percentage points when it comes to divorce, stealing supplies from work, premarital intercourse, and so forth.

That's NOT how it should be! We are to be different in ways that are very significant or noticeable, and not in barely measurable ways.

For instance: I once spoke with a church-going lady in Massachusetts about what it means to be holy. And as the conversation progressed, and I pointed out that "holiness" meant seeking to avoid everything that is sinful or dishonoring to God. And her response -- and I believe she was alluding to Phil. 4:5 where Paul says, "**Let your moderation be known to all men**" -- was: "**We must practice moderation in ALL things, including sin.**"

In other words, it's ok to sin, you just try NOT to sin a lot or do the really bad things! You avoid going to extremes in your sinning. / You look at people around you and you simply try to sin a little less than they do.

And although that concept may sound a bit humorous to us (I hope) -- if recent statistics regarding Christians are accurate, her viewpoint seems to have won the day. Because when you consider that Christians lag behind unbelievers by only a few percentage points in nearly every category, it does seem to suggest that as a whole the current objective in the Church in America is NOT to seek to avoid all sin entirely, but simply make sure that we sin a little less than the unbelieving culture all around us.

Yet as Paul makes clear here in these verses, simply seeking to sin less, or making sure we only "sin in moderation"-- is NOT the Christian ideal! For in reference to all these things he says: ***"Among you there must not even be a hint of such things."***

Or as it can more literally be rendered: ***"Do not even let them be mentioned among you."*** ***"Let them not be once named among you,"*** says the KJV, ***"as becometh saints."*** Stay as far away from ALL of them as you possibly can, says Paul, because all of them, "are improper for God's holy people." They are ALL equally contrary to holiness.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing that needs to be said: That in our culture, whether we like it or not, falling to sin in the first area Paul mentions (the area of sexual immorality) tends to be seen as worse (often far worse) than all the others, even though Paul himself makes no such distinction in this text.

And I say that because in our culture a Christian can be "greedy" (that is, never satisfied with what they have and always striving to get more) and it has little, if any, ill-effect on their Christian testimony. In fact, in a society fueled by capitalism, greed is often seen as a necessary to keeping the economy going, and sometimes is even encouraged and applauded!

Likewise, a Christian can engage in "foolish talk" (that is, useless, irrelevant or benefit no-one type talk) and most wouldn't even consider it to be sin at all!

They can even tell the occasional "coarse joke" and not suffer a terribly tarnished reputation (although "obscenities," for the most part, are still generally seen as being unacceptable).

Yet if you mess up in this area of sexual immorality, your entire testimony as a Christian can often be called into question as being invalid.

In fact, I just sent some of you an article about Tim Tebow, who is 25, gets a lot of media coverage, and made the mistake of saying he was still a virgin. And I can pretty much guarantee you reporters are trying to dig up anything they can(!) / and would call into question his entire Christian testimony as being fraudulent or fake / if they were to discover that he fell just once to sexual temptation -- unfair as that would be.

He could seek an excessive multi-million dollar contract (which would be greed), or engage in empty foolish talk, and even slip with an obscenity, and it would have little overall effect on his testimony.

But if he fell just once to sexual temptation, he'd be labeled a fraud and never completely recover from it -- even though Paul's point in this passage is that all these things are equally unacceptable, equally sin, equally contrary to holiness, and ALL to be avoided entirely -- not just sexual immorality.

And please hear me well: I'm NOT saying sexual sin isn't serious, or that it isn't grievous to God. It is, and we should always affirm that it is, despite the fact that our culture says otherwise. Yet so is, **"ANY kind of impurity,"** and every form of "greed, " and any "obscene thought, gesture or word," and all "foolish talk," or all "coarse joking."

Among us, says Paul, there must not even be a hint of ANY of those things! For they are ALL equally inappropriate for God's holy people -- not just, "sexual immorality." We must avoid all of them completely, not just immoral sex.

That wasn't the case with "anger," as we saw in vv. 26-27. There Paul's admonition was to express it righteously, appropriately and constructively -- not destructively or sinfully -- for it IS possible, as Jesus Himself showed us, to have "righteous anger." But not so with any of the things Paul speaks of today.

They are always wrong -- even the slightest bit -- and must be rejected as such. For unlike "righteous anger," there is no such thing as "righteous sexual

immorality" / or "righteous impurity" / or "righteous greed" / or "holy obscenities." / No such thing as "righteous coarse joking" and "foolish talk."
They ALL dishonor Him.

Now, **THIRDLY**, we can start looking at the three things Paul lists, starting with the first: Sexual immorality. **"Among you,"** says Paul, ***"there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality..."***

The Greek word there is, "pornea." And as you can surely hear from the sound of the word, it's the word from which we get our modern English words, "porn" and "pornography." It's also the word which older versions (like the KJV) translated: "fornication."

"Pornea" comes from a root word which means "to sell," and thus originally referred to, "the selling of sexual favors" or "prostitution" -- both male and female prostitution. It was also used in reference to "homosexuality" or any "extramarital relationship," including adultery, premarital sex and even incest.

In essence, it refers to any inappropriate or deviant sexual behavior, which is why Hoehner can summarize his analysis of the word by saying: ***"It is a broad term best translated sexual immorality, and should not be any part of the lifestyle of the believer."***

And here, it barely needs to be stated that our modern day society is saturated in "pornea" in all its various forms. Pornography, prostitution, pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexuality, incest, rape and molestation. / In fact, you can barely go a week without hearing or reading that, "so-and-so hooked up with so-and-so" / or "so-and-so cheated on so and so" / or "so-and-so found their spouse in bed with so and so."

Such news is getting to be so common in our society that it barely elicits a lifted eyebrow. It's become, the new normal.

88% of unbelieving unmarried singles (age 18 to 29), we are told, engage in sexual intercourse before marriage, while evangelicals of the same age group are only slightly behind at a bit over 80%. And that's not all. We are also told that 23% of all pastors have fallen in this area / and other studies indicate that 65-70% of all husbands cheat on their wives at least once in their married life

(and the wives aren't far behind at about 50-52%) -- causing some sociologists to suggest we are "polygamous by nature" (though the Bible would say it's because we're "sinful by nature")!

And it isn't hard to understand why sexual immorality is so prevalent, when every facet and sector of society (except the church) encourages or endorses it. Newspapers, magazines, art, entertainment, advertizing, the internet, music, fashion, movies -- you name it -- it's everywhere. In fact, you can't even get through the check-out line at the grocery store without having to see it or read about it. Because everyone knows that "sex sells."

Thus, in addition to the cover photo you also see (on nearly every magazine) article titles like: "Hot new sex survey, all the latest moves" / "125 new sex tips" / "How to score on your first date" / "Turn him on" (and it doesn't mean your spouse) / or "What men and women like best in bed," and on and on ad nauseum. (And not just Cosmopolitan Magazine, which usually has the cover covered, since it's now little more than a sex manual).

And that constant bombardment of both mild or moderate porn from every sector of our society, is taking its toll on the minds and hearts of young people. Because even young kids who are not yet teens, and everyone else above that, struggles (in such an environment) not to measure their worth as people by those standards: How sexy they are / how many people they can seduce / or how good they are in bed.

LISTEN: *People around us are dying every day and entering a Christless eternity, and our culture has convinced us that what we should really be concerned about, is how sexy or sexually-fulfilled we are. Can't you just see the apostle Paul being concerned about such things? Can't you just see him, grabbing the latest edition of Cosmopolitan Magazine, like an insecure little child, hoping to become more sexy and desirable?*

No. Paul had far more important things filling his mind. And it wasn't because that stuff wasn't there. In fact, that's what we must remember! That other than the constant visual stimulation we have today, things weren't much different in Paul's day. In fact, in some ways they were worse!

If you don't think so, or think that people of Paul's day were more sexually chaste, then you haven't read history. For if you had you'd know that Greco-Roman society was highly sensual, highly promiscuous and highly immoral.

You'd know that fourteen of the first 15 Roman emperors were homosexual, and know that nearly every married man in that society had a mistress on the side. You would know that the Greek philosopher, Demosthenes, wrote: "**We (that is, we Greek husbands) keep mistresses for pleasure; we keep prostitutes for our day-to-day needs of the body; and we keep wives to bear our legitimate children, and be the faithful guardians of our homes.**"

And we do need to remember that, because otherwise we'll mistakenly think that our culture's obsession with sex is something new. It's not! Paul was faced with a similar environment in his day. Because in the society of his day, there was, as Barclay notes, "**no discredit whatsoever in sexual relationships outside marriage.... Greeks regarded it as a matter of course for a husband to have sexual relationships outside marriage.**"

Greek culture was hedonistic, and nowhere was that more pronounced than in Corinth. For there stood the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which employed 1000 priestesses whose only job during the day was to have sexual relations with all the males who came to the temple, as part of their worship. And then at night, as Barclay again notes, "**come down to the city streets in the evening and ply their trade..., until it became a proverb that not every man could afford a journey to Corinth.**"

So, I dare say that we in America have not yet REGRESSED to the horrid depths of sexual immorality that was prevalent in Paul's day, though we're heading in that direction at a breakneck speed. Which makes Paul's command not only all the more important to strive for, but at the same time, all the more difficult to attain.

Because it's hard to swim against the over-whelming tide of a society steeped in sexual immorality -- and we are. In fact, you can't really get away from it entirely and still live in the U.S., unless you get rid of all electronic devices, put blinders on your eyes or move to the wilderness.

Yet it does help to know that our early Christians forefathers and mothers not only lived in a society more hedonistic than ours, but as a whole, were apparently able to approach to some degree the ideal laid before them! For as we read in an anonymous letter written to **Diognetus** around 160 A.D. (a tutor to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius) the early Christians were described this way: ***"They marry and have children, just like everyone else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present "in the flesh," but they do not live, "according to the flesh." They pass their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven... They love everyone, but are persecuted by all."***

Barclay summarizes it well when he states: ***"When Paul set this stress on [sexual] purity, he was erecting a standard which the ordinary heathen had never dreamed of. That is why he pleads with them so earnestly, and lays down his laws of purity with such stringency. We must remember what kind of society these Christian converts had come out of... what kind of society encompassed them. There is nothing in all history like the moral miracle which Christianity wrought."***

So, let me summarize those 'stringent laws of sexual purity': Among us, says Paul, there must not be even a hint of pornia. That is, no premarital sex, no adultery, no offering your body sexually in return for any payment -- be it money, a fancy date, a vacation getaway, or some valuable gift -- which would be "prostitution." No homosexuality, no incest, no pornography, no friends with benefits, nor any form of extramarital sex.

If you are single and having sex, or married and having sex with someone other than your spouse, you are sinning. It's that simple. It's that black and white. Sex outside the marriage relationship is to be avoided completely, since "pornia" is, as Paul says, "improper for God's holy people."

Then, **FOURTH**, Paul wants us to see that among us there must not be even a hint of "ANY kind of impurity" -- a phrase which refers to any defilement of the soul or pollution of one's character or personality.

The word "*akatharsia*" (impurity) comes from a word that describes the uncleanness, impurity, or foulness of an infected wound. A wound festering with puss.

In the moral sense it surely includes sexual impurity, but the words "any kind of impurity," shows that it goes far beyond that, to include things like: Impurity of motive, greed, dishonesty, pretending, misleading, cheating, lying, backbiting, betrayal, making evil plans, plotting someone's demise, seeking dishonest gain, sedition, rebellion, dishonoring your parents, not keeping your word, pledge or promise, gossip, slander, harboring bitterness, rage and unforgiveness, underhandedness, entertaining vengeful thoughts, hate, indifference, relishing sinful feelings or affections, contemplating theft, and so forth and so on ad infinitum.

And how does one counter such impurity? In II Cor. 10:5 he tells us that one of the ways we "**demolish strongholds**" (that is, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs or thought patterns that encourage us to do wrong) is by, "taking every thought captive and making it obedient to Christ."

It's by refusing to "**conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds**" (Rom. 12:3). The battle for purity, says Paul, is a battle fought in the mind! Whatever triumphs there, determines the purity or filthiness of your soul, character, or personality. What you dwell on, forms who you are and what you will become.

That's why Paul can say in Phil. 4:6-9: "**Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice, and the God of peace will be with you.**"

Thus we see once again that the battle for purity is the battle for what one's mind dwells on or thinks about. The battle is won there or lost there. It's not in your heart. We are to "**guard our hearts, since they are the well-spring of life.**" But the way we guard them is by guarding what we allow the mind to think about or dwell on. So when temptations come, make sure that your mind is focused on Jesus.

In fact, if you're focused on Him before they come, the outcome of the battle when they do come, will be easier to predict -- because it's hard to sin when you're mind is focused on Jesus.

Which brings us to the **LAST** aspect of holiness: The absence of greed, or the presence of contentment. And as I already stated, this is an easy one to fall into, because our society often sees it as a necessary evil to keep the economy going, and thus encourages it and often endorses it, always implying (and especially through commercials) that what you have is not enough, and what you need is more of what they are selling.

Yet Paul says that, "***Among us as Christians there must not be even a hint of greed.***" And the word "greed" here can also be translated "covetousness." It's that state of mind or heart that is forbidden in the 10th Commandment.

It means the opposite of moderation is the essence of selfishness. It's the state of being whereby a person always wants, or feels they need, and desires to have what THEY don't have or OTHERS do have. It's the inability to be CONTENT with what one has or what God has supplied.

And Paul elsewhere calls it idolatry, because it is fueled by the underlying belief that having that thing, or having something other than God, will make one happy. It is to bow at the altar of materialism, convinced that God is not enough, and that earthly possessions -- or the pleasures that earthly things bring -- are better able to satisfy us.

And though it does fuel the economy, it also fuels the desire to steal, lie and cheat. It's the source of much crime and violence / spawns distrust / creates heartache / fuels impure thinking / makes people discontent with God / makes them jealous of others and what they have / and is the soil from which all forms of selfishness and evil blossom and flourish in all of their horrid ugliness.

That's why Paul says, "***Among you there is not even to be a hint...of greed.***" Because even the slightest hint pollutes the soul / distorts one's motives / twists and warps the fairest of intentions / fuels disunity / and makes even generous people question the purpose of their generosity.

That's why Paul says, "**Among you there must not even be a hint... of greed.**" For in reality, there are no good effects of greed. And I say that despite the fact that it may spur the American economy, and fuel a bull market. (It was actually such greed during the roaring 20's that caused the great depression, led in many ways to the outbreak of WWII, and has even played a significant in our current economic woes.)

So how does one overcome it? Only by the grace of God! Paul tells us that in the commonly quoted verse, "**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**"

That familiar verse was actually spoken in reference to this very thing. For in the preceding verse Paul says, "**I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want.**"

And what was that secret? "**I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.**"

In other words, to be content (the opposite of greed and selfishness) is so difficult to obtain, that it requires divine help or the assistance and mighty strength of Christ.

Greed is such a powerful influence in the human heart, that we will not beat it apart from the strength and help given to us by Jesus Christ.
It's that powerful!