

January 6, 2012
 Colossians 3:5-10 / Colossians 3:15-17 / Ephesians 5:4
 Holiness (#6) - Respectful, Clean-Mouthed and Thankful

As I pointed out last week, the over-riding aspect of holiness stressed by Paul in verses 3-4 is PURITY. Purity in the sense of not being stained morally by any participation in sexually immoral behaviors (or "pornia"). Purity in the sense of refusing to think about or contemplate anything that pollutes our motives, contaminates our hearts, or warps our thinking. Purity in the sense of avoiding the pollution of soul that comes through greed or what we would call the idolatry of selfishness.

That was last week. And what we're going to be looking at today, is the need to avoid the impurity (or soul-polluting effects) that come through our speech. That come through the words we speak, the things we say, the topics we talk about, and even our non-verbal forms of communication, since the first area -- obscenities -- involves communication that is often non-verbal in nature. Many obscenities are acted out rather than spoken.

And here, before I begin, I also need to repeat what Paul said in relation to sexual immorality, impurity and greed, because the same exact thought continues in relation to today's verse: **"Among you there must not be even a hint..."** of such things. People will slip up in all these areas. That goes without saying. Yet our aim as "saints" or "God's holy people" (as the NIV puts it) should be to avoid them as much as is humanly possible with the strength Christ gives.

So, let's look at the next three things Paul forbids, followed by the one thing that we can use to combat them all -- the giving of verbal thanks. And as we do, let's begin **FIRST** with "obscenity."

"But among you," as Paul says in v. 3 -- and it does carry over here to verse 4 -- **"there must not be even a hint... of obscenity."** / Or as we could translate v. 4: **"And there should be no obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are out of place (or inappropriate), but rather, thanksgiving."** So, what are these "obscenities" which must not be found among us?

Honestly, it's hard to give definitive specifics. Because this Greek word never occurs in either the Greek translation of the Old Testament, or anywhere else in the New Testament. This is the only place in the entire Bible where we find this word used – and Paul doesn't expanded on it.

So, what's its generally accepted meaning? Outside the Bible it was used to mean: "ugliness or deformity" and in the classical era it simply referred to things that were, "shameful, base or dishonoring."

And that's probably why Paul uses it here. Because it can refer to such a wide range of things – to anything that is crude, distasteful, obscene or disgusting. And it can refer to words or a topic of conversation or the lyrics of a song and even actions that are shameful, disgusting, dishonoring or disgraceful.

Actions such as the use of the middle finger, or crudely pretending to act out sexual acts (in which case it could also include some forms of modern dance that do the same).

Obscenities, then, are words, actions or topics of conversation that are meant to shock, be distasteful, rude, vile or disgusting. Even the dictionary defines it that way, telling us the word obscenity means: "Filthy, repulsive, and obscene." It refers to something impure in language or action. It is indecent and offensive to chastity, decency or delicacy."

It characterizes the language or actions of a vulgar, lewd, offensive, foul-mouthed person. And in that sense, it is out of place for a Christian, because it gives evidence to all that a person has a filthy mind, wants people to know it, and enjoys shocking the sensibilities of most all decent people – and all those things are very unchristian in nature.

That's why Paul says: "***But among you there must not be even a hint... of obscenity...***" or, "***There should be no obscenity...***" For such things have no place among people called by God to be holy. In fact, it's hard to distance yourself any further from holiness than one does when they act in an obscene way, or when they use obscenities.

To be holy means to be: pure / sanctified / upright / saintly / loving / blameless / righteous / kind / considerate / and respectful. / It means loving the Lord and seeking to honor Him in everything.

While to be obscene means being: Foul / disgusting / gross / filthy / lewd / loathsome / vile / dirty-minded / and disrespectful -- just the opposite of everything Jesus was and is and wants us to be.

And as Paul will go on to share in verses 5-7: People who engage in such things not only show they have no inheritance in the KOG, but can potentially expose themselves to the wrath of God against such things -- which is why Paul warns all believers against "partnering" with such people in their lewd, disgusting and immoral words, actions and practices.

Then **SECONDLY**, Paul tells us, "Among you there should be no... foolish talk." This term, as Hoehner points out, is even rarer than the last, and essentially means "***silly or senseless talk.***" It refers to talk that is empty, futile, and concerns nothing important or is useless, contentless, babble.

This is one of those things about being a Christian that you must truly be a Christian to understand. That the faith deals with very important things. Serious stuff. It deals with the ultimate issues of life, suffering, death and eternity.

It has to do with justice and righteousness and living for others. It has to do with caring for the poor, the abused and underprivileged. It has to do with God's eternal plan for the ages and making a difference in this world. The salvation of the lost, and how we can reach people with the Gospel. It has to do with heaven and hell, and sin and wrath, and judgment and redemption and joy and deliverance and liberation! It has to do with all the ultimate things of life and eternity!

And because it deals with such ultimate things, we are called (as Paul will point out in verse 16) to, "Make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." In other words, we are not to waste the precious little time we have on earth talking about empty / inane / senseless / silly / trivial / contentless / useless / and insignificant little things.

And Paul isn't saying that that we must always be serious, never laugh or refuse to talk about anything other than spiritual things. For there is, as the Bible makes clear, "a time for every purpose under heaven."

But Paul is most definitely saying that OVERALL -- given the immensity of the task we have at hand / and the IMPORTANCE of the things God calls to do (like taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth and discipling our neighbors as well as the nations) -- the focus of our conversation should NOT be wasted on things that have no bearing whatsoever on eternity.

People who take the faith more seriously, do tend to be a bit more serious. And that's reflected in the things they choose to talk about. For instance: They don't care how big Jennifer Anniston's engagement ring was / or what celebrity committed a fashion faux pas by stepping out on their day off in clothes that didn't match / or where the Royal couple went on vacation / or who Justin Beiber is now dating / who wore what to the Emmy's / or who struggles with cellulite (as the tabloids seem obsessed with)! I mean I see such things and I'm tempted to say, "Get a life."

I mean, who buys those magazines? Somebody has to or they'd be out of business. And that's the saddest part. It's not the fact that you get assaulted by such ridiculously inane stuff every time you go to the store, it's that you realize when you see them that there are people who actually buy such magazines, and not only waste the time to read them, but even talk to others about what's in them!

That's what Paul is talking about -- senseless, useless, foolish talk about stuff that SHOULD mean NOTHING to ANYONE! And we could add to that list all the conversation that revolves around such senseless shows as: The Bachelor / Bridezillas / Jersey Shore / The world according to Paris / Honey Boo Boo / Survivor / Keeping up with the Kardashians / World Wrestling Federation / Cage Fighting / and so forth and so on (most of which made it to the Chicago Tribune's "Worst TV Shows Ever" list).

So what's Paul's point? When empty, senseless and foolish stuff like that is the main focus of a person's thoughts, and thus their conversation, it not only distracts them from focusing on what really matters in life, but it also (as Georg Bertram points out): ***"is dangerous to salvation."***

What comes out our mouths reveals what our minds have been focused on. And if that is the kind of stuff your mind has been focused on, it's been focused on things that have nothing to do with anything important, or anything godly, or anything that matters, or anything that even faintly concerns the Kingdom of God, or the Church Christ loves and for which He laid down His life, or the people He calls us to love.

Thinking about foolish things, leads to talking about foolish things, and talking about foolish things leads to wasting precious time. That's why Paul can say in verse 16: ***"Be very careful how you live -- not as unwise (that is, not as foolish) but as wise -- making the most of every opportunity."*** It's a matter of stewardship. Wise people make every moment count for something.

The **THIRD**, Paul says, ***"Let there be no... coarse joking or "jesting" as the older versions put it. And I must add here -- because many have taken this as a blanket prohibition of all joking in Christian circles -- that Paul is not prohibiting all jokes or playful jesting. In years past, the previous admonition to avoid all foolish talk, combined with this one, led to the belief that all Christians (especially the more holy ones) must always be serious.***

That's not true. *"Eutrapelia"* (the word used here) refers to "sarcastic ridicule or offensive jesting that makes fun of people." "In the context," says **Hoehner**, ***"it indicates jesting that has gone too far, thus becoming sarcastic ridicule that cuts people down and embarrasses others who are present. It is humor in bad taste. Believers should build up, and not tear down, even in humor."***

And when you add the fact that the preceding section deals with "sexual immorality" and "obscenities," it becomes clear that it also prohibits the telling of "dirty jokes" or "obscene jokes" -- jokes aimed at making sexual love (which God created to be a pure and sacred and beautiful expression of marital love) into something crude, vulgar or raunchy.

The Bible, then, DOES NOT forbid all jokes. But Paul does make it clear that there is no place for jokes that ridicule, belittle or embarrass others. Jokes that tear people down or get a laugh at the expense of another person or race of people. Dirty jokes, obscene jokes, or jokes told in anger or bad taste.

In fact, one of the wisest bits of advice I ever got from a preaching professor (when it comes to telling jokes from the pulpit) is that the preacher himself should be the brunt of the jokes he tells. The best jokes, he said, are those where the one telling the joke is the brunt of his own humor (though I suppose that just getting you to laugh at any of my jokes would be a good place to start)!

Then **LAST**, Paul switches gears and instead of giving us another prohibited thing, gives us the remedy for everything previously mentioned in this verse: THANSGIVING. And what I'd like to do in bringing things to a close is give you 10 quick things that verbal gratitude does for us. For it is true (as the old saying goes), "*Thankfulness is next to godliness.*" Not cleanliness. For if cleanliness was necessary for godliness, then Jesus (who walked the dusty roads of Palestine for days without showering) would have been very ungodly! But thankfulness, since it positively impacts nearly every area of our lives, does lead to godliness.

How? 1st) In the mystery of God's grace, the habit of giving of thanks to Him (and it means on a continual basis) is necessary to replacing the habit of verbal sinning. And by "thanksgiving" Paul means verbal thanksgiving or thanks said out loud! The verbal sins he mentions in the first half of the verse must be countered by the verbal virtue of giving thanks. Sins of the tongue must be replaced by the godly use of the tongue. Vocal sins require a vocal remedy.

Paul's wise remedy is not to simply ask people to stop verbal sinning, but to replace verbal sinning with the verbal giving of thanks. Jesus Himself told us that a soul cleansed of demons must not remain empty, otherwise when the demons return and find the "house" empty they will enter in even greater numbers. Because the human soul cannot tolerate a vacuum.

Simply trying to stop sinning is not the answer! An old bad habit must be replaced by a new good one! That's the way one remedies the problem. For it is indeed hard, to be thanking God for someone or something and then turn

around and speak or act obscenely regarding it, sarcastically belittle it, or publically ridicule it.

2nd) Verbally thanking God keeps us continually aware of the presence, the provision and the kindness of God. At all times -- but especially in the most difficult of times -- we must be mindful to give thanks. For to do so makes us more sensitive to the reality of God, His presence in our lives and the kindnesses He's shown us through all He's given us in Christ (and will continue to give us in Him in the future).

3rd) Verbally giving thanks reminds us that God has a higher purpose behind all the circumstances and situations He ordains for our lives. As Charles Stanley rightly points out: ***"Knowing that the Lord allows hurt and trouble for His good purposes, takes the edge off the pain... Even if we don't understand why we're suffering, we can thank God, because we know that in His time He'll work it all for good. He's using every hardship to transform us into the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29)."***

4th) Giving thanks helps us gain a clearer perspective by focusing us upon God, thus making us more able to submit to His will in all things. Even Jesus Himself struggled to do the Father's will in the Garden, until He paused in prayer, and was able to regain a correct perspective. It didn't make His physical sufferings any less painful, but it did bring about His complete submission and His humble acceptance of the Father's will.

And that's what thanksgiving does -- especially when it's offered audibly to God in prayer. It's one of those things that God uses to bring us that clearer perspective and make possible our humble acceptance of divinely ordained, but difficult situations.

5th) Giving thanks to God destroys our pride, softens a rebellious heart, and reminds us of our continual indebtedness to Him, and dependence upon Him. I can't at the same time be proud & give heartfelt thanks to God. Nor can I be independently trusting in my own self-adequacy and offering grateful praise to Him.

Because what is gratitude except an acknowledgement of my dependence on Him and a way of voicing (for all to hear) the fact of my habitual indebtedness to Him for His grace.

6th) Thanking God is a way of honoring Him and affirming the wisdom with which He sovereignly ordains all the events of our lives. When we criticize or complain, it's as though we are telling God that we could run the universe better than He does, or that He, as God, is being unwise, messing up and mismanaging things.

Yet by giving thanks we do just the opposite. We acknowledge that His knowledge of things is far greater than ours could ever be, that His wisdom is infinite, and that His oversight of all creation (including my life) is perfect.

7th) Thanksgiving is one of the key ingredients to experiencing joy and gaining victory over depression. ***"It is the peculiar wisdom of a Christian,"*** said Richard Sibbes, ***"to find things in even his worst condition to make him thankful; and if he be thankful, he will be joyful; and so long as he is joyful, he will be happy and not miserable."***

8th) Nothing works better for focusing our attention on God rather than our circumstances than the giving of thanks.

9th) The giving of thanks energizes us as few other things can. When one is despairing under the weight of an extended trial, and all looks hopeless, seeking to give thanks can revitalize hope, and give us renewed strength to go on.

Last) The giving of audible thanks to God can transform anxiety and worry into a peace that passes all understanding. Phil. 4:6-7 says: ***"Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition -- WITH THANKSGIVING -- present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*** When you are anxious, pray -- and while you're praying offer your thanks to God -- and peace will replace anxiety.

And it is essential to remember that we must always seek God's grace and strength to do any of these things. We must never seek to pursue holiness on

our own -- for it would only lead to utter failure and disaster! It would only lead to worse sinning / or that horrid "holier-than-thou" finger pointing.

The old adage, "Let go and let God," though it's often been both misused and over-used, is still true: Certain things will never take place in our lives until we learn the spiritual art of giving up our vain efforts to make them happen, confessing our inadequacy and human inability and asking God to do them in and through us.

Not with everything, obviously. But with certain things we must indeed, "Let go and let God." For victory will come only as we stop trying to do them in our own horribly inadequate strength, turn in our exhaustion to the God who is able, and depend on Him to bring it about.

And that's especially true regarding sins of the heart and mind, and not so much those that involve our actions. One may stop stealing long before they ever gain victory over the desire or compulsion to steal. One may stop sleeping-around long before they ever conquer their battle with lust.

One may stop eating certain foods yet still crave them / or restrict buying things they don't need ***long before*** they ever win out over the greed that drives them to feel they need things they don't really need.

And it's in regard to those inner, intense, unrelenting, unable-to-conquer compulsions, desires and passions that we need to learn the powerful and grace-filled spiritual art of: "*Letting go and letting God.*"

We are to pursue holiness. But only in the strength He provides, and with a constant dependence upon His grace for every victory or every shred of progress.