

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND ETHICS OF SEX No. 5, 7/15/07

“Sexual Sin and its Antidote”

We mentioned last time that one brutal consequence of the Fall, and one highlighted in the Genesis narrative itself, is that the sexual life of mankind – intended to be an instrument of love and fruitfulness – became a source of shame. Sins of every kind began to circle around this central dimension of human life and misery and woe ensued for man and woman alike.

The Bible has a great deal to say about sexual sin. It is brutally honest about the amount of it that there is in our world. It does not surprise us that the Bible’s most elaborate illustration of a Christian falling into grave sin concerns a sexual sin (David and Bathsheba) or that one of its most arresting and inspiring portraits of a believing man surmounting temptation is Joseph resisting the sexual blandishments of Potiphar’s wife. Sexual sin from the beginning has been the bane of the world and, more to our interest in this class, the bane of the church as well.

It will not surprise you to hear me say that over the 29 years and more that I have pastored this church we have over and over again faced this cruel fact: that believers in Christ stumble sexually and in ways that prove particularly shameful and harmful. There is a reason, after all, why the term “immorality” has come in our English usage to refer specifically to sexual sin, even though the term itself on its face should refer to any and every violation of God’s law. And there is a reason why the Lord himself, in his Word, should choose *this* sin, sexual sin – promiscuity and adultery – as his preferred analogy for spiritual betrayal. We considered such a use of that analogy in Ezekiel 16 last Lord’s Day evening. There is a peculiar power in this metaphor of the spiritual life. We *know* what sexual sin is like, we know the power of its temptations, we know the misery that eventuates from it, we know how shameful it all is, how disgusting, impure, and unworthy. We know how it dehumanizes and enfeebles. We know how hard it is to overcome its grip or to escape its consequences and we know how this sin is the betrayal of everything good and right in human life. We are all too well aware of the terrible power of the sexual drives and, therefore, of sexual temptations. Far more immediate and demanding than the love of money or ease or reputation, it is not for nothing that sinful sexual desire is often likened to an addiction. One knows how destructive the practice can be, how much he is likely to lose if discovered, and yet he does it anyway. Sexual sin is thus the perfect demonstration of the sinfulness of sin! And so, for a generation now, we have watched as politicians, entertainers, sports figures, and, alas, Christian ministers have been publicly disgraced and their lives left in tatters around their feet as a result of sexual escapades that at least most of them were ashamed of themselves. And, fact is, there is nothing new in this: the taint of sexual scandal has attached itself to George Washington, whether or not true, Thomas Jefferson, certainly true, just as well as to JFK and Bill Clinton.

What is more, long before the love of money begins to intrude on the heart, fascination with things sexual has taken root there. From puberty, the fixation on sex, especially in boys, is a brutal fact of life. It is this fact that led James Dobson, in his original film

series, *Focus on the Family*, (which I remember we showed on Sunday afternoons before the evening service many years ago – when it still required a sixteen millimeter film projector –) to downplay the significance of adolescent masturbation. His remark, as I remember it, was that every young person did it, it was inevitable given the awakening and immediately powerful sexual drives unleashed by puberty, it did no great harm, and so parents needn't be overly concerned.

Let me say here that I disagree with that assessment and for a variety of reasons.

1. Masturbation, except by the married with a view to their spouses – or, perhaps by the engaged with respect to their intendeds – must, in the nature of the case involve the very sin of heart lust that Jesus explicitly condemns in the Sermon on the Mount. It is promiscuity or adultery in the heart. It is the picture on the screen of the imagination that is the invariable instrument and accompaniment of the act that makes it sinful. We should *never* tell our young people that they should not be concerned about sinning against God! Even less that heart sins are not serious.
2. What is more, there is a pattern of sexual thought and sexual desire fueled by masturbation of that kind that is corrupt and evil and has decidedly sinister consequences when carried into adult life. The objectification of women and the consideration of them solely in terms of one's own physical desires is a large part of the sinfulness of sexual sin – the interest in one's pleasure without regard to the heart and the welfare of the other human being – and yet it is that very abuse of another human being that, in the nature of the case, is involved in the heart – the wellspring of life – in adolescent masturbation.
3. The fact is, it is here that young men especially, first learn how damnably difficult it will be to live the Christian life. It is here they first confront the terrible power of sin in their own heart, its grip, its unreasonable and unreasoning demands, and their own fecklessness in the face of those demands. The last thing a young man needs to hear is that he needn't fight the good fight, needn't play the man, needn't cut off his right arm or gouge out his right eye in order to practice purity before God and to master his thoughts for Jesus' sake. The young man who gets used to surrendering to what he knows very well are impure thoughts and deeds is going to be a young man who will either find it easy to continue to do so when he is older or will find it much harder to change his habits when he realizes he must. In other areas of Christian duty we fully understand that the young man is to be learning how to live a righteous life come wind, come weather. Disciplines learned early become the foundation of godliness in young manhood and adulthood. Why in the world would we excuse him from the effort *here, of all places, in a struggle that will continue to dominate his sanctification for years to come?*
4. Fourth, and finally, sexual sins committed in one's youth can have lasting, life-long consequences. Therefore, the principle of resistance needs to be instilled at once. Rutherford, of whom more later, wrote of "the old ashes of the sins of my youth – the hot, fiery lusts and passions of youth." He would write to one young man, "There is not such a glassy, icy, and slippery piece of way betwixt you and

heaven as Youth.” This makes it necessary to begin practicing Christian virtue and purity as soon as the temptations make it necessary.

These considerations weigh with me all the more because the Scripture itself bears witness to the particularly egregious and harmful nature of sexual sin. The text is 1 Cor. 6:18-20. Paul is in the midst of repudiating a slogan that antinomians in the Corinthian church had apparently coined: “Everything is permissible.” They were, apparently, taking a perfectly correct insight – probably one they had learned from Paul himself – viz. that the kingdom of God is not a matter of rules and regulations but of love and faith (a point Paul had had to make in response to Judaizing elements in the Gentile churches) extending that principle to justify actual violations of God’s law. Sexual immorality was rife in the church as the Paul’s first letter makes clear. It is in this context that Paul writes:

“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.”

What does Paul mean by distinguishing sexual sin from other sins in this way? He obviously means to emphasize the deeper wrong of this sin, but in what way? It is obviously a generalization for there are certainly other sins that we can think of that seem to be equally sins against one’s own body: drunkenness, gluttony, or suicide certainly are sins committed against one’s own body. [Lietzmann, *An Die Korinther*, 28] The interpretation of the verse is complicated and I don’t want to get bogged down in the details. But let me make this observation. It seems clear from the verses that precede and follow v. 18 that Paul is speaking about the way in which sexual sin violates the special character of the Christian’s body as the object of God’s redeeming love, as that which is in union with Jesus Christ, and as that which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Most Christians have a visceral appreciation of the point that Paul is making: there is a special dishonor that attaches to a Christian’s sexual sin *precisely because it is so plainly and so horribly a misuse of his body, which is Christ’s body*. This is Calvin’s conclusion, who writes:

“My explanation is that he does not completely deny that there are other sins, which also bring dishonour and disgrace upon our bodies, but that he is simply saying that these other sins do not leave anything like the same filthy stain on our bodies as fornication does.”

We are to honor God with our body, Paul concludes, in v. 20, because it isn’t only our body, it isn’t even primarily our body, it is the Lord’s and has been bought at terrible expense. But if that is the case, then obviously there is all the more reason for us to insist on sexual purity from the get-go, and to build that determination into young Christians from their adolescence.

And this is, in fact, precisely what we find being done in the Bible. I turn your attention to Proverbs 5.

1. Prov. 5 in the context of chapters 1-9;
2. First of three substantial sections on sex;
3. Proverbs training in “wisdom” [what?] To a *younger* son, unmarried in an age when they married young; still a child in some respects. Little children don’t need this, but they will sooner than many parents think or wish.
4. The male perspective (father and son), and all the more effectively with regard to this subject; but applies to mothers and daughters *mutatis mutandis*.
5. 5:1-2: have to have your convictions firmly in place, otherwise sexual opportunity will find you only half-knowing what you want! And, of course, the Devil never tells the truth about his temptations. He offers the honey and hides the stinger until it is too late.
6. 5:3: Sexual temptations are powerfully suited to our natural desires. Augustine, who preached and wrote wisely and honestly about sexual temptation, was candid about sex’s power to “throw a man’s mind down from its tower.” [*Dialogues with Myself*, 1:17] It never takes a great deal to provoke sexual desire, it lies so close to the surface that it can flare up in a moment, and so, when others go about stoking it, it becomes perhaps the most powerful and urgent of all temptations, more powerful even than the urge to live, as is demonstrated by the fact that so many have thrown every caution to the wind, risking every danger from maladies such as syphilis (long a killing disease) or AIDS to the anger of an offended husband to satisfy sexual cravings.
7. 5:4-6: This, in a way, is the viewpoint of the entire book of Proverbs. Always look to the end of the matter. Temptations inevitably work to prevent this. No one who is alone with his date in a darkened room at midnight is thinking of the ruin of his or her life should pregnancy ensue or they be caught by her parents or their tryst become known to many others when she spills the beans to someone she takes to be her friend.
8. 5:7-8: the first antidote: avoid occasions. “Every commandment requires us to avoid everything that may tempt us to break it.” We should not “hollo in the ears of a sleeping temptation.” Thomas Fuller Or another: “If a giant knock while the door is shut, he may with ease be still kept out; but if once open, that he gets in but a limb of himself, then there is no course left to keep out the remaining bulk.” [Hibbert in *NPNF*, “Augustine’s Confessions”, 156n.] McCheyne’s admission: I find myself trying to get as near to the temptation as possible without committing the sin. I’m lying to myself! Or, you don’t conquer this sin by walking through the Red Light District until you are able to make it through without looking to the right or to the left. In our day all the more: television, the internet bring it into our homes, our bedrooms. (Covenant Eyes!)
9. 5:9-10: i.e. her husband will reduce you to slavery and you will spend the rest of your life trying to redeem yourself.
10. 5:11-13: Sexual sin is much more difficult to live down because of the stigma that it carries.

So the father begins with his son by speaking of the power of sexual temptation, its pervasiveness, and its terrible risk and danger. Don’t destroy your life for the pleasures of

a few moments: advice that a great many men in the history of the world and, alas, the church have gone to their deaths wishing they had followed!

Now this emphasis on the deep guilt and stain of sexual sin and its horrific consequences led some of the church fathers to a particularly negative view of sex. This, in part, led to their exaltation of virginity as the holiest way of life and the view, held by some, but not all, that sex was for procreation and for nothing else and that the sensual pleasure of it was to be avoided as much as possible. It was a view that consigned many fine men among the church fathers to the life of tortured conscience (Jerome) as well as regretful unfaithfulness to a spouse (Augustine). *That is plainly not the view of the Bible, as the continuation of chapter 5 will make abundantly clear.* We'll get to that next time, but in regard to sexual sin and its unrelentingly stern condemnation in the Bible, I want to make one further point. In a dialectical relationship with this emphasis on the egregious nature of sexual sin is the indisputable biblical fact that sexual sin is not a sin beyond redemption. It is not the end of the world nor need it be the end of a man or woman's life story.

1. The difficulty of protecting those innocent of the sin without sending the guilty into despair (a chronic problem in biblical preaching and teaching: unwed mothers and the importance of Christian fatherhood; the judgment according to works and mercies new every morning; etc.).
2. But we have read 1 Cor. 16 and Prov. 5. Now we consider the other end of the pole.
3. Judah, the hero of the Egypt narrative: a terrible father (two sons executed by the Lord; and a philanderer and one who consorted with prostitutes.
4. David, whose life, upon its conclusion, is pronounced good by the Lord, even after the terrible affair with Bathsheba and the sins that spun outward from that crime.
5. Paul to the Corinthian church acknowledges the sexual sin, rebukes it, but does not write as if anything more needs to be done than for it to be stopped. He shows, we might say, a calm understanding of this sin that was also a noted feature of Augustine's pastoral care of his flock.
6. Samuel Rutherford (our view of him): February 3, 1626 John Adamson, the principal of the college [i.e. Edinburgh] declared that "Samuel Rutherford, regent of humanity, has falling fornication with Euphame Hamilton and has committed a great scandal in the college." Rutherford biographers have tried to demonstrate that this was a baseless charge, fabricated by Rutherford's enemies but, on balance, the evidence seems to confirm that the charge was true and that, later in his life, when Rutherford would speak of his regret of the sins of his youth he was speaking of more than generalities. As I suggested may have been the case with Thomas Boston, a great man and a great saint, there is that in Rutherford's writing to suggest that he struggled with this sin as much as or even more than most. [John Coffey, *Politics, Religion, and the British Revolutions*, 37-38]
7. A hero of mine, whose name you have often heard in my sermons, Alexander Whyte was the illegitimate child of a Scottish mother who, in order not to make a bad situation worse, would not marry the father: "I was raised to love the

covenanters.” The product of a sinful tryst became one of the great preachers of the modern era! [A daughter of this congregation who had an illegitimate child named the son in part after Alexander Whyte!]

It is our task at one and the same time to abominate sexual sin and to hold out the infinite mercy of God to sexual sinners.