

Sexual Sin and Sanctification

Scripture: Genesis 39:6–12; Proverbs 6:27–35; Matthew 5:13–16; Romans 6:3–7; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Ephesians 4:22–24; Ephesians 6:10–17; Philippians 2:13; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7; 1 Timothy 3:2–7; 2 Timothy 2:21–22; Hebrews 10:23–26; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 1:14–19; 1 Peter 5:3; 2 Peter 1:2–4

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Introduction

Sexual immorality runs amok in our culture today. Temptations to depart from God's sure path of blessing in the realm of sexuality are epidemic. The anonymity of the Internet and wireless technology has allowed people to pursue sexual immorality more than ever before. Today, pornographic images and movies can be viewed with ease, sexually explicit music is common, and extramarital sexual activity is seen by many as normal. Perhaps more than at any other time, promiscuity both in thought and deed is accepted and condoned.

However, in sharp contrast to the trend of the world, God calls His people to be pure (1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Ephesians 5:3–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7). They are to shine as lights of personal holiness and moral virtue for His glory (Matthew 5:13–16). The Lord designed sex as a wonderful expression of love between a husband and wife (Hebrews 13:4), but those who use sex selfishly and apart from the Lord's design will experience untold heartache and personal ruin.

The Consequences of Sexual Sin

Christians are certainly not immune to temptations to lust and sexual sin. The consequences of repeated failure in this area are devastating, and a believer who sins sexually brings shame to the name of the Lord. A child of God must seek to reflect his Father's true character (1 Peter 1:14–19). Impurity in thoughts and actions is diametrically opposed to the purpose of God for salvation—to bring Him greater glory. The following are but a few examples of the far-reaching, destructive consequences of sexual sin.

A man who is unfaithful to his wife cannot serve as an elder in the church because the Lord intends him to be a model of godliness in all areas (1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Peter 5:3). The most important qualification for a man who desires eldership is his being above reproach. His reputation and example both within and outside the church must be exemplary (1 Timothy 3:2, 7). The importance of sexual purity among these qualifications is seen by its placement at the top of the list (1 Timothy 3:2). A man's opportunity for service in the church can be permanently removed because of the lasting reproach of his sexual sin.

Sexual sin also causes intense personal pain. Proverbs repeatedly warns of the far-reaching and agonizing consequences of sexual immorality:

-Death (Proverbs 2:19; 7:22–27)

- Loss of wealth (Proverbs 5:10)
- Enduring regret (Proverbs 5:11–14)
- Entrapment (Proverbs 5:22)
- Painful punishment (Proverbs 6:27–29)
- Shame and destruction (Proverbs 6:32–35)

Within marriage, sexual immorality will also destroy trust between husband and wife and defile the sanctity of their own sexual intimacy.

Forgiveness and Hope

If you have already sinned sexually or are currently struggling with the temptation to lust, take heart! The Lord is always ready to forgive and cleanse those who turn to Him in confession and repentance (1 John 1:9), but understand that lasting holiness in your life will become a reality only as you faithfully pursue it according to the principles of God's Word. The Lord promises, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6), but you must be a willing and eager partner in His work of sanctification.

The follower of Christ must recognize there is divine help and hope for victory over the strong passions and evil desires associated with sexual sin. Scripture tells you there are powerful resources from God that enable you to conquer sin and live a life of purity (Philippians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:2–4). The mighty working of the Holy Spirit in your heart will enable you to faithfully pursue holiness.

The Gradual Process of Sanctification

Your heart is the first and most important battleground in conquering lust and sexual sin. Victory over sexual immorality begins with a new heart. Scripture tells us one of the ways we know if a person is truly a child of God is by looking at the pattern of his life. First John 2:3–5 says, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him." This doesn't mean a child of God never sins, but it surely does mean a saved person will not continue in an unbroken pattern of sin. To do that would be unnatural for a child of God.

Many people become frustrated in their struggle to overcome sexual sin because they never seem to achieve lasting purity. Has that been your experience? Part of the reason you may not overcome sexual sin as quickly as desired is your misunderstanding about the location of the battle. The physical manifestation of sexual sin is simply the outworking of what has already been going on in the heart for some time. The focus of your struggle must be internal first and foremost.

The Holy Spirit immediately and permanently indwells each person He regenerates. Romans 8:9–10 is written to those who are saved: "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." Ephesians 4:22–24 instructs you "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and

holiness.”

From where does the power come to reject sinful habits and to imitate the righteousness and holiness of God? Listen to the liberating truth taught in Romans 6:3–7: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”

As a Christian, you have been given both the responsibility and the power to stop sinning. You are able to do that because you have been spiritually joined to Jesus in His death on the cross and in His resurrection from the dead. If you are genuinely saved, you have new and pure life by which you can please God. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is recreating you into His likeness (Colossians 2:9–14). God has worked a miraculous transformation in your heart, and now He wants you to draw on the spiritual resources He gives you as you pursue holiness (see Romans 6:12–23; 2 Timothy 2:22; Psalm 19:7–14; 119:9–11).

Fighting against sin and temptation, as well as pursuing greater obedience to God’s Word, is a process that happens gradually, day-by-day. The temptation to succumb to your struggle with sin—even sexual sin—is not unusual for the believer. The apostle Paul writes of his struggle with sin in Romans 7:14–25, speaking of it as “bondage to sin” (Romans 7:14). While your fight against sin is constant and difficult, it is a battle you can win if you humbly rely on the resources the Lord gives you—meditation on Scripture, devotion to prayer, and fellowship in a biblical church. Experiencing and rejoicing in the gradual defeat of sin depends upon faithfully nurturing your heart toward purity.

A believer’s struggle with sin is like getting rid of weeds from a garden. If you keep cutting the weeds off at the ground level, they will keep growing and coming back. If you want to remove the weeds permanently, you must kill them below the surface of the ground—at the root level. That is how it works with sin. You must see your sinful tendencies as dead remnants of your past life that must be rooted out, as Colossians 3:5 teaches: “Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.” If you try to stop sinning merely in an external way—not dealing with the root problem at the heart level—you will not develop long-term holiness. As the great Puritan preacher John Owens wrote, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

The key to consistent purity in your life is developing definite, tangible patterns of faithfulness in holiness (Galatians 5:16). It is when you begin to curtail patterns of prayer, diligent Bible study, and the pursuit of an intimate relationship with God, that you will be far more vulnerable to lustful temptation. Could it be that a season of sexual sin is the direct result of becoming lax in your pursuit of the Lord, especially after the remorse of the previous sin has begun to wear off?

You will grow in personal holiness in direct proportion to your intake of God’s Word and your commitment to prayer. In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Let your fight against sexual sin be the overflow of the love and devotion you have for your Lord and Savior.

Biblical Resources for Overcoming Sexual Sin

In Ephesians 6:10–17 you learn of the powerful weapons the Lord Jesus has given you for your fight against sin. The “sword of the Spirit,” the Word of God, is the greatest weapon for your fight against the devil (Ephesians 6:17). In Psalm 119:9–11 we read, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. With all my heart I have sought You. Do not let me wander from Your commandments. Your word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against You.”

In addition to filling your heart with the Word of God, you must actively flee every temptation that seeks to threaten your purity. In 2 Timothy 2:21–22, Paul commands Timothy to continually flee sinful desires. It is utterly foolish to take the issue of sexual sin lightly or to overestimate your ability to resist temptation. Just as Joseph fled the daily seduction of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:6–12), you too must avoid those times, places, and situations in which you know sexual temptation will arise.

In addition to reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible on a regular basis, please listen to John MacArthur’s sermon, “[Aggressively Attacking the Sin in Our Lives](#).” It contains pertinent Bible teaching about overcoming habitual sins like sexual immorality. You may also want to read [this](#) article on sexual sin and biblical sanctification.

Finally, to grow spiritually and to overcome temptation, you must regularly and actively participate in the ministries of a biblically-grounded local church. The Lord has designed our spiritual growth to be carried out through the loving, mutually edifying ministry of a church committed to expository preaching and regular accountability (Ephesians 4:11–16; Hebrews 10:23–25). When you are pursuing temptation and self-gratification, your thoughts and efforts are consumed with selfishness. But taking initiative to serve others on your own or through the ministries of the church takes your attention off yourself. You must strive to develop the habit of loving and serving others instead of yourself. As you do this, you will become more like Jesus.

Conclusion

Sexual fulfillment expressed within a Christian marriage is a wonderful gift from God. The Lord has designed sexuality as a way to express love by a husband and wife, but when it is used selfishly and outside the bounds of His design, it will produce untold heartache. If you are a true Christian and have sinned sexually, please know the Lord has forgiven you on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross. If you confess your sins and pursue righteousness, He is faithful to cleanse you from sin and give you a renewed desire to please Him. The Lord makes the following promise to all those who bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God. . . . For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but God who gives His Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5, 7–8). May the Lord empower you to have increasing victory over sexual sin for His glory and for your good.

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