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# Flee Immorality

## 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 18

**Introduction** There are two principal gods served by the majority of non-Christians today money and unrestrained sexuality. Sexual sins and materialism are both very intoxicating and very damaging to people. We are warned to flee from both. Paul, in a strong rebuke to the Corinthian church for failure to deal with one of their own who had sinned in such a way asked, v.9 “do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” Corinth was a proverb for sexual debauchery. It was then, what we might call today “a wide open city.” One could find any kind of sexual pleasure one desired. The church in Corinth was a testimony of the grace of God working, in such a place, in the lives of all who put their trust in Christ. But Corinth was a continual danger to the Christians. “Such were some of you, but you were washed.” The church had many who came out of a sexually immoral lifestyle. To these and the rest of the saints, Paul rhetorically asks, “Do you not know?” Yes, they knew. Paul and the Holy Spirit had instructed them previously. But they, and we today in America, need to be reminded. We were delivered from that former way of life for a reason. Such people cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. Were we to live as we formerly used to live, it would suggest to the pagans that there is little to be saved from. More importantly, such a way of life completely misrepresents the truths of God as He relates to His people and grossly distorts the human personality.

Paul asks again, “Do you not know?”

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!”

“Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body *with her*? For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.”

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

There is much here that we need to know, that we must know, if we are to stand against the open promotion of sin in sexual matters. Such temptations to sexual immorality are not new. The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a massive departure in the West from Biblical instruction in this area, but in fact, this is not a new thing in the history of the world. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Paul had to write about how to live right sexually. So did John in Rev. 2:14, 20. Jesus corrected the

religious leaders of His day several times in these matters. So this is nothing new. And Scripture still remains ‘inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.’ As we look into it we will discover “What” it is we are to flee from as well as “Why” and “How”.

## Some Clarifications

Thirty years ago, publicly referring to a woman as “sexy” was nearly universally regarded as an insult and equivalent to calling her a prostitute. Today the term is regarded by many as high praise – a good thing to say about a person, male or female. To be regarded as sexually unattractive is considered an insult. Scripturally, we find that sexual matters are intentionally kept private between a married man and his wife. Though there was much hypocrisy in the past, the public face of sexuality prior to the turmoil of the 60’s was closer to the Biblical view. To publicly promote and encourage the kind of sexual thoughts and actions that are common today is contrary to Scripture. Today, the thought that any kind of sexual behavior is something to run from seems quite strange to those outside of the Kingdom of God, and unfortunately it is becoming foreign to some within the Kingdom as well. It will be helpful, therefore, if we consider what the Scripture declares to be right or not right in these matters.

When the Bible speaks of fornication and adultery it does so in two different but analogous ways. Adultery refers to having physical intimacy with the spouse of another. But it is also used metaphorically of a broken relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament and between Christ and His church in the New Testament. Adultery is sexual unfaithfulness to one’s spouse, or replacing God with a rival for our devotion. Fornication is a more general term, including adultery, but encompassing a wide variety of sexual sin. Related to both words are the ideas of uncleanness and impurity. Uncleanness and impurity can describe unclean spirits, moral pollution, animals, and ceremonial uncleanness. When used referring to ethical and moral matters it connotes “vileness especially of a sexual nature”, moral corruption, and unnatural vices. Uncleanness can also refer to any filthy substance such as the contents of a grave – and therefore, by analogy, refer to moral rotteness. Finally, the word “sensuality” is used to communicate the sense of shameless conduct. It is also translated as wantonness, licentiousness, and lasciviousness. The idea is of a total lack of self constraint that involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable, of self abandonment. A sensual person is one who perverts favor into licentiousness, interpreting divine goodness as a license to ignore God and do whatever one pleases. It especially refers to unrestrained sexual conduct and indecency.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains and clarifies just what the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment regarding adultery really required. In Jesus’ day, a Pharisee thought of himself as doing quite well if he had never had physical intimacy with anyone other than his wife. Yet, just like many men today, they followed a woman with their eyes, imagining what it would like to touch, caress, and have physical intimacy with that person. When contempt and lust is within our heart, though we may not actually murder or act in a sexually immoral manner, we are still sinning. Jesus is point-

ing out that righteousness requires that our hearts be right. When our hearts are right, we will behave rightly.

Note what Jesus is not saying. He does not call women evil, nor does He say that women are the problem. One could go to a place where it was possible to never see a woman and never have opportunity for fornication and yet still have adulterous thoughts. Fornication arises from within the heart. Even if one could avoid the sight of a woman or cut off every member of the body to prevent acts of fornication, the heart would remain untouched. Nor is Christ saying that sexual feelings and thoughts necessarily constitute adultery. The fact that we may experience a sexual attraction when a person of the opposite sex enters our visual field is not what Christ is warning us against. What He is warning us about is looking in order to arouse lust. It is the intentional look for the purpose of lusting for that person that is sinful. Indulging and cultivating that desire is sinful. To be tempted sexually is not sinful, nor can such temptations be completely avoided. Certainly we can and should avoid deliberately entering temptation. What we are to avoid is looking in order to imagine engaging in physical acts with a person. This is what is meant by “adultery of the heart” and that can be avoided.

Jesus Christ said, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” Literal adultery is much worse than adultery in one’s heart in the same way that murder is much worse than anger or contempt. The acts include the sin of the heart plus a great deal more that ruins and involves many other people as well. It is never morally justifiable to do the literal act just because one is guilty of the sinful thought. There is no right way to commit adultery any more than there is a right way to murder. If we are to flee from fornication we will have to address the heart matters.

## The Virtue of Sexual Purity

To understand the seriousness of this sin we need to consider the wonder of what the Bible means when it describes the union of a man and a woman. There is something much deeper about the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment than merely not having physical relations with another person’s spouse, as important as that is. In Exodus 20, when God says “You shall not commit adultery”, He is telling us something about Himself. The commandments all embody the moral character of God. This commandment tells us that God is faithful to His people. He will never forsake us “for another” even though we might forsake Him. He will keep His promises. He will be with us.

The relationship of God to Israel is described by the prophets in terms of a marriage. Is. 62:5 says “*as* the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, *so* your God will rejoice over you.” Israel’s faithlessness to God is described as adultery and harlotry in Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 1:2. Israel’s restoration to God is described in marriage terms as well. In Hos. 2:16, 19-20 reads “It will come about in that day,” declares the LORD, that you will call Me “my Husband” and will no longer call Me “my master”. God said “I will betroth you to Me forever. Yes, I will betroth

you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD.” Many believe that these passages were fulfilled when Christ came. Others assign them to the time of Israel’s future conversion.

The relationship between Christ and His church is even more explicit in the New Testament. Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride. In 2 Cor 11:2-3 Paul describes the Corinthian church as having been “betrothed to one husband” and presented to Christ as a pure virgin. In Rom. 7:4 our death to the Law is described as necessary so that our relationship to Christ would not be one of adultery and so we could be “joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.” Finally, in Eph. 5:22-33, the husband-wife relationship is explained in terms of how Christ loves His church and how the church lovingly respects and is subject to Christ. Paul declares in vs. 32 that there are things in a marriage and in the Church’s relationship to her Lord that are a great mystery, but that a complete and correct understanding of human marriage can only be found in reference to Christ and the church.

So faithfulness in sexual matters, both of the heart and the body, is a picture of Christ’s love and provision for His people. Our marriages and how we behave as sexual beings is to be as accurate a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church as is possible this side of heaven. Understanding and imitating this is one way of turning the affections of our hearts to God and away from fornication.

A husband and wife are said to be “joined to one another” in Gen. 2:24. Jesus quotes this passage as does Paul in their teaching on marriage. Actually, Scripture says that God joins the two so that they are no longer two but one flesh. These are not merely “nice sounding words”. There is a reality here that should be frequently thought about, and a great mystery that we will never fully explore in this life. It refers to sexual relations and much more. In some great and mysterious way God intends to make a husband and wife into a single being, without destroying their individual distinctive characters. In His eyes, the husband and wife are joined, welded and bonded together. Adultery destroys this great work of God by polluting it with a third person so that the relationship between the husband and wife is adulterated and impure. Our bodies are an important part of this great work of God.

The heart of Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians regarding fornication involves the contradiction between flesh and spirit that results when one becomes one flesh, or one body with a person other than one’s lawful spouse. 1 Cor 6:15-16 says that physical intimacy joins two people together. Again, this is not poetry or nice words – it is a fact. One who becomes a Christian is described as “one who joins himself to the Lord”, and such a person “becomes one spirit with Him.” The Bible has a very high view of the body – so much that in verse 19 Paul calls it a temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore “the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.” (vs. 13) Because of these facts and because we “have been bought with a price” we are to “glorify God in our bodies.” The importance of faithfulness in sexual matters then is part of honoring and glorifying God and part of the great work of God in revealing Himself through our marriages to this world. Being joined to one and to one only is essential to this.

This virtue is important enough to be included in the list of character qualities required of the leaders in the church of Christ. In 1 Tim 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:5-7 both overseers/elders and deacons are required to be one women kind of men.

We might summarize this section by stating that sexual fidelity to our spouse is a living illustration of God and His love and care for His people. There is a reality, beyond a mere picture, in the union of a man and woman. Recognizing that celibacy is a unique gift from God for a few the joining of one to another is part of what most of us were made for. There is a great mystery here but, a man and a woman in a Biblical marriage are illustrating the free union between Christ and his church.

## Warnings

Because of this parallel between a husband and wife and God and His people, we can begin to get an idea of what sexual sin looks like to God. We will see in a minute, that central to the ability to flee from fornication is reverence for and fear of God. “By the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil” says Proverbs 16:6. Developing the fear of the Lord requires that we see this sin as God sees it.

From the beginning we saw that God intended the man and woman to be joined together. This was intended to be permanent, for man was commanded not to separate what God had joined together. But because of the hardness of heart that sin produced, many things now can destroy this union. The introduction of a third person into a monogamous relationship pollutes and adulterates the relationship in a manner similar to the way worshipping a false god violates the relationship between the true God and the worshipper. God regards breaking faith in sexual matters in a manner similar to breaking faith in spiritual matters. To engage in sexual relations with someone other than ones spouse is analogous to breaking the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment against having any other Gods than the Lord. Seen in this light, fornication becomes incredibly vile.

When a man and woman are rightly related biblically, it is a picture of faithfulness between Creator and creature. When a man or woman violates the marriage bond, the picture is changed and it implies that God is also unfaithful. This sin in a man tells a lie about God and pictures Him as untrustworthy and false – likely to abandon His people for someone else. When a woman sins like this, it misrepresents God and pictures Him as unworthy of devotion and rather to be despised.

These facts being what they are make it much easier to understand why so many warnings exist in both Old and New Testaments regarding sexual sins. Immorality, impurity, and sensuality lead the list of deeds of the flesh in Gal. 5:19. They stand at the head of other lists in 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Eph. 4:1-7 and Col. 3:1-10. Several extended sections of the book of Proverbs are warnings about fornication and its consequences. We might summarize all of these warnings by stating that this is how unbelievers act – perhaps how you or I acted before we “were washed, were sanctified, and were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” But now we are to “put them all aside” and “put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.” These warning pas-

sages tell us that this is how unbelievers behave and that they will be judged. Because they will not inherit the Kingdom of God, we are not to act like them. To do the same deeds as the unbelievers is to mock the coming judgment of God and to suggest that how we live makes no difference to God. However, our lives are to demonstrate what we believe. We are to model the image of the One who created us. 1 Thess. 4:1-8 reads

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus*. 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; *and* that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is *the avenger* in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects *this* is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.”

## What Does Flight from Fornication Look Like Today?

No one who reverences the Scripture as the Word of God would argue against the need to remain sexually pure. But agreeing with the truth is quite a different matter than living the truth. Yet, live it we must. Part of our difficulty today is the persistent belief that things have never been this bad in the world as they are today in the West. This is simply not true. It certainly was worse in many ways in 1<sup>st</sup> century Ephesus and Corinth. We have an almost omnipresent media unknown in any other time that presses and molds us often without our full awareness of what is going on. Our computers now enable anyone to obtain the most explicit pornography in the privacy of one's home without the public risk of embarrassment. These factors of modern life are new and must be addressed. Yet 1 Cor. 10:13 promises that “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” Since this is so, we need to ask what these ways of escape look like.

As we noted earlier, fornication has its origin in the heart of man. Because of this, physical actions alone will not be enough. This is not to say that actions are not required. They are indeed! Joseph was right to flee from Potiphar's wife. If faced with the same situation, you and I also could do no better than to run! But such acts can never address all situations, no matter how essential they are in some. Joseph was successful because his heart was already prepared. He knew in advance what he would do in such circumstances, so when it happened, he was ready and did not need to “think on his feet”.

In the context of our hearts it is worth considering Matt 5:27-30 and ask what is meant by tearing out eyes and cutting off hands and feet. A literal understanding of this cannot be intended because of what vs. 27 says. Committing adultery in ones heart does not require eyes, hands or feet. It merely requires a little imagination. If righteousness were merely not doing certain

things, as the Pharisees thought, then some advantage could be gained by blinding and dismembering oneself. But righteousness, to be righteousness, must be more than what the Scribes and Pharisees had. These expressions are metaphors. Micah 7:3 says “Concerning evil, both hands do it well.” Cutting off ones right hand will not solve the problem. As Dallas Willard puts it in “The Divine Conspiracy” even a mutilated stump can still have a heart filled with anger and lust. Jesus’ teaching actually points out the absurdity of this approach to righteousness. What Christ is describing is the seriousness and completeness with which we are to pursue holiness. We are to spare no effort even to the point of ending our connections with anything that causes us to stumble. The battle must start in the heart, for if the heart is right, the body’s actions will follow. We need to fear the Lord. The fear of the Lord is knowing, believing that God sees and knows everything. There is no escape and no hiding. He not only sees our actions, but also “sees” your heart.

## Humility and Grace

Closely related to the fear of God is the provision of grace for the humble. James 4:6-10 is a basic principle in the Kingdom of God. God opposes proud people, but gives grace to the humble. We have sometimes limited grace to refer to the forgiveness of our sins, but it means much, much more. Grace brings us into life, but now having been converted, grace is also how we are to live. Peter ends his second epistle with the instruction to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Humbling ourselves before God can have many faces. All of them have in common some form of yielding to God my desire to act independently of Him. I must accept his right to rule without question or reservation in my life. I want my entire life to be pleasing to Him. I will no longer try to maintain the illusion of spirituality before others in the church. I am just as needy, probably more needy than most. When appropriate, after prayer and reflection, I may even seek the help of others in learning how to obey the Lord in those areas that I have a particular difficulty. Grace is given to such people.

## Avoidance

Sometimes, it is true; the only thing one can do is to run from opportunities to sin as the text for this study exhorts: “Flee immorality.” We have already referred to Joseph in Gen. 39:7-12. The Bible is quite frank about sexuality as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> chapters in Proverbs shows. These passages include references to the fear of the Lord, contentment, warnings about the end of such activity, and exhortation to stay away and flee from those who would lead one into adultery. The frank and graphic descriptions of how, in this case, a woman leads a man into adultery are given in the form of instruction from a father to a son. The father in Prov. 5:1 and 7 is emphatic. “Pay attention!” “Listen to this!” “Do not depart from this instruction!” Chapter 7 begins with similar stresses: “Keep my words.” “Treasure and keep my commands, that you may live!” These things, as distasteful as they are, must be taught to our children. We as parents have a responsibility to warn them of the ways of the sexually immoral. In so doing we inform the next generation of the ways of escaping this sin.

Sometime we simply have to flee, to run-to get away from the person or the provocation- whether it is coming to us personally or through TV, books, magazines or whatever. Brothers & sisters run!



**Conclusion** We cannot afford the luxury of pretending that no Christian will ever experience moral collapse in sexual areas. Here we are free to see others not as objects for fleshly satisfaction, but as targets of God, pleasing service & Love. This turns the focus of our hearts from “getting from them” to “giving to them”.

Fornication and other related sexual sins have always been a danger to the Church of God. Our time is not that different from other times in this regard. Yet God’s Word remains just as able to equip us and train us in righteousness as it was in Paul’s day. We are promised a way of escape. A man or woman never “has to sin.” The fear of God, humility as a means of grace, contentment, avoidance, flight, and serving one another all are practical “weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.”

(Heb. 12:1-3) reads “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

And in closing Col. 3:1-10 reads “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amount to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.”