

Marc Steele

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Preacher: Deacon Marc Steele

[0:00] Amen. Now the works of the flesh are evident.

Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

I warn you as I warned you before that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. We continue on with our series in the Christian disciplines.

[1:45] I think, Caleb, is this our fifth sermon in the series? Sounds about right. Scary. It's scary when the preachers don't remember where we're at in the series.

This week we're speaking about the discipline of sexual fidelity. Now last week we looked at fasting. Caleb preached to us a sermon about fasting.

And I'll never forget, I heard a teaching by an Eastern Orthodox deacon on the issue of fasting.

Now, I don't usually go to the Eastern Orthodox for advice on fasting for various reasons.

One is, I can't live up to their standards. But he said something that was very interesting to me. He said that if a man was not in the practice of regularly fasting, that he would not consider that man for ordination.

I don't know if that was the practice across all dioceses in the Eastern Orthodox world. But for this man's diocese, that was.

[3:02] And his justification was interesting. If a man cannot practice self-control in one good thing, why would we expect him to be able to practice self-control in another more important good thing?

Speaking specifically about the issue of sexuality. And there's notable correlations here, right? Food is a good thing.

Nobody argues that. But sex is also a very good thing. We need to be able to practice self-control in these areas.

Our Hebrews reading today makes a direct connection in that area. Taking the issue of sexual immorality in the church and linking up to Esau, who for one meal sold his eternal birthright.

Now, as we continue in this series on the disciplines, I just want to review a couple of small things.

One is, when we say the word discipline, we're thinking about what older reformers and older church fathers would speak about, the marks of a Christian.

[4:30] Practices, how we order our lives, how we conduct ourselves. What sets us apart as a church, both as a group and as private individuals?

We saw the last time I spoke about the disciplines of participating in the sacraments, that unlike other religions like Muslims, who also have spiritual disciplines, we do not believe that we earn righteousness by partaking in these disciplines.

Instead, these disciplines are a reflection of the righteousness that has already been given to us by Christ. So the question is, is sexual fidelity really a discipline?

Does it fit in this category? Well, let me counter this and say, we can certainly all agree that sexual immorality is a daily pagan discipline.

And we've seen this all throughout history. We see this in the Old Testament. For instance, as Israel exits Egypt and they depart to true worship of the Lord, and they bow down to the golden cow idol, their first response of worship was a mass act of sexual immorality with one another.

[5:51] In later years, as they stand in the land of promise, and they began to develop their groves and devote themselves to Baal worship, and the resultant children were burned on fires of sacrifice to Malak.

Every time Israel stopped worshipping the Lord, they fell into mass sexual sin. But the follower of the one true God is called to a different path.

We are warned in our Proverbs reading for today that our bodies are to be owned by him and reserved for his holy purposes. Lest your springs should be scattered abroad, and your water be poured out and wasted on the street.

We are a reserved people. God has claimed our minds, our spirits, and our bodies.

And as is warned in the middle and the conclusion of our Old Testament reading today, the one who lacks discipline places his life in mortal danger.

[7:05] In my three decades of experience within the church, sexual immorality is far and away been what I have viewed as the leading cause of departure from the faith.

For lack of discipline in this area, many church members have made their life a shipwreck. And as I look out across the world today, and I look at the church in the news, and I try to understand how the world considers Christ followers, I see catastrophic and tragic acts of sexual sin within both Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations.

This has somehow become the mark of the church in the eyes of the world. We understand that the drive for multiple sexual partners, a complete lack of self-control, is a reflection of a departure from the life of faith.

It is a departure of the worship of one true God, and the adoption of the worship of many false gods. But in a beautiful and refreshing contrast, for the Christian husband and wife, a lifetime commitment to monogamous intimacy becomes a bold and countercultural act of worship.

As we read in Hebrews, the marriage bed is to be honored. It represents a separation from the world and a joining to Christ.

[8:54] For this reason, it is to remain undefiled, a place free from the poison water of the forbidden woman or the forbidden man. Our author tells us that God himself will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

The end of adultery is bitter as wormwood and sharper than a two-edged sword. As we turn to Hebrews, turn with me to Hebrews chapter 12, we see a very strong warning.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God so that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. Speaking about a poisonous danger that can quickly infect a whole body of believers.

See to it that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

The first time I really studied this passage thinking, I don't remember anything about sexual immorality in the story of Esau. It was a little bit hard for me to understand this.

[10:27] We see that Esau was the firstborn son of Isaac. To him, the eternal birthright, that covenant promise that was made to his patriarch Abraham, that was supposed to be passed down to Esau.

Esau clearly did not value it that much because when he came back from hunting after a day-long hunting trip, certainly we can survive a day without food, right?

Right? I mean, yeah. It's not too much. Sometimes I think like I'm dying when I fast for a day, but it's not a life-threatening situation.

We came back and saw Jacob cooking a meal. Jacob, being the typical younger brother, kind of withheld what that meal was.

And Esau, for his bartering, said, well, I'll sell you my birthright for this meal of stew. Clearly Esau didn't have much faith in that promise that he was supposed to inherit.

[11:39] So now we consider this area.

What is the author of Hebrews speaking about in the area of sexual immorality? Esau's hunger was not life-threatening. Yet for the satisfaction of a moment, he gave up eternal promise.

Sexual desire is never life-threatening. But those caught in the deadly throes of passion often will swear to you that it is.

The issue of self-control, the disciplines we've talked about so far, the idea of taking time to pray, of fasting, church attendance, right declaring the word.

You can drift in these areas. It's not uncommon for us to drift in these areas. The hymn writer writes, prone to wander, right?

[12 : 49] Lord, I feel it. Sometimes those are just the seasons of life thing, and the correction can be gradual. But the lack of discipline in the area of human sexuality can shatter the whole lives of generations in one moment.

This is why the New Testament authors are so serious when they address this issue. That's why the response is so quick. Caleb and I might encourage you to pray more or think about fasting, but when it comes to sexual immorality, it's going to be a hard warning, a stop this minute, a harsher word.

But don't be mistaken. This discipline is not a matter of gritting it out or demonstrating you have a greater measure of strength than others. It is instead an act of faith.

It is a resting in the promise of Christ our Lord. When we stumble, we take our eyes off the Savior. So we must take full advantage of the disciplines that Christ has given to us.

The fact that we've been placed in a body of believers. We are not left without defense. We live in a world that tells us that our hunger defines us. And this is the oldest tactic in the devil's arsenal.

[14 : 07] Back to the Garden of Eden. We are not defined as Christians by our desires. When I look at Scripture, the only time I see people identified by their sexual desires are those whose sins are listed before they came to Christ.

If you look at passages like in Romans 13, you see, you used to be this. You used to be sexually immoral. You used to be this kind of sexual immorality. But then you were washed by the water of the word.

You became Christ. Our identity is now found in Christ, no longer found in our desires. And so we're called to make for ourselves straight paths.

For feeble knees, that some of us here might have an understanding of what's being said here.

Think about our own Pat who had a knee replacement this past year. My father is just going to have one in two weeks.

Two weeks my father is having a knee replacement. And the idea there for a feeble and weak injured knee is that you make sure that you walk in terrain that is safe and a place where you will not stumble.

[15 : 23] So he moved his entire office from the downstairs to the upstairs so that he could be on one floor until the time his knees remained weak. Just like the author of our Proverbs passage today says, get to a place of safety.

This is an issue of discipline here. Discipline is about practice. It's about location. And we must remember that this call to fast in the area of sexuality is one thing shared by both single believers and married believers.

Married believers also fast from sex. not with the partner, not with the married partner, but the adoption of wedding vows made before God is a forsaking of all others.

Disciplines don't stand alone. So let's get into some areas of practical observation. Let's think about these straight paths for feeble knees, knowing that we are all prone to wander in this area and that it is deadly serious.

We're going to do a little bit of a whirlwind tour through scripture, hopefully without too much comment for myself. Each of these passages or mentions of scripture probably deserve a more thorough fleshing out, and I'm sure they'll be covered in other series here.

[16 : 57] But as we saw in our Proverbs reading that Norm gave us and did such an excellent reading of, we saw a warning to stay away from the place of the strange woman.

Location matters. Where you are speaks to your vulnerability to temptation.

I am extremely blessed as a bivocational pastor in that the person I work with, my boss, is my Christian brother.

Every year, nearly, we have to make at least one trip to Las Vegas for business. And, knowing that we are sinners saved by grace and people with weakness, we have all made an agreement that if we make that trip to Las Vegas, nobody makes that trip by themselves.

Why is that? Because we know where there is a place of danger and where we need help. We can't stand alone in this area.

[18 : 14] one time as I walked in Las Vegas from one place to another, there was a businessman in his 50s who had stopped two prostitutes in the pathway and then remembered that he was a

married man and tried to get out of that exchange.

And he told the two women, no, I'm married. I need to leave. And they asked him, well, why did you stop?

Which I think was a pretty valid question for them to make. But that man was trapped in a dangerous place without anyone to back him up.

And I started, when I heard that, I'm pretty good at hearing conversations going in another area. It's part of being a father of six children. But the second I heard that, I almost just broke down.

I just started praying for that man. But he was caught in a web. He did not have protection in that area. He left himself exposed. And he left him, he was in a place where he was unaccountable to his wife and to others.

[19:30] Don't make excuses to linger in places where you should not be. And don't think you can withstand temptation alone. God did not place you into a body of believers for you to be a solo act.

And I can't tell you what your place of danger is. I grew up in a tradition that would try to list out all the places that you'd be in danger. But I found as I grow on, each person's place of danger is in a different area.

I don't work at your workplace, I don't go to your school. Second observation, age matters. Younger people, you are vulnerable.

At your stage of life, it is very hard for you to comprehend the value of your spiritual birthright. Do not sell it for something so small and pitiful as a single meal.

The next point of observation, age matters. Older people, your age does not protect you from sexual immorality. Never forget it was the age Judah who thought that his fornication with a roadside prostitute was anonymous and would go unnoticed.

[20:51] Instead, it is his shame that rings forth until this day. Sexual fidelity is a blessing to the church. This is how families grow.

It is the normal means of evangelism. But, sexual impurity within the church body can tear it apart. As I close this final section, the words I say now may be harsh and hard, but they don't speak to any existing situations to my knowledge.

But let us consider them and let them be a preventative measure, preventative medicine and to keep a disease from touching down here. Here is a fact.

Emotional and sexual affairs within a church body are much more common than we like to admit. It's not polite to discuss, and we're embarrassed by them, so we try to pretend that they don't exist.

[22:00] Corleen and I in our church experience have observed two affairs or acts of infidelity within church leadership. Now, you might be asking, Mark, why would you betray confidence and broadcast private business out like this in public at another congregation?

Don't worry about it. You can't hide this kind of sin. Nobody fooled anybody. They weren't able to hide it from God. They weren't able to hide it from the people that surrounded them, whether those people were in the church or in the community around the church.

Everyone finds out. The events I mention are on public record. One family was broken up. To follow up from both events continued to this day and still caused trouble within the body that we formerly attended.

Innocent and wrong parties left the church and to my knowledge never returned. This isn't a recent phenomenon.

As I considered that, as I just did a very cursory look through the New Testament, there are at least four passages from the New Testament apostles that spoke to ongoing situations of adultery and immorality within the church.

[23:23] Paul gives a very strong warning in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, in other words, your development into Christlikeness, that you abstain from sexual immorality.

And I want us all to hear the apostles' word as a warning here, that each one of you know how to control his or her own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the unbelievers who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.

Because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand, and solemnly, in the strongest possible terms, warned you. I also wanted to mention in light of recent news stories and revelations that have come out in the last couple years, and I got Caleb's permission to discuss this, I wanted to speak about the life of the clergy within the church.

Caleb and I do our utmost to live upright and honorable lives among you. We are accountable to you. and we are accountable to the bishop.

We try to live openly. Many people are frightened to even step foot in a church now because many of the news stories of systematic abuse that have been reported in hundreds of congregations across this country and across the world.

[25 : 11] we pledge to live honorably and upright amongst you, but we also ask that you hold us accountable. Too many of these situations where men sinned, it was well known by the congregation, and the congregation act in a permissive way or turn a blind eye into the ongoing situation.

We submit ourselves to you and if we ever stumble, we ask that you hold us accountable. you have a system of reporting here that can start with confrontation, can be speaking to the vestry or speaking to the wardens.

if you're not heard, you have a bishop who will hear from you. I also mentioned that our bishops, and I say bishops because I believe Bishop Dave was still active at the time that this decision was made, have made a pledge that all findings will be transparent.

What does this mean for you? Well, what it means for is if in the future, Caleb and I, who our deepest desire is to follow God's will, and we hope that that will is to be here for decades and decades to come in fruitful ministry, we want to run our race well.

But if we should move on to another calling or should die suddenly and we're replaced, you have the confidence that there won't be shuffled ministers.

[26 : 48] In other words, someone that has been found guilty of a charge in this area of sexual immorality will not be placed here without your knowledge. I don't believe that the standards clergy are called to, or actually, I don't view them as higher than the calling of the average church member.

In other words, I'm called to be the husband of one wife, one who disciplines and raises his children well in the knowledge and admonition of the Lord. I'm called to not be greedy, not be given to drunkenness.

I believe these are the standards for every member of the church. But I do believe that the response to a transgression, especially in the areas we've mentioned today, when committed by a clergyman should be responded to swiftly and openly.

Because we need this to be a place where the Lord can be worshipped safely, where people know that they can send their children and not fear. And we work very hard to make sure that we have standards in place.

So we ask that you bear with us. If we have situations where we have asked our wives to be with us in a meeting, understand why. It's not an accusation against you or your character, or an accusation against our own character.

[28 : 13] We just want to be people who have a long, fruitful ministry here. We love you guys a lot. I also want to mention that many of us, and I would guess that if we are being honest, most of us have stumbled in this area of sexual sin.

I just want to remind you that forgiveness is offered. One of the first proclamations of forgiveness that Christ gave was to the woman at the well. And he went to her and said, you have six husbands and you're with a seventh guy and he happens to not be your husband.

He didn't close the door to her after that point. Right? Sometimes in some religious settings that woman would be considered useless and not worth anything.

But Christ showed her the path to forgiveness, the path to the kingdom. Remind you that in especially grievous areas of sin, where the guilt has followed you through years, we as Anglicans have the sacrament of confession.

You need to be free from that baggage. We have two people authorized to take a confession here within our congregation. congregation, we have Father Caleb, we have Bishop Dave.

[29 : 47] The seal of confession is sacred. Nothing that is said in confession is shared outside of that time and space. If you have an area of sin from your past that has haunted you to this day, I ask you, I beg you, seek forgiveness from God on it and he will freely offer it to you.

These two men are here to help you. repentance is the foundation of this Lenten season. Come find forgiveness at the foot of the cross.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.