

From Impurity to Purity

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of February 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled From Impurity to Purity and is based on Colossians chapter 3 verses 1 to 10.

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. What a blind, blind world we'd live in.

For no one would see. If literally we did that, plucked our eye out if it causes us to sin. And yet ironically in our world the blind lead the blind all the time and not least in the area of impurity and purity.

For daily we are bombarded, literally, with what is pleasing to the eye. If you want to buy a car, then you are enticed and persuaded to do that by an attractive young girl lying on the bonnet in an advert or on a TV commercial or whatever.

If you want to buy soap, then we're likely to be persuaded about a particular brand of soap or shampoo or something else to use in the toiletries department because some naked or near-naked beautiful body is urging you to buy the product.

[1 : 25] Lingerie and underwear, quite obviously the same sort of thing. Buy a holiday? It'll be a gorgeous model who's trying to tempt you on an advert or even over a counter. They're trying to tell us to pamper ourselves, to indulge ourselves, to have a treat, to go for a splurge.

You deserve it. Not just buying the product, I mean, but feed your lust. For that is traditionally what the word in the sermon title is amongst the seven deadly sins.

Lust. Lust. And lust craves to be fed. It is rumbling to be fed all the time. But it's insatiable. It can never be satisfied.

And like a hungry person whose stomach rumbles from time to time in the middle of the morning or whenever, lust is rumbling away in our eyes, in our minds, in our hearts, in our stomachs, desiring to be fed.

It leads us down blind and dark alleys. Just a fling. Everyone does it. It's just something on the side. It's all right. It's an affair.

[2 : 28] That's what everyone calls it. What an innocent sounding word affair is. It's only soft porn, really. No harm, surely. It's a private matter. It's something that is private to me.

It's nothing to do with my public role, my public office. It's private. It's none of your business. Therefore, it's okay. Or maybe our response is, I didn't expect to get caught.

For there are all the ways in which we sort of water down the seriousness of the sin of impurity and lust. I wonder if you can remember or guess who said these words.

It was probably the wrong thing to do, but I thought it was a private matter. I didn't think it was going to become public. And now that it has become public, I suppose it's a mistake. If it had stayed private, then it wasn't a mistake.

Well, if you can think back just a few years, that blonde-headed superhero of the Australian cricket team, Shane Warne, said those words. He sums it up, doesn't he? If I wasn't going to get caught, it would have been okay.

[3 : 31] If it stayed private, it's all right. But he got caught. And so did Bill Clinton. And so did Wayne Carey. And so did Prince Charles.

And so did King David. The list goes on and on and on. Because one day, you're going to get caught. By God, if by no one else. We live in this sexplosive era of porn, permissiveness and promiscuity, not purity.

We live in an era and an age where safe sex means using a condom. And we don't have a conception, if you excuse the pun, of what is right sex or pure sex.

Our world might be a little bit concerned with safe sex, but that's about it. But surely what God is teaching us is about what is right sex and pure sex, not just in the action, but in the lustful thoughts as well.

I remember when I was in the school cadets and we would do our marching drills. And periodically, the drum major, the man out, the guy out the front, the school kid out the front leading us, would give us our instructions.

[4 : 40] You know, what do I call it? Halt. I was going to say stop, but halt or left turn or about turn. And every now and again, if we were marching in a particular place and there was quite a beautiful young girl or young woman wandering down the footpath or whatever, eyes right.

But what God is teaching us is to get our eyes right. Not to feed our lust by turning to the right or the left, as the case may be, but to get our eyes right and to get them right, to get our heart right.

Now this is not just a problem out there in society. It's not just a problem of the super star sportsmen or the great politicians or the future leaders of the British what was empire.

This is a problem in the church as well. It's a problem amongst Christians as well. Don't think Christians are immune or safe from the sin of lust or impurity. Not at all. In every church, it seems to me, there are struggles of marital infidelity, partly because somebody has, what our society says, had an affair or a fling on the side.

Periodically that comes up in my ministry here and in other places. Probably one of the most common reasons, if not the most common reason, for a minister to leave the ministry is because of some sexual misdemeanor.

[6 : 01] And you would have seen it blazoned on the front page of The Age in the early days of October last year. An Anglican minister in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne was one of those arrested on that day when that great child abuse scandal broke around Australia, when so many people were arrested for pornographic child images on their computers and so on.

A person who, of course, is no longer in Anglican ministry. That's a crime. But there are plenty of others who don't commit a crime but commit a sin. And there are plenty of others who may not actually act but they feed their lusts in their minds, in their eyes, in their hearts.

At the time that that broke, I was in Fremantle in October last year at what is called in the Anglican Church the General Synod. The General Synod meets only every three years and it's representatives of all the different areas of the Anglican Church around Australia.

220 of us or thereabouts. And I was one of the representatives of the Diocese of Melbourne. And a significant part of our discussion and debate and decision making and motions and Anglican legislation and so on through that time was to do with issues of sexual protocols for the church.

What is right behaviour, speech, action for those in Christian leadership and ministry. Not just ordained people such as myself but youth leaders, church wardens, children's ministers and so on.

[7 : 24] Not just at the issue of who you get into bed with but at the issue of what do you say to somebody. And making sure that we set up right boundaries and protocols to protect those who are particularly vulnerable.

And in the middle of that discussion and debate on a very serious issue and a very common sadly issue in the Australian Church, I overheard a lay person from another diocese saying over morning tea break, I can't work out why we're so fussed about who gets into bed with who.

And I thought pity the Anglican Church if that represents the views of many. This is serious issues here. This is a deadly sin. It's not just about getting into bed but it's about what our lustful eyes and hearts are driving us towards.

And because lust is an insatiable craving and hunger, it leads us further and further when it's unchecked. Down dark alleys.

Down deadly paths to destruction. It's the fourth of the deadly sins that we're dealing with. And deadly is a word that you should keep in mind with this sin amongst all the others that we're looking at.

[8 : 33] And like all the other deadly sins, it begins not between the sheets but it begins in the heart. It flows like all the other deadly sins from a heart that enthrones itself as the ruler or king of the world.

You may remember Leonardo DiCaprio in that Titanic film on the bow of the ship with his arms out saying, I am the king of the world. We may not say that out loud but it's what our heart actually says time and time again.

It's the basis or the core of sin. I rule. I am in charge. Not God. And so when set ourselves up on our little thrones in a challenge to God's almighty throne, we get a very distorted view of the world.

Dethroning God and trying to claim to be God in our heart. And from such a distorted view of the world, we end up with a distorted view of values, a distorted action, distorted speech, distorted behaviour.

The main word that's used in the New Testament for lust, as it's traditionally translated, is just a neutral word in fact for strong desire. There are times when strong desire is a positive and right thing.

[9 : 50] So for example, Jesus at his last supper meal in Luke's Gospel we're told, says to his disciples, my strong desire is to eat this Passover. Paul in Philippians chapter 1 says, my strong desire is to be with Christ.

So that strong desire channeled in the right way is a virtue, is a good thing. But in a sense, just like anger that we saw a few weeks ago, when it's coming from a distorted worldview, when we're on the throne and not God, then strong desires get channeled in the wrong direction, and then they're deadly and they're sinful.

Most frequently the word is used negatively in the New Testament. For example, in 1 Peter 4, it's translated in a few Bibles here as passions, and it's associated with drunkenness and carousing and licentiousness.

In Titus chapter 2, it's translated as worldly passions, and again a negative, a sinful thing. In Colossians 3, in the passage that we heard read just a few minutes ago from Esme, it's translated as evil desire.

3,000 years ago from his royal palace, where he was enthroned as the king of Israel, King David espied a beautiful, gorgeous woman bathing on her rooftop.

[11 : 09] The city of David, of David's day, as it is today, that little part of Jerusalem, is steep-sided hills where two valleys actually converge, the Kidron and the Tyrapean Valley, where they converge.

So this little ridge of steep sides of hills is where the city of David was. On top would have been the royal palace. After all, you don't want anyone to look down into the royal palace.

And with flat-top roofs, from David's rooftop, he could look down virtually over his whole little, not kingdom so much as city. 2,000 people probably in his early days as king, that's all, that lived in Jerusalem.

And there he espied this beautiful, probably semi-clad Bathsheba bathing in the hot Israel sun. It could have been as though he was looking at any TV advert that we could see today, to be honest.

But it was the real thing. And he saw, he lusted, he sent for her, he lay with her, and he killed her husband sometime later to cover up the sin.

[12 : 16] Was it okay so long as he wasn't caught? Would David say something like Shane Warne said? See, the trouble is he was caught, not by her husband, not even by Nathan the prophet, but God saw.

And God sent Nathan, his prophet, to confront the king over this matter. And what was at the heart of David's sin?

Not climbing between the sheets, not even really killing her husband Uriah in battle, but as Nathan's words, God's words that is, to David say, back in 2 Samuel 12, why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight?

See, that's what happens at the heart of sin. When we set ourselves up on our throne and take God off his throne, we despise the word of the Lord. And from that position of being so distorted, we go down sinful paths, from our heart, into our thoughts, into our actions.

David's son Solomon, a wise old chap, though full of all sorts of mistakes, wrote in Proverbs chapter 6, these words, Avoid lust, is what Proverbs 6 is telling us in those verses.

[14 : 08] Don't let the desire of her beauty fester in your heart. If it's a prostitute, it's cheap, but if it's somebody who's married, it will stalk you through your life.

Sin has consequences, even if you're not caught out. And the corrective to that, the writer of these verses in Proverbs, Solomon says, My child, keep your father's commandment and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

Bind them upon your heart always. Tie them round your neck. When you walk, they'll lead you. When you lie down, they'll watch over you. When you wake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life to preserve you from the wife of another, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

You see, the corrective there is exactly what David ignored. The corrective is not despising the word of the Lord. The corrective is making sure that the word of the Lord is in your heart.

Physically, you can't actually do it. It says, bind it on your heart and round your wrists and think about it when you're awake and when you're asleep and when you're standing up and when you're doing your work and when in every part of your day.

[15 : 19] Let the word of God infiltrate every part of your life, every part of the day. David didn't do that. He despised the word of the Lord. If you set yourself up on your throne and take God off his throne, you're despising the word of the Lord.

But sitting under God's word as we ought, letting it be our authority all our day is putting God on the throne, not us on the throne. You see, God's word to us, the scriptures that is, is our authority.

It is sitting under the authority of God's word that keeps God on the throne and us off it. And it will keep our hearts pure so that we will not sin, so that we'll resist the temptations of lust and the actions that may follow.

So as David found out his mistake was despising the word of the Lord, as Proverbs chapter 6 teaches us, we're to let the word of the Lord infiltrate us all our day so that we will resist the sin of lust.

And Paul, a thousand years after David and Solomon, wrote pretty much the same sort of thing in Colossians chapter 3. A little bit beyond the reading of tonight, Paul, as he's arguing in Colossians chapters 2 and 3 about moving from a sinful life to a virtuous life, he says in Colossians chapter 3 verse 16, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

[16 : 43] In effect, he's saying what's said in Proverbs chapter 6. That God's word is to be in our hearts. And he goes on in chapter 3 verse 16 to say, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

So that letting the word of Christ dwell in our hearts richly is not just something that I go and do in the privacy of my own room, but that you and I do together, that we do together as we teach and admonish each other.

As we insist on each other submitting to the authority of God's word. That's the corrective that the scriptures are telling us about. Don't think that these are just ink on paper, that it's another book to gather dust in a bookshelf, that it's something to drag out occasionally, reluctantly and dutifully to read a few words.

Not at all. These are powerful words. These are more powerful than any other words ever written by anybody else. These are words to penetrate to our heart. We've got to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly so that following Solomon's injunction, following Nathan to David's rebuke, following Paul's instruction to the Colossians here, the Bible is to form us from our heart out.

It'll never do that if the only time we ever open it is in church. It won't do that if the only time we ever think about it is when we listen to a sermon. It won't do that if the only times are sermons and Bible studies.

[18 : 06] Daily, regularly, in fellowship and alone, God's word is to be infiltrating our hearts. It's a word that's powerful enough to do that. And that's what the writer of Proverbs is saying, what Nathan was saying, what Paul is saying here as well.

More than memorising verses, more than paying lip service to God's word, more than being selective about the bits that we like and we don't like, we are to submit to all of God's word. We've got to be careful about this.

Just this afternoon I was preaching at an inter-church service at another church in Doncaster and somebody came up to me, an old lady, don't know which church she comes from and she came up to me as soon as the service was over and she said, I don't like what you say.

I said, oh, you don't agree with what the Bible's saying? She said, no, the Spirit tells me something different. I said, the Spirit will never contradict the word. And we didn't go very far in this conversation. Rather saddened me to be honest.

But it's actually fairly common. All of us actually like to leave bits of the Bible out, the bits that we feel uncomfortable about. When we start doing that, we're putting ourselves on the throne and God and God's word under us.

[19 : 13] And we end up so distorted in our thinking and so distorted in our actions. Sin comes from the heart as it does. The medicine we need must go to the heart. It's no good putting band-aids on the solutions.

That may help for a little bit. But we need heart medicine to deal with heart sin as this sin is. And God's powerful word is balm to our sick hearts. It corrects us, it reproves us, it trains us in righteousness.

It is sharper than a two-edged sword, it pierces to our very heart. So God's word then is the first and essential part of what we might call a cocktail of remedy for sin.

When someone is suffering serious illness, they often have a whole range of medicine. My father is suffering from terminal cancer and he has what can be called a cocktail of pills.

And every period during the day he takes some of these pills and some of those and he has to write it all down and his wife has to check it because he can't remember all the different things that he takes at different times of the day. Well in a sense to deal with sin there is a sense in which it's a cocktail of remedy.

[20 : 18] God's word is foundational to this. God's spirit is foundational to this. I'll say a little bit more about that today. We'll see more about that in a later week. In a sense the remedy is the same for each of these seven sins.

By the time we get to the seventh one hopefully it's all very clear in our minds. But secondly as we've seen in previous weeks and again is the case tonight the power of Jesus' death must be appropriated to us because the blood of Jesus' death was powerful not just to forgive us our sin but leave us in it but was powerful to actually cleanse us from sin change us from sin as well.

And again looking at Colossians tonight we see hints of this in chapter 2. In chapter 2 verse 11 Paul says to the Colossian Christians in Christ also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision.

That's talking about the heart changing. How? By putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ when you were buried with him in baptism you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made you alive together with him when he forgave us all our trespasses erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.

[21 : 32] He set this aside nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them triumphing over them in it. What he's saying there simply is this that when Jesus died on the cross we died with him and in him.

When Jesus was buried we were buried in him and with him. When Jesus rose from the dead we rose in him and with him. That is as Jesus died for sin our sin died when we were in him.

In our identification as Christians in the death burial and resurrection of Jesus we too died were buried and rose to new life. Sin was defeated in those acts by Jesus and us in him mean that sin is dealt with by those events.

That is the death and resurrection of Jesus must be appropriated in our lives as Christians so that sin is conquered in us by those events. How do we do that then?

Well as Paul goes on with his argument into the passage we heard tonight we read these commands to us. We must expend effort. We don't sit back and let God just take it away from us.

[22 : 38] We expend effort. So in chapter 3 verse 1 seek the things that are above. We've been raised with Christ seek the things that are above. That's our job.

That's our duty responsibility to expend effort seeking the things of heaven seeking the things of Christ seeking the things of virtue and purity. We've got to pursue those things and seek them.

Verse 2 the imperative or command here is set your minds on things that are above not the things that are on earth. So instead of setting our minds on lustful desires on earth we set our minds our thoughts our intent our will our direction on the things of heaven.

That's to consume our attention in our minds. If we look on to chapter 3 verse 5 put to death whatever in you is earthly. In effect it's saying the same sort of thing but it's saying it in a slightly different way.

The things that are earthly in us the list follows in verse 5 fornication impurity there's the word passion evil desire and greed which is idolatry put them to death.

[23 : 43] By setting our minds on the things that are above by seeking the things that are above and also positively in verse 12 clothe yourselves with virtue compassion kindness humility meekness patience forgiveness love they're the things that we've got to do we've got to pursue them it's not a once off action a continuous determination in our minds we must be resolute in our intention to do those things as we're instructed there in Colossians chapter 3 that's how we appropriate the death of Christ for in doing all of those things with all the effort and attention and power that we can muster we do so successfully by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection not by our own power I want to give a few practical steps here about what sorts of things we should be doing some of them I've already hinted at and some of them we've also seen hints of in previous weeks in effect this could be the set or checklist for any of these weeks on these seven deadly sins firstly keep reading the Bible keep letting it form us listen to God's voice not the voice inside our head let it infiltrate us secondly pray pray God's word into our hearts pray that God will write what we read inside us that it will penetrate to our hearts ask God to show us our sin so that we can identify it pray for the desire to be righteous for I know in my life as well as in those to whom I minister from time to time that often when we're grappling with sin one of the great blockages or obstacles is we desire to keep on in sin and lust is a very pleasurable sin it's hard actually not to desire lust we should pray that God gives us the right desire thirdly give thanks for the powerful death and resurrection of Jesus

Paul says in Colossians 3.16 when he talks about letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly he goes on to say sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts that is be thankful for Jesus' death and resurrection to conquer sin express that thanks give thanks for the powerful blood to forgive and the powerful blood to cleanse fourthly this is no particular order I suppose be quick to flee temptation don't underestimate its power and don't overestimate your power or strength be aware of your vulnerability if you're in a place of temptation get out don't flirt with it but too often you see we actually flirt with temptation we see something tempting we think oh well I'm safe on this side of the fence but what we actually do is get as close as we can and to be honest the whole lectern would keep tumbling down too many Christians are like that sort of on the fence almost peering over getting as close as we can thinking that we're still safe when we're not flee temptation and if you have to be in a place of temptation set up bounds of accountability that's the fifth point for example

I know of Christian ministers who know that when they're away from their wife usually is the case or husband I suppose in some cases for some period of time they know that they are vulnerable sexually so whenever they travel they will only travel on condition that either they take their spouse or they share a hotel room with somebody else that they're travelling with a colleague or whatever or they're staying in someone's private home so they're not alone in a motel or hotel somewhere if you've got to identify your point of vulnerability whether it's lust or some other sin for that matter and be accountable at those times and that means we have strong Christian fellowship that we've got Christians that we can share these matters with pray about them and be accountable to others with them we've got to sixly pursue virtue it's like the illustration I think I used a few weeks ago if somebody says to you I don't want you to think about elephants all of a sudden we think about elephants the way to shun sin is not to keep thinking about it but to think about a virtue in its place to think about purity to set your minds on heaven is what Paul has said back in verses 1 and 2 of Colossians 3 pursue real love not illicit love and lust desire God not desire the lust and sin seventhly set God on the throne of your heart get off the throne get your centre right

God on the throne so that out from that will flow right views of our values and sins and virtues put God on the throne and confess your sin to him put God on the throne and submit to him put God on the throne and obey his commands put God on the throne and honour him and pray to honour him put God on the throne and look forward to the full satisfaction of heaven and eighthly and lastly for tonight be people of grace through and through see it's grace that saves us to start with something that we don't deserve mercy that is undeserved or unmerited by us but the grace that saves us is powerful in Romans chapter 6 verses 12 let not sin reign in your mortal bodies for you are people of grace not law grace tackles the reign of sin in our hearts in Titus chapter 2 the same sort of idea grace appeared training us to renounce sin grace is powerful so have a robust understanding of the grace of God that saves you and sanctifies you and sustains you to heaven remember that as you expend effort on all of those things the power to change is God's power are not yours sin is eradicated in our life or dealt with or subdued in our life then don't think

I've done it that's not grace God's done it and acknowledge that remember that the power of God comes from the powerful death and resurrection of Jesus powerful blood indeed it comes from a powerful word the scriptures it comes from a powerful spirit who writes that word on our hearts we need to integrate all of those things together the death and resurrection of Jesus the Bible the Holy Spirit all of them acting together to change us from our heart outwards the Spirit is the agent of that power in effect applying God's word to our hearts applying Jesus' death to our hearts applying his resurrection to our hearts as well the Spirit is the agent of breaking the dominion of sin over us applying the cross don't underestimate the power of sin is what I'm hinting at it enslaves us and destroys us and we need something beyond us to break its reign its rule and dominion and that's what the death of Jesus does triumphing over the enemies as we saw in Colossians chapter 2 disarming the rulers and authorities making a public example of them triumphing over them in it in the cross that's where the power comes real power to break the slavery to sin one of the most common illustrations or metaphors used of Jesus' death is its redemption or ransom something paid to liberate us not from ancient Egypt as the Old Testament people of God understood liberation or redemption but from slavery to sin it rules us it controls us we need God's power to break that rule when Jesus taught a parable to his disciples and others the parable of the sower he talked about the farmer scattering the seed on different types of soil and towards the end of that parable he said that some or others are those sown among the thorns these are the ones who hear the word but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth and the desire for other things that is lust come in and choke the word and it yields nothing the desire for other things chokes

[31 : 03] God's word as King David had experienced when he despised God's word you see as the word is choked by our evil desires lust loses its logic it sends us down crazy paths to destruction for in that parable the sower such seed yields nothing it dies it's destroyed when I lived in England in 1993 to 5 the Tory government the conservative government under John Major lurched from one sexual scandal to another one of the most bizarre was I think a junior minister I think this was in about 1995 only a year or so before Tony Blair Labour government was elected this junior minister in his 40s was found dead in his flat or apartment or whatever with an orange in his mouth it was described that it was some sort of sexual thrill seeking probably by himself that somehow by having an orange in your mouth you would sort of be almost asphyxiated and in the lack of air or oxygen or whatever

I don't quite understand all this sort of stuff there would be a greater thrill in some sort of other sexual activity choked in effect and that's what lust does it chokes us chokes God's word to us destroys us and we die lust indeed is a deadly sin but thanks be to God that the power of sin is broken by the death and resurrection of Jesus by God's word that testifies to that appropriated to us by the spirit of Jesus Amen