

Sensualitis

Ephesians 4:17-24, 5:1-20

When I was preparing this message series, *Affluenza and Other Ailments*, I did not anticipate Zoom services for the whole family.

Before I begin, I need to explain that the content of this message is not *G-rated* for a general audience. It's not *R-rated*; but it could be described a PG, a message that will benefit from parental guidance. So I would encourage parents of teens or pre-teens to take time, afterward, to talk with them about this message. Now that I have your attention, let's plunge in. . . .

One of the Netflix series that Connie and I enjoy is *Madam Secretary*. This a political drama that features Elizabeth McCord, a former CIA analyst and political science professor now serving as Secretary of State. Her husband, Henry, is a professor of Christian ethics, and they have three young adult children, two daughters and a son.

The episodes deal with a variety of current national and international issues. As Elizabeth and Henry engage with these issues, they are depicted as smart, competent, principled, compassionate, wise, creative, and good. They have a committed and healthy marriage and they actively and wisely invest together in parenting their children through the complications of growing into responsible adults.

Madam Secretary is better and cleaner than many, if not most, movies, television series, and streaming shows. Yet there is a glaring lapse in the basic decency of the series: neither Elizabeth or Henry challenge their children about casual sex or cohabitation. Through the five seasons we have watched, sexual encounters are not pictured, only alluded to, yet . . . the unspoken message is that sexual purity is an outdated trait of character.

Even a media series noted for its decency has a shameless blindspot, It is as though our contemporary culture has taken a black pen to strike-out all the portions of Scripture that reveal the clear standard of God, which is: that human sexuality is to be expressed within a pure, single life or in a faithful marriage between a man and a woman.

The word "sensuality," is defined as seductiveness, eroticism, and carnality; and the suffix "itis"—as a medical term—denotes abnormal conditions, excessive tendencies, and obsession.

Put together, this creates the word, "sensualitis"—the pervasive and pathological cultural message that immodesty, immorality, and impurity are normal and acceptable. Let me repeat that, slowly.

"Sensualitis" is the *pervasive* and *pathological* cultural message that *immodesty*, *immorality*, and *impurity* are *normal* and *acceptable*.

Like the smog and exhaust fumes that our daughter and her family are exposed to, day in and day out, in Bangkok, Thailand, we cannot escape the toxic pollution of "sensualitis." This infection is *everywhere!*

In the year 2020, to live a life worthy of our calling—Ephesians 4:1; to put on our new self—Ephesians 4:24; to live as people of light—Ephesians 5:8; is pretty much to navigate a minefield of unrelenting sensual temptation.

The good news is that it is absolutely possible to repudiate the false messages of sensualitis and to live in a way that is good and right and true—when we have the courage to make radical choices.

In Ephesians 4:17-24, the apostle Paul refers to "sensuality" as a remnant of our *old* life *before Christ*.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to *sensuality*, greedy to practice every kind of *impurity*. But that is not the way you learned in Christ!

As followers of Jesus, we are throwing off our old self, our old nature, our old identity, which is corrupted by sensuality and impurity; and we are putting on a new self, a new nature, a new identity. We are in the midst of a complete "makeover" in all areas of life.

Connie has an uncle in Abilene, Kansas, who is a master mechanic. As a hobby, he restores antique cars and tractors. The crown jewel of his collection is a 1909 Model T Ford Roadster. When Henry Ford started to make Model T's in 1908, Uncle Gale told me, he made them one at a time in different colors—gray, red, green, and blue. Eight years later, in 1915, he started producing Model T's on an assembly line, all of them black. Well, Uncle Gale's roadster was built in May, 1909—the 3,665th Model T ever produced. When I first saw it, it was partially assembled with parts all over his garage, some on his workbench, some on the floor, and some still to be reconstructed. It was in rough condition, to say the least.

I visited him again, 10 months later, and the car looked like this: The parts that were *missing, bent, and broken* had been restored. Once again, the car was in mint condition. It was *magnificent!*



The point is: in relationship with Jesus, the original design for our lives, which has been marred by sin, is being reconstructed into mint condition. The old self is junk; the new self is bright and beautiful. We reject "sensuality" and embrace God's standard of purity so that our life is repaired and restored like Uncle Gale's red roadster.

Last week we talked about greed; the word we used was "influenza." In the same passage, Ephesians, chapter 5, Paul *also* focuses on immorality and impurity, a critical area of life which, more often than not, needs to be repaired in order to experience a radiantly restored life. Do you remember the strong words that Paul uses, starting in verses 3?

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with

them. . . [And skipping down to verse 17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

To resist sensuality, we must make (at least) three radical choices.
The **first** is: **to understand what the Lord wants**.

When we are bombarded by the skewed thinking of “sensualitis,” Paul insists, we are not to be confused, or misled, or deceived. Instead, we are to understand clearly what God wants for us: which is: either a pure, single life or a faithful marriage between a man and a woman.

This is the clear and consistent biblical standard which the church has preached and taught for 2,000 years in every tradition of the universal church: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

It is being called into question today, in some churches, *not* because God’s Word has changed, but because of the pervasive influence of “sensualitis.”

God’s Word has not changed.
The standard still holds, and will for all time, because a radiantly restored life requires sexual purity.

In Genesis 39, Joseph was absolutely sure of what God wanted when Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce him. He said: “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” Day after day, she persisted, and he steadfastly refused. One day, when she caught him by his cloak, he tore himself away, and ran out of the house to escape.

When it comes to impurity and immorality, we cannot *dabble*, we cannot *delay*, we cannot risk *a little bit*, Like Joseph, we must *run as fast and far away* as we can— with an *unwavering commitment* to God’s standard of purity.

The good news is that this is absolutely possible!
Paul goes on to reveal the one sure defense— a **second radical choice—to live in the light**.
Picking up the passage, again in Ephesians 5, starting with verse 8:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Just like mushrooms grow in the dark,
immorality and impurity thrive in darkness.
Some people openly flaunt their immodesty and indecency,
but most people try to hide impurity and immorality.
So the best possible defense and safeguard is to *live in the light!*

Let me name two practical ways that we can live in the light.

One is to assert control over our electronic devices.
We can place screens and filters on our devices.
We can carefully select the settings on streaming shows.
We can link our devices so that everyone in the household—
dad, mom, and kids—knows what everyone else is seeing on the internet.
“Whoa!” you say, that’s an invasion of privacy!
No, it’s a radical commitment to mutual accountability.
It backs up our understanding that God wants purity
with firm and decisive action.
We are being *wise*. We are making visible that we see.
Very practically and specifically, we are *choosing* to live in the light!

Another way to live in the light is to find someone
with whom we can be wide open and completely honest:
a parent, a spouse, a pastor, an accountability partner;
a small group or a Celebrate Recovery group.
When we are encountering temptation, we tell them.
When we have fallen into sin, we tell them.

We admit our temptation,
we uncover our wrongdoing, hard as that is,
by confession that is *real* and *honest* and *humiliating* and *effective*.
The best cure for the deadly infection of sensualitis
is light—*openness, vulnerability, confession*.

David is a good biblical example. He did not keep guard over his eyes. He did not seek out an accountability partner, so God sent one to him—Nathan, the prophet—who rebuked David for his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. To his credit, David confessed to Nathan:

“I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13, ESV)

and he confessed to God in the great prayer of remorse in Psalm 51 (51:4)

‘Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

This is a pattern for us.

David confessed his sin to another person, Nathan, and to God, who could forgive and save.

Both are needed to destroy immorality and impurity.

When people are caught in the throes of sexual sin, they no longer think or act rationally.

Now—while we are still sane and sensible—is the time to put these safeguards in place: to take control over our devices, to find an accountability partner, to take swift and decisive steps to live in the light.

In chapter 5, verses 15-20, Paul enlarges his response to include all of life with a **third radical choice: be careful how you live.**

It may seem like Paul is changing subjects; but this is a larger, wider view of the same subject—starting with verse 15:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we are *careful* how we live—*overall*;
When we are *wise* in *all* areas of our life;
when we are *filled* with the Holy Spirit,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
giving thanks for everything to God;

that is, when the whole of our life is in reasonably good, working order, we are protected from “sensualitis.”

We see this in the biblical account of the woman at the well in John 4. This woman had been involved in serial marriages, five of them, and now had a live-in boyfriend; and Jesus offered her living water that would transform the *whole* of her life. He said:

Everyone who drinks of this [well] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to [abundant, full, satisfying] eternal life.”

We are vulnerable to impurity when we feel *empty* or *bored* or *stressed* or *overworked*. So another safeguard against “sensualitis” is to be “careful how we live” in *all* areas of life, so that, to the extent possible, we avoid these hazards.

This is not to say that our lives have to be perfectly in order, but by our day-to-day choices, we *can* be careful how we live in our marriage—by active and joyful intimacy; in our single life—by devoted service to Jesus and others; in our vocation—by productive work; in our retirement—by meaningful service; in our relationships—by wholesome friendships; in our perspective—by adequate rest and recreation; and *all of these together*, protect us from the lure of lust and impurity.

Conclusion.

The high standard of morality in the second half of Ephesians is fully possible by the gospel truths in the first half.

When we make radical choices
first, to understand what the Lord wants
second, to live in the light
 and **third**, to be careful how we live, overall,
 we can *survive*, we can *overcome*, we can *thrive*—
 even in a culture saturated by sensualitis.

And when we do mess up, we can turn back to the mercy, forgiveness, and power of God through Christ Jesus.

Jesus suffered and died and rose again
so that we can be *saved* by grace, so that we can be *forgiven*,
so that we can be *transformed* by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus loves everyone: those who have safeguards firmly in place,
and those who are still enmeshed in impurity and immorality.
He will *forgive*, as he did David. He will *protect*, as he did Joseph.
He will work in all areas of our life to bring *order and contentment*
as presumably he did with the woman at the well.

Like Uncle Gale's red roadster,
in relationship with Jesus, we can be *forgiven* and *repaired*;
and by making *radical choices*, the image of God can be restored in us.
The original design for our lives, which has been marred by sin,
can be reconstructed into mint condition.
Our new self can be *bright* and *beautiful* and *deeply fulfilling*.

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