

Zero Tolerance for Lust

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Psalter: 162

Scripture: Ephesians 5

Psalter: 309

Sermon Text: Ephesians 5:3–4

Psalter: 123

Psalter: 360

But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

—Ephesians 5:3–4

In the last few years, we have heard a lot of talk about possible radioactive contamination from the Japanese nuclear reactor damaged in 2011 by the earthquake and tsunami. But the accident in Japan pales in comparison to the disaster that took place in 1986 in Chernobyl of the former Soviet Union. Even today, an exclusion zone of a thousand square miles prohibits public access. When the accident happened, many emergency responders rushed to the scene to put out the fire. They thought they were only battling fire and smoke. They did not understand that invisible to their eyes was the radioactive contamination in that smoke. Dozens of workers died within a few months, and hundreds suffered from acute radiation sickness. Downwind of the nuclear reactor, horses, cattle, and even trees died. No one knows how many people in Europe were affected.

Today I am warning you about a kind of spiritual contamination that is invisible to the eye but, just like

the smoke of Chernobyl, has the power to bring sickness and death. Many people today scoff at this warning, yet in their souls is a growing cancer that will ultimately destroy them if it is not removed by the great Physician. I am speaking of sexual lust. “What?” someone may say, “Sexual lust is fun and natural. I enjoy it.” But like a poison that tastes sweet but destroys your life, so sexual lust is candy-coated death.

We must have zero tolerance for lust. Some places and schools have a policy of zero tolerance regarding harassment or drugs. Ephesians 5:3–4 calls upon Christians to have a personal policy of zero tolerance regarding sinful sexual lust. This Scripture speaks of “fornication,” which means having a sexual relationship with someone to whom you are not married. It also speaks of “uncleanliness.” That does not refer to getting dirt on your body but of contaminating yourself with things offensive to God and harmful to you, especially sexual sins of various kinds.¹ It also speaks of “covetousness,” a super-sized desire for more and more, whether it is a desire for more money or more sexual pleasure.² Put these words together and you have worldly lust, especially sinful sexual lust.

When it comes to having zero tolerance for lust, this Scripture answers three questions. How do we have zero tolerance for lust? Why should we have zero tolerance for lust? What should we embrace or “put on” instead of lust? So, with God’s help, based on Ephesians 5:3–4, we want to consider the how, the why, and the what of *zero tolerance for lust*.

1. On the association of “uncleanliness” (*akatharsia*) with sexual sin, see Rom. 1:24; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:7 (in context).

2. Charles Hodge takes “covetousness” (*pleonexia*) here to refer to materialistic greed. Andrew Lincoln takes it as sexual greed. See Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 205; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 322.

How Do We Have Zero Tolerance for Lust?

Ephesians 5:3 teaches us, “Let it not be once named among you.” To “name” something in this case means to mention it or talk about it.³ This does not mean that we can’t even say the words “fornication,” or “lust,” or “immorality.” If it did, then we couldn’t even read this verse of the Bible aloud. What it means is that sexual sin should be a matter of shame.⁴ It is disgraceful. It should be such an unpleasant subject that we don’t even want to talk about it if we don’t have to. It is like a huge, disgusting sore that you want to cover up so no one can see it. Ephesians 5:12 says, “For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.”

It is truly sad how our society has lost its sense of shame. While we should not seek to cause people inappropriate shame, there is a healthy and good kind. Shame gives us a sense that some things are not normal; they are revolting, horrifying, and wrong. Shame is a voice inside of us that says we should avoid such things. It arises from a sense of the evil of sin. Sin damages us, for we were created in the image of God.

Sex is not a form of private recreation. Sex outside of marriage has huge personal consequences. A single sexual experience can affect you for the rest of your life. Fornicators sin against themselves, violating the natural principle of self-love. The Bible warns in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” Romans 1:24 warns that those given up to “uncleanness through the lusts of their own bodies...dishonour their own bodies.”

3. See Isa. 19:17 and Jer. 23:36 (LXX), where the same Greek word for “name” (*onomazō*) is used in the sense of to mention or speak of something.

4. The idea of shame is clear in the Greek text. The term “filthiness” in Eph. 5:4 is literally “shamefulness” (*aischrotēs*), from the same root as “shame” (*aischros*) in v.12.

God created us to be men and women of honor and dignity. He did not make us to grovel in filth like animals, but to walk with Him in holiness and ultimately walk with Him in glory. Our noble calling on earth includes our sexuality. Sex itself, when properly enjoyed within the marital relationship, is beautiful and clean, not dirty or shameful. It is precisely because sex is good and honorable and promotes a good conscience that we should allow no tolerance for sins that twist and pervert God's good gift. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." The "bed" (the sexual union of a husband and wife) is inherently precious, honorable, and clean as God's plan and creation. The price of waiting for sexual relations until marriage is well worth the exercise of self-control to embrace the joy of beautiful marital relations.

Sexual sin and the evil desires that produce it therefore should be viewed as shameful, a kind of ugliness we want to avoid. There was a time in our society when getting pregnant without being married would have brought shame. Now many people think that living together outside of marriage is normal, desirable, and preferable. Pornography, homosexuality, and having multiple sexual partners⁵ are no longer done in secret, but celebrated, promoted, and forced upon us in the public square. Today we even have a president who has persuaded his political party to inscribe into its political platform an unqualified support for homosexual marriage. We are told that it is beautiful and normal and healthy and good for anyone to have sex with anyone so

5. We can expect to read of increasingly bizarre examples of this in the future, e.g., in Brazil a government official recently granted a "civil union" to a trio (one man and two women). See Mariano Castillo, "Unprecedented Civil Union Unites Brazilian Trio," August 31, 2012, *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/31/world/americas/brazil-polyfaithful-union/index.html> (accessed Sept. 13, 2012).

long as all the parties consent. But God, who made us and owns us, does not give His consent.

Having rejected God, our society is seeing the inevitable consequence described in Romans 1:32: “Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.” In many ways, we are beginning to see North America slide into the same corruptions that wreaked havoc in the Roman Empire, the wicked society where Christianity was born. We see Ephesians 4:19 sadly fulfilled among us, as people are calloused to the evils they commit, “who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

It is time for Christians to rise up in holy rebellion against this evil and to show the world what true love looks like. Romans 12:9 says, “Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” Literally, that could be translated, “Love without hypocrisy, hating the evil, clinging to the good.” Fake love, hypocritical love, may accept all kinds of evil with a mindless smile. But real love, true love, must always include hatred against what is evil just as surely as it rejoices in what is good (1 Cor. 13:5). If we really care about people, then we will hate sin because sin destroys.

How do we show zero tolerance for lust in practical ways? If fornication and uncleanness and covetousness are normal and acceptable in a wicked world, how can we be abnormal and radical in a good and holy way? Romans 13:14 says, “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” Let me unpack that in five ways.

1. No tolerance for lustful talk.

Ephesians 5:4 focuses the issue on how we talk: “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting.” Does it surprise you that sexual sin often begins with how we talk?

Immorality often begins with smooth, pleasant words (Prov. 6:24; 7:21). It might sound like a compliment about how good your body looks or how much someone likes you and wants to be with you—with sexual overtones that should be reserved for how a husband speaks privately to his wife. It might be a joke. This world is full of sexual innuendo. In fact, much of modern comedy consists of the clever use of words to make you think of sex when talking about other things. In other cases, people openly talk in a vulgar and filthy manner, such as in telling dirty jokes.

What should the Christian's response be to this kind of talk? We must have zero tolerance for it. We must never speak in a way that promotes fornication or uncleanness. If our friends ever talk that way, we should walk away. If they insist on talking that way, we should find better friends.

2. No tolerance for lustful looks.

Christ taught us in Matthew 5:28, “That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” You need to take severe action to avoid lustful looks. This is particularly a problem for many men, but women are increasingly falling prey to it. Like Job, you need to make a covenant with your eyes not to look upon someone's body with the intent of sexual desire and enjoyment unless you are married to that person (Job 31:1).

Zero tolerance means you must cut out of your life everything that entices you to lust. If you have pornographic images in your possession, whether in print or stored electronically, destroy them. If you visit or are tempted to visit pornographic websites, establish an accountability partner and install a protection system that works. If a video game, movie, television program, or magazine entices your eyes, get rid of it. If a particular person allures you, find ways to avoid looking at that person in lustful ways.

3. No tolerance for lustful reading.

Just as spoken words are powerful to excite our desires, so are written words. In fact, some women who have little interest in pornographic pictures may be caught up in reading books that excite romantic fantasies that are just as defiling. Furthermore, many science fiction and fantasy books popular among young people depict sexual immorality—sometimes subtly and sometimes scandalously, but always in a positive light without showing its tragic consequences.

Ask yourself, “Does this reading material show the honor and dignity of sexual purity, or does it lift up sin?” Remember the command of Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

4. No tolerance for lustful dress.

Your actions express your character, and how you dress expresses your heart. If you desire to draw attention to your body, then you dress in a way that accentuates parts of your body to grab the attention and stir the desire of others. If you dress provocatively, the Bible says that your heart is wrong (Prov. 7:10). You will then attract the kind of man to you that would be attracted to a prostitute. Perhaps you are beautiful, but Proverbs 11:22 says that a beautiful person without godly wisdom is like a piece of golden jewelry in the snout of a pig.

I am not suggesting that you should dress in a potato sack. There is nothing wrong with spending a moderate amount of time and money to wear attractive clothing. The Lord Himself showed a concern that people have adequate clothing after the fall of man (Gen. 3:21). But we should dress with modesty and focus on the inward beauty of the heart, not flaunting beauty (1 Tim. 2:9;

1 Pet. 3:3–4). Very soon these bodies grow old, die, and return to the earth.

5. No tolerance for lustful touch.

As physical creatures, we were made to touch and be touched. In our culture, people use physical touch, such as a handshake or a hug, to greet and welcome each other (Rom. 16:16), without there being anything sexual about it. However, there is such a thing as a sexual touch (1 Cor. 7:1). In order to bless us with a vibrant sexual life in marriage, God designed our bodies to respond to sexual touching and kissing. In marriage it is a beautiful and delightful thing to communicate our affection, friendship, and sexual desire through touch.

But kissing and touching can lead unmarried couples to lust and fornication (Prov. 7:13). Christians therefore need to exercise wisdom and self-control in how we touch people, especially someone to whom you are attracted but not married. There are some actions that the Bible clearly associates with making love, such as touching each other's private parts (Prov. 5:19–20). These are off limits for single people. And if someone touches you in that way against your will, you need to get away from him, end the relationship, and confide in a close friend or pastor, or, if you are young, tell your father immediately.

With regard to holding hands and kissing in a courting or Christian dating relationship, it would go beyond the Scriptures to lay down laws for all Christians. Each Christian must know himself, be wise, and exercise self-control. Wise is the father who establishes guidelines and rules for his children in these areas for their protection and guidance. Wise is the couple who talks these matters over early on in their relationship and, with God's help, resolves to set firm biblical lines of self-denial for their premarital relationship.

Have zero tolerance for lustful touch. So ask yourself these questions. Does this activity stir sexual desires in

me or the person I am with? If someone saw us doing this, would he think that we are likely headed for sexual intercourse? If my parents caught me doing this, would I feel ashamed? Dear friends, let there be not even a hint of sexual immorality among you!

Why Should We Have Zero Tolerance for Lust?

Why does love for God and love for people move us to firmly reject sexual sin? What motivates us to view fornication and uncleanness as shameful? Why should we have no tolerance for lustful talk, lustful looks, lustful reading, lustful dress, or lustful touch? Ephesians 5:3–4 and its context give us five reasons.

1. Lust is not love (v. 2).

It is no accident that just before warning us against lust, Paul wrote about true Christian love. Throughout history people have confused lust for love. Like Amnon towards Tamar, they can feel so much desire for someone it makes them feel sick. But their lustful desires have more in common with hatred than love (2 Sam. 13:1–2, 4, 15). No matter how much someone might say he loves you, if he tries to draw you into a sexual relationship before marriage, that is not love. It's probably mostly selfishness and using other people to get what he wants.

Ephesians 5:2 says, “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.” Notice here that the character of true love is self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is costly. It can be painful to wait until you are married. It's hard to say goodbye in the evening to someone for whom you have strong feelings, and nights can be long and lonely. But love is willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of the other; mutual self-restraint is well worth the price of preserving an unstained wedding day and of avoiding a bad conscience in marriage. Premarital

relations have a way of wreaking havoc in the area of intimacy within marriage.

Seducing someone or allowing yourself to be seduced into fornication is the opposite of love; ultimately it is an act of hatred. The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 that those who commit fornication “defraud” others. The idea is that you greedily steal something precious from them.⁶ For the sake of your own pleasure, you have led someone to sin against the living God and robbed that person of a good conscience and heavenly reward. You have used that person’s body and jeopardized that person’s eternal destiny. Furthermore, you have also defrauded that person’s parents and family and your own family, bringing shame and dishonor on them and robbing them of the joy of seeing their dear children walk in purity to their wedding day.⁷

Sexual sin also has massive public consequences for a nation. Sexual sin is an act of hatred against society at large. Sex in marriage is the cement that holds together the foundation of our society: the family. Sexual immorality breaks up that foundation by weakening marriages. It spreads painful, embarrassing, and sometimes deadly diseases. Immorality also naturally produces children out of wedlock. Standard contraceptives still fail to prevent pregnancy in 9–15% of cases per year.⁸ Among teenagers

6. The term “defraud” (*pleonekteō*) means to take advantage of someone, often financially but also in other ways (2 Cor. 2:11; 7:2; 12:17–18). Interestingly, it is from the same root as the word “covetousness” (*pleonexia*) in our text.

7. The text in 1 Thess. 4:6 says, “...defraud his brother,” not “...defraud the woman,” suggesting that the crime in view is particularly against the father of the woman. Under the Mosaic law (Ex. 22:17), a man who seduces a virgin must pay her father the bride-price even if they do not marry each other.

8. Haishan Fu, Jacqueline E. Darroch, Taylor Haas, and Nalini Ranjit, “Contraceptive Failure Rates: New Estimates From the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 56–63, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/jour->

the contraceptive failure rate is even higher. That means that tens of thousands of children are conceived every year by people using contraceptives. What will happen to these children if their parents are not joined in a loving marriage? How many are aborted? What is happening to our society right now as millions of people have grown up without a stable family? Is this love, to engage in an activity harmful to your friend, family, future children, and nation?

This is one great reason to have zero tolerance for lust: lust is not love.

2. Lust defiles desire (v. 3a).

Lust takes something good, useful, beautiful, and pleasing to God and turns it into evil, a monstrosity that is wasteful, ugly, and displeasing in His eyes. In particular, it deforms our desires and makes them dirty. That is why sexual sin is called “uncleanness” (v. 3). It is like throwing vomit and manure on an expensive painting by a gifted artist; sin casts spiritual dirt and filth upon God’s amazing creation of our sexuality.

One way lust does this is by wrapping itself in the lie that sex can be our god. Ephesians 4:22 speaks of “deceitful lusts”—strong desires driven by lies. All sin is at root an attempt to treat God’s creations as if they were the Creator instead of trusting Him who alone has never-ending happiness (Rom. 1:25). Sex is good, but it is not God. But when in lust we worship sex as our god, we hope for more than it can deliver.

This is a reason why fornication is connected to “covetousness” or greediness (Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). Sinners think that if they will just feed their sin, it will be quiet and satisfied. But the truth is that the more they feed their lust, the more it consumes them and the greedier

nals/3105699.html (accessed Sep. 13. 2012). Failure rate for the Pill was 9% and for the male condom was 15%.

it gets. In the end, lust will turn you into an empty shell of hunger, always wanting more and never content with what you have. The only answer is not to feed lust but to kill it by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Have zero tolerance for lust because it does not satisfy desire, but defiles it.

3. Lust contradicts our holy calling (v. 3b).

In Ephesians 5:3, Paul reminds us that we must give no place to lust because this “becometh saints.” In other words, sexual purity is fitting and proper for those called and consecrated to belong to God. The word “saint” literally means “holy ones.”⁹ It does not describe some elite class of super-spiritual people; all true Christians are saints by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:1). Ephesians 5:8 tells us that we were once “darkness” but now are “light in the Lord,” so we must walk as people who belong to the light. Lust is what we expect from people who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:5). It simply does not fit with who we are in Christ.

If you are a believer, God is building you, together with other believers, into His “holy temple” where He lives (Eph. 2:21–22). The temple in the Old Testament was a beautiful building full of sparkling gold. Now the temple is people, and we are beautiful in God’s sight with the righteousness of Christ and the holiness of His Spirit. Do you want to paint obscene graffiti on God’s temple? That is what lust does. Don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own. You were bought at the price of Christ’s blood. Therefore glorify God with your body and spirit, which belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Submit to the Spirit’s work and grow into a beautiful and holy temple where God will live forever! We have a holy calling, and lust contradicts that calling.

9. Greek *hagioi*.

4. Lust corrupts conversation (v. 4a).

Notice that the sins listed in Ephesians 5:4 revolve around how we talk: “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.” Our ability to communicate in verbal language distinguishes us from the animals. Nothing like the complex and profound speech of human beings is found in the animal world. Lust takes the noble gift of human speech and turns your mouth into a sewer. There are some people whose speech is so filthy that even if you love them, you hate being around them.

God gave us our mouths to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). He especially gave us our ability to speak so that we could live to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 1:6). Don’t allow lust to pollute the streams of your words with the poison of sin. Keep them clean and clear for the glory of God.

5. Lust damns sinners (vv. 5–6).

Paul’s warning against lust and greed ends with these sobering words in Ephesians 5:5–6, “For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.”

Dear young people, “Let no man deceive you.” Lust is not healthy. Lust is not a joke. If it is not broken by the ruling power of Jesus Christ, lust will condemn you and your friends to hell forever. If you continue in the path of sexual lust without repentance, then you are a fornicator at heart and you have no place in heaven. Unless you declare war on your sexual sin, you remain at war with God. Will you trifle with a few passing pleasures and provoke the living God to anger? Will you plunge yourself into a sea of fire for the sake of a few drops of gratification? Hell

is no party, but the never-ending experience of the burning anger of God.

If, on the other hand, you truly repent of sexual sin committed in the past and forsake it, you may find forgiveness in Jesus Christ, even if the scars of sin may remain. As with the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus speaks to penitent sinners who are guilty of sexual sin, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

Let us pray for God’s grace to conquer this sin so that we have zero tolerance for lust. We must not pamper it. We must not permit it in our lives. We must turn from it in disgust and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Turn from Lust to Grace and Gratitude

We must put off sexual lust and covetousness, throwing it away like an article of clothing stained by some repulsive, life-threatening contamination. And what shall we put on in its place? Every sin needs to be replaced by some form of righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22–24). Paul teaches us that we must replace lust with gratitude, writing in verse 3, “but rather giving of thanks.”

Giving thanks for what? For the love of God in Christ. Ephesians 5:1–2 says, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.” Here is true love! Here is the God who loves sinners and makes them His “dear children,” adopting them and embracing them with eternal affection. Here is Jesus Christ, giving His life as a sacrifice for our sins so that instead of the revolting stench of our disobedience, He can perfume us with the sweet smell of His obedience and the Father will be pleased with us.

In some ways, sexual lust is a twisted cry for love, but it seeks love in the wrong ways. But God’s love can satisfy

you and give you peace and contentment. If your heart is hard and cold, His love can give you a new heart that is soft and warm. If you have defiled your mind or body with uncleanness, here is love that can wash you as white as snow. If you have betrayed God with your sins, perhaps sins that no one else knows about, here is love that will accept the repentant sinner. He will be your shield, your glory, and the lifter of your head.

Revel in the grace of God and cultivate gratitude by trusting in Him, for gratitude will heal what lust has destroyed. Lust is not love, but thanksgiving to God ignites love. We love because we are amazed at how He first loved us. Lust defiles desire, but thanksgiving to God purifies desire. It sets us free to enjoy good things but to let God alone be our God.

Lust contradicts our holy calling, but thanksgiving to God fulfills our holy calling. God calls us to give thanks in all things to our God and Father in the name of Jesus Christ. Lust corrupts conversation, but thanksgiving to God gives honor and dignity to our conversation. Lust damns sinners, but thanksgiving to God springs from salvation by grace.

The ultimate reason why Christians should have no tolerance for lust is that Christians have no need for it; we have a God who loves us as His dear children, a Savior who died for our sins—including lustful sins, and the Spirit who lives closer to our hearts than the most intimate companion. Repent of every known lustful sin, and entrust your soul and body to the triune God of grace, believing in His Son alone for salvation. Know this God, whom to know in Christ is life eternal (John 17:3), and be satisfied.

