



**Author John Fonville shows that the gospel is God’s provision for the power to live a life of sexual purity. And it’s available to every Christian. With a shepherding heart and theological acumen, Fonville sets us on a desperately needed joyful path of renewed strength and faith-filled purity.**

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# DO WE KNOW THE GOSPEL?

“MY HUSBAND AND I lived a lie in our relationship and marriage for almost ten years,” a woman confessed to me after a church service. “On the outside, we were a happy couple, so in love, in sync, playful, serving our church and those around us. However, behind closed doors and in our hearts, we were failing miserably. Our marriage was incredibly rocky. I lived in a constant state of anxiety: Is he going to act out while I’m at work? Is this my fault?”

The problems were not due to a lack of trying on her part. Trisha told me, “When we were dating, I thought, ‘Surely when we get married, he won’t have these sexual issues.’ When that turned out not to be true, I thought, ‘Surely when we have kids, he won’t have these sexual issues.’ That didn’t happen either. I kept hoping and praying things would change. I tried yelling, pleading, threatening, shaming, crying, shutting him out, anything and everything I could think of to force him to stop. Nothing helped.”

Her experience mirrors that of many sincere Christians who are faced with sexual addiction and sin. No matter what they do, they cannot escape it in their own power, or free others from its grip.

It is an old story—as old as the Christian church. The apostle Paul dealt with it in Corinth, a city steeped in sexual immorality. But unlike

so many Christians in our day, Paul knew that the answer was not to try harder, to yell, shut out, or shame. It was to apply the good news of Jesus Christ to our hearts. Only through the gospel could hearts be truly changed, leading to changed behavior. The gospel is still the only way.

Before we delve into Paul's remarkable question to a church enslaved to sexual sin, let's look at four foundational truths about sex.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. WE ARE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

First, in terms of human nature, the Bible doesn't begin with the fall and the doctrine of total depravity. If it did, rather than with God's good creation, we could easily assume that human beings are simply rotten from the beginning, void of any goodness and intrinsic dignity.<sup>2</sup> The Bible, however, begins by setting forth the *goodness* of God's creation (Gen. 1). From the beginning God declared His creation to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

This means that human beings—pre-fall—were created basically good in their intrinsic nature, endowed with free will, beauty of body and soul, reason, and moral excellence. Simply put, human beings are made in the image of God.

Even after the fall, mankind still retains the image of God, although it is now greatly obscured and marred by sin. German Reformed theologian Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583) writes, "The vestiges and remains of the image of God in man, although they are greatly obscured and marred by sin, are, nevertheless, still preserved in us to a certain extent."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, all of us possess an intrinsic dignity. This has important implications for human sexuality.

Accordingly, there is no place for discrimination or dehumanizing of an individual who is trapped in any form of extramarital, aberrant sexual sin (or any type of sin!).<sup>4</sup> Uncharitable statements about those ensnared by sin are unchristian and ought to be condemned by every Christian, including Christian leaders.

All human beings are image bearers of God. This demands respect for all human life, Christian or not. Michael Horton writes, “Only in Christ do we realize the salvation and the goal of our personhood by the gospel, but the law that binds us to our neighbors and co-bearers of God’s image obliges us to treat them as persons.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus treats the woman “caught in the act of adultery” with utmost dignity while confronting her illicit behavior (John 8:4). One can only imagine the shame, embarrassment, and fear that gripped this woman as her accusers dragged her before Jesus to be stoned. But this is not how Jesus deals with sinners. Jesus is not a new Moses, who demanded “Do this and live.” Rather, He is the Mediator of a new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6; 12:24).<sup>6</sup>

Horton writes, “When Jesus inaugurated the Lord’s Supper in the upper room, He declared, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:28). Instead of a covenant of law (‘Do this and you shall live’), it is a covenant of free mercy. Unlike Moses, He did not dash the blood on the people, confirming their oath, but pledged His oath in His own blood. He alone passed between the pieces, bearing the judgment in our place.”<sup>7</sup>

In John 3:17, Jesus says of the Father, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” As One who is a friend of tax collectors and sinners, Jesus says to the woman, “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more’” (John 8:10–11). Though guilty of adultery, this woman is treated with dignity and respect by Jesus. Her adulterous sin cut to the very fabric of her personhood. She was a fallen, broken child of Adam who needed grace in order to be adopted as a child of God.

John Stott observes that talk about our sexuality touches a point close to the center of our personality.<sup>8</sup> When we talk about human sexuality, a vital part of our identity is being discussed—and perhaps

endorsed or threatened. Therefore, let's remember that whatever inclination or struggle a person may experience in this area, all people are made in the image of God and are worthy of respect and dignity.

## 2. WE ARE SEXUAL BEINGS

Our bodies as well as our sexuality are basic to our humanity. God created both. God created us as physical beings: “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). God also created sexuality. He made mankind male and female: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Thus, we are not disembodied, sexless beings like angels. Because our bodies and sexuality are basic to our humanness, the desires for sensual pleasure are not bad and do not indicate a weakness or defect in human nature. Rather, the desires of the body for sensual pleasure indicate what it is to experience human nature as God created it.

During the Reformation, John Calvin criticized Roman Catholic theology for locating sin in an alleged weakness of human nature itself. Horton explains,

According to this view, human beings are related to God and the angels by virtue of their “higher self”—the mind or soul—but are related to other animals by virtue of their “lower self”—the appetites associated with the body. This idea, influenced by Plato, gave rise to the notion of *concupiscence*: that is, the desires of the body for sensual pleasure. Concupiscence [author note: according to Thomas Aquinas] is not itself sin until it is acted upon, but it does suggest a weakness or defect in human nature as created by God. Aquinas, following Augustine, spoke of this concupiscence as the “kindling wood” for the fire of passion that leads to actual sins.<sup>9</sup>

Because of this wrong view of human nature, married life was considered a lower—though not evil—form of life in contrast to the contemplative life of the monk. Sexual relations within marriage were said to be for procreative purposes only and not for sensual pleasure. Horton explains, “It is this sensual (animal) aspect of our constitution that drags us down from the heights of pure spiritual contemplation.”<sup>10</sup>

Calvin rightly rejected this body-soul dualism that identified sin with the body. Nowhere do the Scriptures teach that concupiscence (i.e., sinful inclination; original sin and the seedbed of sin)<sup>11</sup> is in any way due to a weakness of nature (i.e., the body and its desires). Thus, Horton concludes,

The most fundamental problem with this view, says Calvin, is that it attributes sin to human nature as God created it. Against those “who dare write God’s name upon their own faults,” Calvin says, “they perversely search out God’s handiwork in their own pollution, when they ought rather to have sought it in that unimpaired and uncorrupted nature of Adam.” Not God, but we are guilty “solely because we have degenerated from our original condition.” Our mortal wound comes not from nature itself, but from its corruption through the fall.<sup>12</sup>

This leads us to a third introductory comment.

### **3. WE ARE ALL SEXUAL SINNERS**

Because of the fall—rather than a weakness or defect in human nature as created by God—our bodies, as well as our minds, hearts, and wills are all under the enslavement of sin and death. Every part of our being has been infected with sin, including our sexuality. And even though we are not as bad as we possibly could be, we are radically and equally

corrupt, impure, and guilty before God. Horton writes, “We are all guilty and corrupt to such an extent that there is no hope of pulling ourselves together, brushing ourselves off, and striving (with the help of grace) to overcome God’s judgment and our own rebellion.”<sup>13</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7:20 states, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” In Romans 3 Paul writes,

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” . . . we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:9–12, 19, 23; cf. Isa. 53:6)

No one is sexually sinless. No one can claim to have fulfilled God’s ideal for sexual purity. Jesus said it like this: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28). Only Jesus lived a sexually sinless life in thought, desire, and deed.

As Stott writes, “We are frail and vulnerable. We are pilgrims on our way to God. We are very far from having arrived. We are engaged in an unremitting conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil. . . . Because all of us are sinners, we all stand under the judgment of God, and we are all in urgent need of the grace of God. Besides, sexual sins are not the only sins, nor even necessarily the most sinful; pride and hypocrisy are surely worse.”<sup>14</sup>

To suggest that sexual sin is not the only sin (or even the primary sin) is not to imply that sexual sin is not a serious problem with disastrous



consequences. Sexual sin can have devastating effects on individuals, marriages, families, and society as a whole. But sex and sensual physical desire are not the problem. The problem is that we are fallen; all of us sexual sinners!

But if sexual sin is not the primary sin—the worst sin—why does Paul devote two chapters to it in 1 Corinthians? Why does he address it so often? Why is it the first item in Paul’s vice lists?<sup>15</sup>

The reason is twofold: First, as the Corinthians were discovering, gaining freedom from this idol is difficult.

Second, sexual immorality can provoke deep shame, hopelessness, and huge amounts of guilt in people who struggle with this enslaving sin. Sexual immorality slices deep into our personhood. It causes frustration, guilt, hurt, and shame. Such a fallen, broken state demands an enormous amount of concrete, specific gospel truth and application.

So, before we continue, I think it’s vital to emphasize the following point:

*There is no condemnation for Christians who **struggle** with sexual sin and sinful desires.*

This may strike you as surprising, but it is true (see 1 Cor. 6:11). Question 60 in the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “How are you righteous before God?” Here’s the comforting answer (emphasis added):

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, *although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, have never kept any of them, and that I am still prone always to all evil*, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect

**Sexual immorality slices deep into our personhood. It causes frustration, guilt, hurt, and shame.**

satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me, if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.<sup>16</sup>

In Galatians 5:17, Paul recognizes that the Christian life is a struggle—an unremitting conflict between the flesh and the Spirit: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Such a continuous struggle indicates our continual need for the gospel. Tim Chester writes,

Alongside your talk about sex needs to go talk about grace. And not just grace in the abstract, but the grace of God in the death of Christ. Christ dies in our place, bearing our guilt so that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . . There is no condemnation for porn users, adulterers, sexual fantasists who are in Christ Jesus. This is not being soft on sin. Quite the opposite. It takes sin seriously, so seriously that the only remedy is the death of the eternal Son of God. . . . Churches are full of people desperately trying to self-atone for their lust, desperately trying to sort themselves out, desperately trying to prove they are good enough for God. Our message must be, “It is finished. Christ has done it all.”<sup>17</sup>

The good news is that the desires of our flesh do not have the final say. Though at times it may feel like the desires of your flesh will prevail, they won't! For the Christian, the desires of the flesh will not and cannot win. In Galatians 5:24, Paul writes, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” This is good news in the believer's daily battle with the flesh!

Now, you may be wondering, “When did I crucify the passions and desires of my flesh?” The answer is found in the word “crucified.” John Calvin writes,

The word *crucified* is employed to point out that the mortification of the flesh is the effect of the cross of Christ. This work does not belong to man. By the grace of Christ “we have been planted together in the likeness of his death” (Rom. 6:5) that we no longer might live unto ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

The crucifixion of the passions and desires of our flesh took place at conversion when the Holy Spirit by grace alone through faith alone united us to Christ in His death. Because believers “belong to Christ” (i.e., are united with Christ), they share in His death and thus the desires of the flesh have been forever defeated!

So then, take heart, struggling believer! The gospel announces that you are not left powerless to the ruling and reigning desires of the flesh. You are no longer a slave. You are now a free man or woman! Because all believers now share in Christ’s death, they are no longer enslaved to the desires of the flesh.

To be sure, this verse doesn’t imply perfection (i.e., no longer experiencing the warring opposition of the flesh). Neither Romans 6 nor Galatians 5 teaches a sinless perfection (Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:14–23). Rather, the point is that the power of sin has been broken in those who believe. John Calvin writes, “The flesh is not yet indeed entirely

**Take heart, struggling believer! You are no longer a slave to the desires of the flesh. You are now a free man or woman!**

destroyed; but it has no right to exercise dominion, and ought to yield to the Spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

We will see in chapter 2 that Christians will still experience a mighty struggle with the flesh, but the desires of the flesh no longer rule and reign in us. Paul is announcing that Jesus’ victorious death is also ours! Consequently, by virtue of our union with Christ, we are now free to walk by the Spirit and triumph—albeit imperfectly—over the desires of the flesh, which formerly dominated us. The Holy Spirit, who is better than any external law, will produce a life that is pleasing to God in every respect. This leads us to one final, introductory, clarifying comment:

#### **4. WE ARE ALL DEFICIENT IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOSPEL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR LIVES**

A great eighteenth-century Scottish preacher, Ralph Erskine, wrote, “They that think they know the Gospel well enough bewray [reveal] their ignorance; no man can be too evangelical, it will take all his lifetime to get a legal temper [disposition] destroyed.”<sup>20</sup> The fact is, we really do not know the gospel and its implications for our lives as well as we should. The law is a doctrine whose seed is written by nature in our hearts. In contrast, the gospel is a doctrine that is not at all in us by nature, but which is revealed from heaven (Matt. 16:17; John 1:13) and totally surpasses natural knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

So it should not surprise us that in 1 Corinthians Paul asks the all-important question, “Do you not know?” ten times (six occur in chapter 6).<sup>22</sup> In each instance, Paul’s question is intended to draw the Corinthians’ attention to a cardinal truth of the Christian faith—one that ought to be self-evident and unavoidable. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul’s question is intended to draw the Corinthians’ attention to the paramount truth of the Christian faith (see 1 Cor. 15:3), namely the gospel and its implications for their sexuality. But the Corinthian

believers didn't really know the gospel and its implications, particularly concerning sexual immorality. This shouldn't have escaped the Corinthians' thinking—and it must not escape *our* thinking.

However, since it *did* escape their thinking, Paul appeals to specific gospel truths and the fruit of the gospel as the remedy for the Corinthians' sexual immorality. We will come to see how Paul appeals to the doctrines of regeneration, sanctification, justification, adoption, resurrection, union with Christ, redemption, and the gift of the Spirit. This certainly puts to rest any notion that doctrine isn't practical!

Paul's concern in chapter 6—in fact, in the whole book—is to set forth a gospel-centered vision of community in the church. Throughout his arguments in 1 Corinthians, Paul is not only concerned for the welfare of the individual but also for the welfare of the community of believers—the church.<sup>23</sup> The failure of the Corinthian church to act in gospel-centered ways damaged the church's unity and witness to the world. And so, Paul, in chapter 5, calls on the Corinthian believers to discipline—rather than arrogantly tolerate—a man in the church involved in an incestuous relationship. We must never be among those who think the gospel and God's grace wink at sin. Craig Blomberg writes,

Such people fail to grasp God's utter repugnance to sin and his infinitely perfect standards for holiness. Further, we must avoid a cheap grace that refuses to force professing believers to face up to the destructive consequences of grossly immoral behavior. They are not only damaging themselves by allowing sin to go unchecked but also destroying the church.<sup>24</sup>

Paul then is addressing the failure of the church to *be* the church, for its members to be who they really are in Christ.<sup>25</sup> The ways of the world—their pagan past—have infiltrated and replaced the centrality of the gospel and its ethical implications for the church's life and

ministry. Gordon Fee writes, “The gospel itself is at stake, not simply the resolution of an ethical question.”<sup>26</sup>

At the end of each chapter in this book, I will share some theological reflections that will help readers apply its insights. Here are the first two:

## REFLECTION

### **1. All the problems and imperfections that we experience are failures to be conformed to the gospel.**

Anglican theologian Graeme Goldsworthy writes,

As we begin the Christian life by placing our whole trust in the Christ of the gospel event, so in the same way we continue in the Christian life. The gospel not only brings us to the new birth and faith as Christians; it is God’s means of saving us totally. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16), and this means the whole of salvation for the whole person. Thus the gospel converts us, the gospel sustains us in the Christian life and brings us to maturity and the gospel brings us to perfection through our resurrection from the dead. . . . All the problems and imperfections that we experience are failures to be conformed to the gospel. The only remedy that the New Testament prescribes for our problems is to bring our lives to conform to the gospel.<sup>27</sup>

The believers in Corinth were messed up theologically and morally. First Corinthians shows their pride and factionalism. They were suing one another and tolerating gross sexual immorality (apparently justifying it using theological arguments, e.g., 6:12–13). Abusing their freedom in Christ to an extreme, they corrupted the Lord’s Supper,

misused spiritual gifts, and lacked love. And they were utterly confused about the doctrine of resurrection—the hope of the gospel.

In each case, Paul's strategy was to point them back to the gospel and its implications for Christian communities. Only the gospel can bring the believer's life into conformity with what the law requires—in this context, sexual purity.

In dealing with sexual immorality, Paul calls on the Corinthians to know the gospel and its implications. He wants them to know who they are after trusting in Christ and to act in accordance with their new identity as citizens of the kingdom of God ("saints," 1 Cor. 6:1–2). Their fundamental problem was failing to be conformed to the gospel and then live out its implications daily. They didn't know who they really were. They had a crisis of identity! And often, so do we.

## **2. We must never assume that we know the gospel and its full implications for our lives.**

We really don't know the gospel and its implications for our lives as well as we should. The gospel and its life implications are not truths that come to us naturally. They are not self-evident. In fact, "the gospel is so odd, so against the grain of our natural inclinations, and the infatuations of our culture that nothing less than a miracle is required in order for there to be a true hearing."<sup>28</sup>

Instead of seeking to bring their lives into conformity with the gospel and its ethical implications, the Corinthians were being influenced by their pagan pasts. But Paul calls on them to live lives commensurate with their new status as citizens of the kingdom of God. Paul's million-dollar question "Do you not know?" highlights the incongruity between who the Corinthians are and how they are living.

Paul doesn't adopt ascetic, moralistic, or exemplary arguments to motivate the Corinthians to morally pure lives. Instead, he redirects them to the gospel and its implications. There's no list of "how to" steps for moral purity. How interesting, then, that "how to" lists

are frequently the remedy offered to those struggling with sexual sin today, as the friend I mentioned in the introduction learned.

“Do you not know?” is the question that shines a searchlight on our real problem. What we don’t know as evidenced by this letter and driven home by the rest of Scripture is that good news is the key to moral purity. There truly is no other way.



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