

Sexual Sin

Sexual behavior reveals what is in a person's heart, and for that reason Scripture speaks about it often. In Colossians, Paul equates sexual sin with covetousness and idolatry:

COLOSSIANS 3:5,6 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming.

Married or single, your behavior in this aspect of your life waves a flag that signals the allegiance of your heart.

The material in the first six chapters is crucial to understanding how to counsel a person who struggles with sexual sin. (If you have not read those chapters, you should read them before reading this one; otherwise, it will not be as helpful to you.) Remember, once a person gains control of his thought life and learns to defeat the flesh and walk by the Spirit, the idol of the flesh is deposed and behavior problems involving self-control diminish.

When someone is involved in a sexual sin, simply apply all the principles covered in the previous six chapters about defeating the flesh. One area of sexual sin, however, requires special attention.

Homosexuality

"Homosexual" is an unhelpful, imprecise term that causes great confusion because in the Bible it means one thing but in our culture it means something very different. For that reason we need to be careful about what we say. Unless we define our terms, we could convey ideas we do not intend to communicate.

Biblical references to homosexuality always focus on *behavior*. But most people in our culture use this term to refer to what they call a sexual orientation and what the Bible calls temptation. According to our culture, if you are tempted to commit homosexual acts, you *are* a homosexual—regardless of how you behave.

More than once someone has called the church office and said, "I'm gay, but I'm celibate." What they mean is, even though they are not engaging in homosexual behavior, they have strong desires in that direction. The world calls it *orientation*; the Bible calls it *temptation*. So you can see the need to be careful with our terminology. When we say, "Homosexuality is a sin," what the world hears is that it is a sin to even be tempted.

I recently asked my Sunday School class if any of them knew which people in our congregation struggle with strong temptations toward homosexuality. Nobody knew. Why is that? I know of some. Why doesn't anyone else? If you struggled with that temptation would you tell anyone? My guess is you would not. You probably would either leave the church and abandon yourself to the fulfillment of those desires and drives, or stay and try your best to suppress your desires in lonely isolation and portray yourself as being just like everyone else.

We should think of homosexuality the same way we think about fornication or adultery. Is it perverse to engage in fornication or adultery? Yes. Is it sinful and wrong to allow yourself to relish thoughts and fantasies about those sins? Yes. Is it wrong to be tempted by those things? No.

Jesus Himself was tempted. In fact, Hebrews 4 makes the point that if Jesus had not gone through the same things we go through then He would not be an adequate high priest.

Hebrews 4:15-16 ... we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

Regardless of what the temptation is, simply being tempted is never a sin.

Where I previously pastored, a woman came into my office one day and said her brother had visited the church. He then visited a Bible study where people were making jokes and derogatory remarks about homosexuals. That drove him away from the church because he considered himself a homosexual, even though he was celibate.

Of all the sinful compulsions, few are more powerful than homosexuality. And if every one of us needs support from other believers to overcome smaller struggles, how much more do those who struggle with homosexuality need support from other members of the body of Christ.

Some people, from the time they first begin to experience sexual attraction, for no reason they are able to discern, find themselves drawn to people of the same sex. They do not want to feel that way, and they do everything they can to shift their attraction to the opposite sex in order to be normal. They beg God to take the temptation away from them, but instead it becomes stronger and stronger. What are people like that supposed to do? What about a man, for example, who begins to develop a friendship with another man but then a sexual attraction develops. Should he cut off the friendship with no explanation?

I read about a man who was trying to break away from a homosexual lifestyle. Leaving his partner and cutting off all the supportive friendships he had in the homosexual community seemed impossible. This is what he said: "I ached physically from the emotional turmoil, but several Christian heterosexual men made themselves available any time of the day or night. I'm alive today because those guys loved me."

An inside look at the struggle

The following is a letter I received from someone in our church who wanted to confess her struggle:

I really need to ask some questions, but I have been avoiding these particular ones for a lot of reasons. But I feel very alone in my struggle, desperate actually, and I guess I hardly have anything to lose by asking. To be honest, life right now seems almost too unbearable, and I feel guilty for my lack of strength. Even though I am constantly trying to reorient myself to an eternal perspective, comfort is still so often elusive. What kind of witness is that?

I've struggled for a long time with being gay. It seems so unlike the "average" sin or struggle. Just about any type of sin I can think of—greed, gossip, self-centeredness, discontent ... all of those are things I hate and want to be rid of. Even when I'm tempted to indulge in them I hate that they are a part of me in any way.

But this, being gay, I cannot understand why it is wrong. I believe the Bible is clear that it is, and so I have committed to rejecting the lifestyle, but it so often makes me sad.

You say the feelings are not wrong but just the actions. So can I be in love with someone of the same sex and be pure? Is sex the only thing restricted? What about any level of affection? Is hugging a friend okay but not someone I'm attracted to? How do I draw the line?

In college, I was shocked to hear a Christian tell me that there was “nothing wrong with being gay.” I questioned it, but you can’t believe how happy I felt at the prospect of it possibly being okay. It was like an impossible dream come true. And so I let myself be open to a relationship, which eventually did come. I would have given anything for this person, including my own life.

And then I started going to Creekside Church and realized that the pro-Christian gay arguments really did seem to be a bit of a stretch (which I had a sense of all along but still hoped), and eventually saw that I had to choose between this relationship or faith in God.

I also realized that since our time here on earth is so short in comparison with eternity, how could I choose now over then? If it really was grieving the Holy Spirit, how could I continue to walk this road away from Him? So I made my choice and that’s what led to my conversion.

This past year has been so hard, trying to keep a friendship while also ending the relationship the way it was. I have been trying to hold on and let go at the same time without knowing quite what the boundaries should be. Meanwhile, she was faced with the same decision and chose against God. Given how much I love her this grieves me in a way I cannot even express, and not only do I grieve for her soul, but for the fact that we have become so different from each other.

She doesn’t understand practically anything that I’m passionate about. Almost all meaningful topics of conversation are off limits.

I think I can imagine the pain of a divorce ... if I could have married her I would have (I hope this is not too unsettling to your stomach).

Now it feels like the tearing apart of my own limbs ... in fact, I think that would hurt less. Today what had me down is that she said she is going to date again. Now that she is moving on it should be easy to let go. But I’m feeling the pain of separation all over again. I knew the reality, but today it became even clearer. I can feel the blade that cuts us apart all the more.

I don’t understand why it has to be this way! I have decided to obey God regardless of whether I understand, but I wish I could see some reason for it. At least all other sin looks like sin.

I feel like a terrible witness, especially if my sorrow over the whole matter is seen. People who knew me before I was saved think my reasoning is crazy. I’m shooting myself in the foot, and besides, who would want to serve a God that’s so demanding and narrow and painful? Is it any wonder I don’t see any fruit from witnessing?

And Christians would understand my reasoning and applaud my turning away from sin, but it’s surely a strange and sinister thing to struggle with in the first place, and what does my sadness say about the forgiveness I’ve received? Ungrateful! How can I hold on to something so evil with such longing? I feel isolated because I have so many secrets.

I guess I’m paying the price for my sin ... I know I deserve it. My path led me into deep and very dark sorrow (though mostly after repentance). When will the light come? I feel like I might not last. Can you maybe pray for me in the next couple of days? I feel so low I wonder if I can bear it.

I include this letter so you will understand that not all homosexuals are the people marching in the gay pride parades. I know what would happen if a person like this came into our church today and said those things in one of our small groups. Everyone would embrace her in love, and would understand and do whatever they could to help and support her. No one would look down on her.

We at Creekside have a good attitude toward repentant sinners. We could, however, make more progress in conveying that attitude so that people would know it is safe to

share their struggles. We should be attracting repentant homosexuals. And we probably are, but they most likely still feel the need to remain silent about their temptations—even though they have repented. Once a person has repented there should be no stigma of any kind—even if the struggle continues—no matter what the sin.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that some people teach homosexuality is the worst sin there is—in a class below all other sins. It is not.

Someone might ask, “Isn’t homosexuality at the bottom of the downward spiral described in Romans chapter 1? Isn’t that man at his most depraved?” It is true that homosexuality is highlighted in that chapter—not because it is the worst of all sins but because it is one of the best examples of a sin against natural revelation, which is the focus of Romans 1.

Those who say it is at the bottom of the downward spiral need to read this chapter more closely. Once sinful man gave himself over to worshipping the creation rather than the Creator ...

Romans 1:26-27 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Is that the end of the process? No.

ROMANS 1:28-31 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Is there a level of depravity even worse and more severe than homosexuality? Yes, there is, and it’s characterized by greed, envy, pride, disobedience to parents, and gossip. There’s no stigma attached to people who have repented of pride or gossip but are still tempted by it. In fact, if they face temptation but resist it, we admire them. It should be the same for those who struggle with any sin.

What causes homosexuality?

We know the same sinful heart that produces sins such as gossip and pride produces the sin of homosexual behavior (or homosexual fantasies). But what makes a person open to this particular temptation?

Homosexuality is unusual in that only about 2 percent of the population is even tempted by it. If you struggle with prejudice against homosexuals, keep in mind that if you were susceptible to it, you could fall into homosexuality just as readily as you fall into any other temptation. Do not look down on anyone because of the type of sin he is tempted by, unless you have complete success resisting all of the things that tempt you.

How can we explain the few who have a sexual attraction to people of the same sex? Particularly perplexing is the situation in which a person hates homosexuality, does not practice it, and would give anything to be rid of wrong desires but feels he can no more do that than someone else can flip a switch and no longer have heterosexual desires.

As with everything else, the world wants to blame it all on the brain. Thus far they have had no success in discovering a neurological cause, however.

Psychologists in the past theorized homosexuality was caused by a negative relationship with the same-sex parent. That theory is still widely accepted, but it is not based on any solid evidence. There are plenty of heterosexual people who had lousy relationships with their parents of the same sex.

Many Christian counselors have assumed it must be the result of a childhood trauma, such as being raped. Then when a person struggling with homosexuality says, “No, nothing like that ever happened to me,” they say, “Aha ... repressed memory!”

Obviously, holding on to theories that are not supported by evidence won't do any good.

Is it possible that some people are born with a tendency toward homosexuality? I don't see why not. We know that the sex drive is something people are born with. And we also know there are such things as birth defects. Some people are born with physical deformities; some are born with mental deficiencies. It seems that practically any part of a person's makeup—including the sex drive—could possibly be defective from birth.

For example, it appears that certain people are born with a susceptibility to pornography. People who are enslaved to porn often report that their first exposure to pornography, at a very young age, affected them far more than most people. Instead of responding with the normal level of curiosity, they report being completely gripped by the experience—having an increased heart rate, sweaty palms, and an obsession from that moment on.

So the fact that some people seem to be more susceptible than others to this temptation may be related to some defect in the sex drive. It could be the way they were born, or it could be a result of something that happened to them. There could be emotional factors, environmental factors, physical factors, or spiritual factors.

A person may be susceptible to various sins for many possible reasons. The good news is, you do not have to know what caused the susceptibility in order to help the person. God's grace is powerful enough to overcome any weakness, no matter how or why it came to be.

The Way Out of Sexual Sin

What can we do to help a person who wants out of homosexuality? The answer is the same as for any person who wants out of sexual sin.

Most people are tempted with some kind of sexual perversion. For some people it is homosexuality. For others it is pornography. For some it is a desire to engage in sexual activity or fantasy while single. For others it is a desire to engage in sexual activity or fantasy with someone other than his or her spouse. A woman can be tempted to be unresponsive sexually to her husband. A man can be tempted to use his wife as a tool for his own pleasure without concern for her pleasure. Whenever Satan sees a powerful, God-given desire intended for good, he is going to make every attempt to pervert it for evil and lead people into sin.

What do you tell people who are in bondage to sexual temptation? Begin with the principles covered in chapters 1 through 6. Teach them to exercise self-control in their thought life, to be self-controlled in their actions, to walk by the Spirit (and in doing so, to defeat the flesh). The summary of it all is to walk by the Spirit because of this great promise:

Galatians 5:16 ... walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (lit., flesh).

Marital satisfaction

Marital union is to be a major factor in preventing sexual temptation (Prov. 5:20, 1 Cor. 7:12,9). For a person who struggles with sexual temptation, one priority should be to seek to find satisfaction within marriage. There is no such thing as *total* satisfaction of any kind this side of heaven, but having a healthy sexual relationship with a spouse can greatly reduce the level of temptation.

Keep in mind, however, that while finding satisfaction in the marital union will help, it is not a guarantee of purity. You should not assume that a problem with sexual sin necessarily means the spouse is doing something wrong. A man can have the greatest amount of physical satisfaction possible with his wife, but if his thoughts are impure, his actions will follow. He must be taught biblical principles, particularly from the book of Proverbs (see next page), as well as self-control of the thought life.

What about singles?

Someone who is single and losing the battle in the area of purity should seek a spouse. It is crucial to marry only a strong believer, but beyond that, a person should not be too picky. Protecting oneself from this sin is more important than finding a spouse who has all the items on some checklist. Scripture is clear that people who are characterized by the sins of fornication or adultery will not go to heaven (1 Cor. 6:9, Heb. 13:4, Rev. 22:15). When counseling a single man, it might help to tell him, "You can learn to love any believer, and it is worth giving up some of your dreams to protect your soul from sin."

In the meantime, while the Lord keeps him single, teach him to follow closely the wisdom found in Proverbs chapters 5 through 7, summarized in the following verses:

Proverbs 5:38 ... the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not. Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house.¹

Warn him to stay far away from temptation. Figure out at what times and in what circumstances he tends to fall, and help him restructure his life to avoid those circumstances.

It is crucial that you use the principles in the first part of this book to teach him how to control his thought life.

It is also important that you work to protect the single person from becoming discontent with his singleness. Someone tempted with fornication may start with a God-given desire ("I want a spouse") and use it as an excuse to covet something he does not have. So he will spend several minutes at a time daydreaming about being married or reviewing all the hardships of being single. At this point it is nothing sexual—just thoughts about being married. But then the thoughts do begin to turn to romance and progress from there.

Single people who think this way keep taking more and more steps in the wrong direction until they find themselves dominated by the desires of the flesh. And after months or years of feeding the flesh, if an opportunity for sexual gratification presents itself, the desires are so overwhelming that they fall into temptation.

It may be sleeping with someone or using pornography, but every time they do it they feel terrible afterward and fall on their knees in sorrow and repentance, begging God to

change their heart. They tell themselves, “I have to stop this behavior,” and they backtrack to the first X (see diagram on p. 110), in an attempt to control themselves from that point.

What they do not realize is they have not gone back far enough. They departed from walking with the Spirit much further back.

When you are counseling someone about sexual sin (or about anything), find out where his thoughts first started to go astray. Begin with the sinful actions and work backward.

One other point: While you are trying to help a person begin to walk in the Spirit, you are also going to have to help him break the bad habits he has established. And few, if any, habits are harder to break than those involving sexual sin.

The feeling of pleasure that comes from sexual sin causes certain chemicals to be released in the body. Plus the fear and anxiousness connected with doing something forbidden cause other chemicals to be released. The combination of these produces a powerful sensation that makes such a habit extremely difficult to break.

The value of shame and guilt

God has given us something to help us—a conscience. Shame is a powerful motivator (think of a guy who doesn’t have the willpower to put away the porn, but the moment he hears his wife coming, he suddenly has all the willpower in the world).

So use this tool. Teach the person how to expose his life in that area, so shame will help him resist.

In my case, I did not want to have to deal with the temptation to look at impure things on the Internet, so I signed up with a service called Covenant Eyes. It does not filter anything. Everything on the Web is immediately available to me, but once I signed up with that service I had no temptation to look at anything bad on the Internet.

It sends an email once a month to two people (I chose my wife and a good friend at church) showing all the sites I visited and how long I was on each site. And it sorts them by how questionable they might be, so if I got on to a porn site, that would appear right at the top of the list. My wife might as well be standing in the room. The result is I now have zero temptation in that area.

Shame and guilt have frequently been misused in the name of religion, but they do have some value. It is possible for someone to use them as helpful tools in the struggle against temptation.

The same goes for other things. Urge anyone you are counseling to do whatever common sense dictates—change his schedule so he is not alone at the times when he is most often tempted, become accountable to a men’s group at church, etc.

Chapter Summary

To find victory over sexual sin:

- Follow the principles in chapters 1 through 6.
- Seek marital satisfaction.
- Maintain accountability.

Key passage:

Proverbs 5–6

Review questions:

1. Is it a sin to be tempted toward homosexuality?
2. How does a person escape sexual sin?