

Sexual Immorality

As Jesus taught on the issue of marriage, He counseled His hearers that divorce could be justified in the sight of God only if sexual immorality had occurred. Sadly, I fear that this is the only experience that many Christians have with the subject of sexual immorality- its impact on the marriage-divorce-remarriage subject. However, the Scriptures deal quite extensively with the issue of sexual immorality and we would do ourselves a great service to understand what the Holy Spirit would have us to know about it.

The term "sexual immorality," or a similar phrase, is used twenty-two times in the Bible. It is a practice deemed sinful in passages such as 1 Cor. 6:18 and 1 Thess. 4:3. "Sexual immorality" is the phrase used in the NKJV (the KJV commonly uses "fornication") and is translated from the Greek root word "porneia". The Greek word "porneia" is defined by multiple lexicographers as "illicit sexual intercourse." And, while the fact that sexual immorality is sinful is quite well known, consider with me what practices the Bible defines as sexual immorality: Extra-marital sexual activity (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 5:1); Incest (1 Cor. 5:1); Sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage (1 Cor. 7:2,3); Homosexuality (Jude 7- see also Gen. 19:5).

Questions arise from time to time as to what constitutes sexual immorality. The Bible does not give a list of activities which fit into what God considers sexual immorality; this, however, is not peculiar to the discussion of sexual immorality. God does not give a list of activities which fit into what God considers submitting to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1). Just because we lack a specific list does not mean that we may act in whatever way we wish- we are guided by the principles revealed elsewhere in Scripture. For example, we understand that submitting to the governing authorities partially involves paying taxes (Matt. 22:17-21) and living according to the rules of that government (1 Pet. 2:13,14). In like manner, when we consider the issue of sexual immorality we can come to some reasonable conclusion about what constitutes sexual immorality by examining the Bible as a whole. A principle we need to recognize at the beginning is that sexual immorality is not limited to the type of sex engaged in for reproductive purposes; Jude's reference to homosexuality as sexual immorality allows us to understand that more falls under the term "sexual immorality" than just reproductive sex. The sexual relationship, in whatever form it takes, is limited to the marriage relationship (Heb. 13:4); any willing participation in fulfilling the sexual desire outside the bounds of marriage is deemed sexual immorality. How do we know this? Because in the latter half of Hebrews 13:4, the Holy Spirit uses a derivative of the same Greek root word "porneia" which was discussed earlier.

While considering all that the Bible has to say about the issue of sexual immorality, many Christians I know have had serious questions about masturbation. And, again, while the Bible does not deal explicitly with this sexual act, there are principles discussed in the Bible which help us decide whether such an activity is approved by God. The writer of the Hebrew letter indicated that the sexual relationship, in all its forms, belongs in the institution of marriage. Beyond this, Paul indicates in his first epistle to the Corinthians that one function of marriage is to provide a means for the fulfillment of the sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:2-5,9); we would then do well to recognize that seeking to fulfill our sexual desires outside the realm of marriage is sinful.

It is very easy to get caught in the sin of sexual immorality. At times (perhaps, most of the time?), it seems as though sexual immorality is glorified and promoted as an activity which everyone engages in at one time or another. However, such an attitude is wrong. There is nothing glorious about sexual immorality- it is as nauseating as a dog eating its own vomit (2 Pet. 2:22), as disgusting as a cloth used for cleaning excreted bodily fluids (Isa. 64:6), and as heart-wrenching as driving nails into the hands of the sinless, innocent Son of God (Heb. 6:4-6). You and I do not have to engage in sexual immorality. Just as we are cautioned in the Proverbs against looking at wine while it swirls in the glass, so also we would do well to avert our gaze from images and people which sexually excite us. By avoiding those situations we can, for the most part, keep ourselves out of situations which entice us to sexual immorality. We can also purpose in our hearts, much like Daniel did (Dan. 1:8) to serve God in whatever situation we find ourselves. But, perhaps most importantly, we should gain a true appreciation for the awfulness of sin and the power of prayer. An awareness of how horrible and awful sin is will surely keep us out of many temptations. But, still, the Devil will find some way of getting to us (1 Pet. 5:8). It is in those moments when we need to pray to God, seeking wisdom and strength from Him, knowing that He will provide (James 1:5; Hebrews 4:14-16). May God bless us all as we seek to live pure lives, free from the sin of sexual immorality.