

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part ten - Sunday, April 25th, 2010, 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #1366

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MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL SIN - GOD'S HEALING MERCY FOR BROKEN LIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Philippians 1:6 - "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

There was a day when sexual sins were not only ungodly, but were usually listed in the criminal code. Almost by reflex our society knew that at least **some** of God's laws were good for it, even if God wasn't honored in other, more personal areas of morality. But that has all changed. Our society has come to feel God has no business in sexual morality that is consensual and doesn't openly harm the participants. That means most sexual sins will only be taken seriously by those who take **God** seriously.

I'm making the assumption most of us here do that. We take God seriously. At the very least, we **want** to honor God. We **want** to be like Jesus. We know something good has taken place in our hearts through God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus. But we also know that work isn't finished. It's been **begun**, says Paul, not **completed**. We are all works of grace in **process**.

There's a question we want to deal with today. "**He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**" What does this process of completion look like? What does it feel like inside our own skin? What does Jesus' ongoing grace do for a husband and wife who, though at one time, literally couldn't **stand** to be **apart**, have come to the point where now, with equal passion, can't **stand** to be **together**? Yearning has turned to repulsion. Or what does Jesus say to the person who hates his craving for pornography and loves it at the same time?

What does Jesus' completing grace do for the **female** addiction to a totally different pornography industry full of soap operas, romance novels, and women's magazines, where all the bodies keep their clothes on a while longer and the faces have names, but the romantic relationships are just as elicit and damning and displeasing to God? The nameless, airbrushed bodies of men's magazines and internet sites or the too good to be true Fabio, cradling his woman off tenderly to the strains of Dr. Zhivago - **eye** candy or **emotion** candy - **erotic** lust or **intimacy** lust - **both** create fantasies and feed our fallen hearts in different, but equally corrosive ways.

And there are **other** kinds of brokenness that may be even harder to believe can be salvaged by grace. What about those who were sexually sinned **against**? What about the woman who was abused, who carries painful memories?

Sexual memories can each stain the soul as much as sexual fantasies. **Fantasies** can cause passion to wane by an unfair **comparison** with your marriage partner. But painful **memories** can freeze the heart in **fear and suspicion**. An abused person can carry memories that cause her to fear even the most compassionate approach of another. This too needs God's completing grace. God's grace extends both to the sinner and the sinned against. Both need - in different ways to be sure - but **both** need to receive from Jesus His healing, restoring, redeeming grace.

So what does the **process** and **progress** of grace look like? **How** are we being made complete? Nothing is more important to know. Wrap your mind around these truths with relentless faith:

1) **EMBRACE GOD'S GRACE BUT FIGHT YOUR OWN SIN**

Effort is required, but the right **kind** of effort. Self-laceration without grace only turns you in on yourself. When the Bible says God's mercies are **new every morning** it isn't giving us information. It's telling us grace must be **grabbed** on a daily basis. It isn't just **given** moment by moment. It must be **embraced** moment by moment.

Psalm 25:4-7 - "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. [5] Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long. [6] Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. [7] Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!"

These are my life verses. I have memorized them and say them to myself every day - at **least** once a day. They remind me that grace comes to me from **outside** myself. It doesn't come from my own moral reform, or my self-loathing, or from jumping through religious hoops. Jesus comes **looking** for me with grace. He gives it as a gift.

David was a sexual sinner. His illicit sexual relations tore at his conscience - **Psalm 38:4-8** - “**For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. [5] My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, [6] I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. [7] For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. [8] I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.**”

This is a battle we can *all* identify with. It's a *good* battle, not a *bad* one. Grace always feels terrible before it can feel good. The first step of a healthy soul is to *fight with itself*. Feel God's pain for your sin. But is this *all* there is? No. And it's right at this point that my life verses offer healing grace - **Psalm 25:6-7** - “**Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. [7] Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!**”

I love praying those words. David's own conscience remembers only too well the stupidity and guilt of his sin. But these verses are different. They describe, not how *David* remembers his sin, but how *God* remembers his sin - “**Remember your mercy and your steadfast love.....according to your steadfast love remember me....for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.**”

This is what I mean by embracing *external* grace. When God looks at me in mercy, *what will He choose to remember?* I may remember *my* sin. But, through Christ Jesus, *God* remembers *His* steadfast mercy. Grab a hold of this every morning. Confront your guilt with this truth. Wrap your repentant heart in this wonderful, externally-gifted grace. Make grace a *palpable* reality - a *gripping* force in your fight against sin.

David *made* himself consider this precious truth. He didn't just *assume* this kind of grace. This was not a *casual* truth, like the knowledge of a zip code or phone number. He *prayed* these words out loud to God. He cried them out in God's hearing. He prayed them loudly and earnestly enough to drown out his own self-condemnation.

Place God's grace over your own despair. *Fight against yourself* with God's external grace when condemnation rises. Make the effort to *chisel the shape of grace* deeply into your heart. Like no other sins on earth, obsession with *erotic pleasure* leads to *obsession with moral failure*. “**According to your steadfast love remember me!**” This is not a candle-lit benediction. This is warfare. Apply it to your own wretchedness - especially for the sins of the past - the things you can no longer do anything about.

2) **RECOGNIZE THE OTHER LUSTS THAT JOIN HANDS WITH SEXUAL SINS**

Many times sexual sins are the *result* of other lusts. Trying to bail water out of the boat without plugging up the hole in the bottom is not only tiring, but a waste of time. Many times people fail to conquer sexual sin because they didn't realize the battle was a *wider* battle than they thought.

Here is a young woman who considers herself unattractive. Perhaps she considers herself too skinny, or too fat, or too plain, or with a bad complexion. But she is smart enough to know that this world's warped value system has placed her on the back burner somehow. She longs to be loved by a man and she discovers she will be promised love for sexual activity. Her erotic willingness gains the interest of others for the first time and she mistakenly thinks this is the love she craves. She sins sexually to be sure, but the *first* lust she needs to confront isn't *sexual* lust. It's the lust for *acceptance*.

Here's a married couple. Things aren't going well. There is more anger than love. The wife resents the husband's inattentiveness. He resents a lack of sexual excitement. As he spends more time away she thinks she will teach him a lesson by making herself more attractive to other men. When he finds out what she's doing he has an affair to get even. Two people end up with sexually twisted lives. But the problem, at least at the beginning, had little to do with sexual lust.

I'm not kidding when I tell you these things happen. They happen in churches all over Canada more than you know. People find it more pleasing to fight each other than to fight the *sin* that is making them fight each other. Satan has a party with them both. They both fall victim to sexual sin. But the *first* lust they need to deal with isn't sexual. It's the lust for *revenge*.

Here's a man turning 55 or 60. He's not at the top of his game in business or physique. He's single and not sure he's ever going to find a marriage partner. He's not even sure he has what it takes to appeal to the opposite sex

anymore. Then a woman at the office, much younger than he, shows genuine attention, and he's flattered. He's still got it! She affirms his sense of self-worth. One thing leads to another and they eventually tumble into bed. Was it sexual lust? Yes. But only **after** a while. The first lust that made him **vulnerable** to sexual sin was the lust of **pride**. And perhaps the **fear** of living the rest of his life **alone**.

These are just a few examples. There is a long list of other lusts that join hands with sexual passions. Sanctification is the battle of **seeing things clearly**. Sin is about behavior, but it's never **only** about behavior. Whenever I sin I am **always** loving something **more** than God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.

3) **ASK THE HOLY SPIRIT TO TEACH YOU THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIGH EFFORT, LOW EFFORT AND NO EFFORT SINS, AND TO SHOW YOU THE DIFFERENT KIND OF BONDAGE EACH OF THESE SINS BRINGS**

All sins bring real guilt before God. **All** sins damn. But they don't all do it in exactly the same way. The completion of God's work of ongoing grace is enabled as we walk in deeper and deeper understanding as to how sexual sins work their way into the fabric of our beings. Like video games that get more involved as you work your way up from level one through 25, sins get more subtle and tricky to deal with.

- a) **High effort sins** are the most **damaging** by all observable measurements and they are the most **difficult** to commit. **Having an extra-marital affair** is a classic example of a high effort sin. By high effort I mean you have to **plan** to commit these sins. You have to keep them secret, at least at the beginning. Each lie has to be carefully coordinated. Times, places, phone calls - all have to be shrouded in secrecy because there is so much at stake.

Each person with whom you have liaisons can turn on you and become a reporter of your deeds. High effort sins are the most **visible** and usually the most **damaging** to others. Reputations are destroyed. Relationships are bruised or even severed.

But there's a twist here. Visible, high effort sins are also the easiest to deal with. First, they are quickly identifiable. They are the most obvious sins. They bring immediate pain. Frequently they are the very **first** sins to be repented of when God first redeems the heart. So while they are the most outwardly **damaging** sins, they are also most quickly **perceived** as sinful. They carry their own pain and frequently (though not always) turn the soul to Christ in broken-hearted repentance. Jesus frequently **begins** His work in our hearts by dealing with these **high effort, high handed sins**.

- b) **Low effort sins** take much less planning and thought than high effort sins. Let's compare viewing internet pornography with having an affair. An affair may take weeks of careful planning and cover up. There are more potential witnesses to my actions. A low effort sin, like viewing internet pornography, is more private. Unless someone walks into my den or office, no one is likely to catch me. Also, there is less of a **time** lapse between the moment of **temptation** and the **commission** of the sin. It's only three mouse clicks away.

But if low effort sins are **easier** to commit and less **damaging** to others, they are also much **harder to forsake**. Unlike the affair, there are no partners to blow the whistle. There is usually no **external** pressure to cause you to forsake low effort sins. Forsaking these sins takes more **pure love for Jesus**. That's because you don't forsake them to save your **reputation** because they usually don't **spoil** your reputation.

That leads to the final category of sexual sin:

- c) **No effort sins** are the easiest to commit, the least damaging to others, and by far the most difficult to forsake. Let's imagine now, instead of the low effort sin of internet pornography, the no effort sin of mental fantasizing and lust in the heart. You simply turn on the screen in your own mind. Whether it's the erotic lust of sexual images or the romantic lust of intimacy and passion, no one else will ever know what I'm thinking. I can't get **caught** in these sins. And they are available - always on-line - instantly - where ever I am.

These sins take no effort to commit. They are the most private in that no other person is involved in my sin. Yet they are the most devastating to my own soul. They are the bedrock - the foundation - on which other external sins will grow. And nothing but the work of the Holy Spirit will force me to **see** these thoughts as utterly wicked and needing repentance.

Why take the time to examine these different forms of sexual sins? Because we're examining the **process of grace** in our lives - "...he who **began** a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." It's so easy to think that because **one** category of sin has been dealt with, all have. And that is almost **never** the case. It's so easy to let my guard down in one area because I'm only focusing on another.

Long after David had committed sexual sin outwardly with Bathsheba he learned how to pray for purity - **Psalm 19:12 and 14** - "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. [14] Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

4) **TELL YOURSELF EVERY DAY, AND DO SO WITH HONESTY AND INTENSITY, THAT YOU ARE ONLY ON THE WAY OF SALVATION, AND YOU ARE NOT A FINISHED PRODUCT YET**

We wrap up with our opening text - **Philippians 1:6** - "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Christ's work on the **cross** is complete. His work in my **heart** isn't. Every point in this message has stressed the **battle for grace** that must be fought in all our hearts. Paul says there is **coming** a day when we will be complete - "...will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." John tells us that some day - **not** today - we will be perfectly like Christ - **1 John 3:2** - "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

In the mean time we are all being **made** new. We are being **made** complete. That means remembering the two foundational truths to walking and growing in God's completing grace: **sanctification is a direction in which you keep your life going.** And **repentance is a lifestyle you are constantly living.**

- a) **Sanctification is a direction in which you keep your life going.** It is absolutely imperative that we view the Christian life as a **long process** with a **glorious end**. And neither one of these two components can be ignored.

Remember, there is no spiritual key that will **end** your battle for purity. Prayer, Bible study, a good church, fasting, accountability groups, self-discipline - **all** of these things are crucially important. **None** of them will guarantee you won't have a fierce battle with sexual temptation one, five, or thirty years from now.

As you study the Bible you won't find one person who says, "**There, I've arrived!**" Look at Bible characters, churches, denominations and individuals. Look at the whole flow of church history. Everyone is being **made**. God seems content to work on the stage of years, scores of years, centuries, and ages.

John 15:1-2 - "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Don't miss the message here. There is **always** something the Vinedresser is pruning. The **length** of the journey isn't the issue. The **direction** is. Is your life still yielded to this process? Is there still that sense of **movement**? Is there still **spiritual activity and movement** toward the Lord? Again, even **speed** isn't the issue. **Direction** is. Even if you are **trudging** in the right direction you will one day see Him face to face in glorious perfection. Cling to that.

- b) **Repentance is a lifestyle you are constantly living.** Thesis number one of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses had nothing to do with "**By faith alone**," or "**By Scripture alone**." Theses number one said this: "**When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.**"

Luther went on to say this: "**This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness,**

not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified."

The church has become forever cursed with only the more **narrow** idea of repentance - the one time, climactic turning from unbelief in Christ to belief in Christ. But Luther was describing something so much bigger. We **live** in repentance just as we **live** in grace. We are constantly living **from/to**. We are constantly being **turned**. We are constantly forsaking and constantly yielding.

This is the deeper understanding of sanctification. Every truly serious Christian knows that we are constantly getting both **better** and **worse** at the same time. We are constantly being turned from the more obvious **outward** sins to the more deep rooted, deceptive **inward** ones. We move from **avoiding the guilt** of sins to pursuing the **glory of God**.

This is the surest root to sexual purity and spiritual joy. You become more interested in **righteousness** than **self-gratification**. You prize the deeper value of a clean conscience and the free heart. Sexual sins just doesn't have the **room** they once had to press into your heart because your heart is turning to Christ in **increasing measure**.