

TJW, HT, 26.10.08, Romans 13.8-14

Whenever a preacher stands up to preach on a Bible passage that talks about sexual immorality, most people probably think they know what they're going to get...

and they're expecting a lot of negatives: "don't do this - don't do that. "And if you've ever done this or that - feel guilty about it."

Most people think that Christian morality is a series of "no's". After all, that's how the second half of the Ten Commandments goes, isn't it - "You shall not ... You shall not."

Now we shouldn't be embarrassed or indignant when we discover that in his word in the Bible, God wants to put some big "nots" back in, in the area of sexuality - when we want to keep taking them out.

If you are caught in sexual sin right now - if you're in the midst of sexual temptation this week - God will want to stop you in your tracks this morning - to say his powerful and loving 'no' to you.

But God never just says 'no', does he.

Along with his 'no', you always get his 'yes', as well. That is - he always points us to a better way. As I've prepared for this sermon, I looked at all the statements on sexual immorality in the New Testament. I was struck by how often the negative statements, against sexual immorality - vital though they are - how often they're linked in with something else - something positive, that the Lord wants to lead us into instead.

What that is, we'll see in a moment. But first we have to feel the weight of God's 'no' to sexual immorality.

So when it comes to our human sexuality, we need to hear the limits God gives us.

Of course this sermon would be much easier to preach if our church family were a narrow group of people, all at the same age and stage of life. But, wonderfully, we're not.

So not everything I say this morning will apply directly to each one. But even when it doesn't apply to you, you need to know what God is saying to other members of your Christian family - so that you know how to care for them, watch out for them, love them, and pray for them.

Do open your Bible to today's reading - Romans chapter 13 - and see verse 13 [READ].

Sexual immorality does not fit with following Jesus Christ - it's like north poles on magnets - you can't fit them together - they just repel each other.

The words in the original Greek of the New Testament for 'sexual immorality' refer to any sexual activity with someone you are not married - be it adultery, prostitution, intercourse with anyone you're not married to - including homosexual activity.

God is as clear in the Bible as he possibly can be that these are no-go areas for the follower of Jesus Christ.

Once we've heard God's 'no' to these things ringing loudly in our ears - then we can notice in this verse 13 that sexual immorality occurs in a list which also includes drunkenness and jealousy.

That's usually how it is, in the New Testament. Sexual immorality is not in a special category all of its own, as somehow much more sinful than all other sins.

It does have some key features which distinguish it from other sins - because it involves the abuse of your body, or someone else's body. There's one passage in the New Testament that seems to make that point.

We're not going to turn to it now - but if you want to make a note of it for later, it's 1 Corinthians chapter 6.

But sexual sin is not distinguished from jealousy, or dissension in the church, by being more sinful - it's just one in a list with those other sins.

Some of us will need to hear that. Sexual sin seems to provoke more guilt and shame in people than anything else.

Perhaps that's because it's a perversion of who God made us to be.

Sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of - it's God's good gift to us.

Back in Genesis, when God made Adam and Eve, the passage ends with a beautiful phrase: "The man and his wife were both naked - and they felt no shame."

But when they turn away from God, they instinctively want to cover themselves physically - they're so ashamed.

But the shame of sexual sin does not make it more sinful.

And it's because sexuality is God's good gift to us, that he sets limits to it.

"It's the ultimate physical expression of human commitment", he says to us. "So only use it in the most committed human relationship - in marriage - in which a man and woman have made a covenant together for life."

(Just as an aside here - you may know that the Anglican church world-wide is currently torn apart over this issue - particularly over the issue of homosexual practice. What we cannot do is turn away from the Bible's clear teaching on this, just because for a time our culture is going through a period of approving of homosexual conduct.)

Sticking to the limits which God has put on sexuality for our own good is incredibly tough in our culture.

There is probably more temptation to commit sexual sin in the world around us than there has been for a long time.

You can have it within 30 seconds and a couple of mouse-clicks of switching your computer on, if you want to.

Advertising uses images which aim to arouse us sexually, in order to sell us everything from chocolate bars to cars.

We are surrounded by images which say to us: "It is your right to satisfy yourself sexually, in just about any way you want to - so go for it."

This is nothing new. England went through a similar period of loose sexual morals in the eighteenth century. That was followed by the much more rigid Victorian era. No one really knows where our culture now is headed.

But for now, we need God in his word to tell us the limits he has set on our sexuality - for our own good.

Now, second - **Why** has God set these limits? Let me put it this way... **because of love.**

I said at the beginning that there's a better way that God wants to point us to.

And it struck me that in at least five places in the New Testament, the command not to sin sexually is set right alongside the command to Christians to love one another, and to show love to the whole world.

(If you're taking notes: they other places are Galatians 5; Ephesians 5; 1 Thessalonians 4; & Hebrews 13.)

And do you see that that's what's going on in Romans 13? Verse 7 [READ verses 8-10].

It seems to be that, in God's mind, sexual immorality is the absolute opposite of something else. And that "something else" is: loving each other. In fact, it says here, doesn't it, that the command not to commit adultery is summed up in the command: "love your neighbour as yourself."

Let me put it this way: The more you choose to love everyone around you in the same way that you take care of your own needs and do the best for yourself - the more you do that, the easier it will be not to sin sexually.

You see, real love is: selflessness in action. Real love says: "What's best for you? I'll do that. What serves you? What brings you comfort? What brings you closer to Jesus Christ? I'll do it all for you." That's love.

But at the heart of all sexual sin is not selflessness, but selfishness.

A sexual fling - visiting a prostitute - pornography - adultery... - at the heart of all of these is not, me giving myself selflessly to someone else for their good and their delight - but me focusing on feeding my own desires.

And the more you feed your sexual selfishness, the stronger your selfishness becomes.

That's the vicious circle - but there's a virtuous circle, too. The more you resolve to have no debt outstanding except the debt to love - that's the debt to be selfless - the more your own selfish desires will stop gnawing away at you.

Can I say to those of you who are not married that there's a love you can experience and show within the family of the church - and that love is one of the biggest gifts God gives you, so you can avoid having your sexual desires loom so large in your life that you feel you have no choice but to sin sexually.

Those of us who are married - we can help our unmarried brothers and sisters best in this area by giving them opportunity to be part of our lives - part of our families - to give and receive practical Christian love.

Why are there limits to the use of our sexuality? Because our only outstanding debt should be: not to gratify all our cravings selfishly - but selflessly to love one another.

And these verses have something else to say about how to avoid falling into sexual sin - or indeed into any selfish sin.

So here's the third main thing. It's **how to become loving**. And you'll see it from verse 12. [READ verses 12-14].

There are two commands here. First, clothe yourself with Jesus.

Put aside the actions and the habits that don't fit with the light that Jesus Christ has brought into your life - and instead put on the deeds that flow from belonging to Christ.

And if you do that, you'll find the protection for yourself that comes from Jesus Christ. That's what verse 12 means by "the armour of light" - Christ's protection.

"Clothing yourself in Jesus Christ" is one way of picturing what it's like to become a committed Christian.

Christ doesn't yet make us morally perfect - he doesn't wipe all sin out of our lives.

But his perfect righteousness does surround us, when we come to him - so that in God's eyes all the blackness of our sins is covered over by Christ's shining perfection.

Let me say to anyone here who's not a committed Christian - this is the message from today's sermon that I'd love you to hear.

The Bible's message to you is not: "Stop sinning and become morally perfect". It's: "clothe yourself in Christ, because then all your sins will be forgiven."

But clothing ourselves in Christ is not something we do just once.

Christians are people who are permanently clothed in Jesus Christ for our forgiveness - but now we've still got to clothe ourselves in Christ every day for our protection.

You've got to get dressed every day - you put your shirt and clothes on again every day - and every morning of your life, as Christians, you've got to consciously put Jesus Christ on - so that you're tuned into his protection of you - so that you don't fall into sin when the temptation rears up at you, at 11.30 tomorrow morning.

And another command, about how to become loving, is also there in verse 14: "do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

That command doesn't quite catch in English the power of the original words. Something like this would be better, and a bit more literal: "Don't make any provision for your sinful nature, to satisfy its cravings."

Don't make any provision...

Parents have to make provision for their children... thinking about what the kids will have for their tea, and then going to buy it.

It's wise to make provision for your retirement... thinking about how you'll provide for yourself when you're older, and then doing something about it.

But don't make any provision for the desires of your sinful nature - in other words - "don't feed the tiger".

Because if you feed it, it will grow.

If you keep choosing to toy around with sexual temptations in your mind, imagining greater fulfillment with someone else than you feel you've got in your life now....

if you keep choosing to feed your sinful nature with the images it craves...

you're just feeding the beast that wants to drag you down and away from Christ - throwing fuel on the fire that wants to burn you up.

Our cravings lie to us. They say: "If you don't satisfy me, I'll just get stronger." That's usually a lie. It's feeding them that makes them stronger.

So, three headlines this morning. First: Sexuality is a good gift to us from God - but he's given us limits to how we use it.

Second: Why these limits? Because of love - because God's commands to us are summed up in the command to love one another - and love is the way of Christ-like selflessness, rather than the devilish selfishness that drives all sexual sin.

Third: How to become loving - choose to clothe yourself in Christ every day, as close to you as your shirt is on your back - and don't give nourishment to the cravings of your sinful nature.

There's a fourth thing I wanted to include - but it really needs a whole other sermon on its own. It's there in verse 11, and it's an extra motivation to flee from sexual immorality [READ verses 11-12a].

One day, Christ will wipe all trace of sin out of your life - either when you die, or when he returns - whichever comes first. That's the great "day" that's coming. And because the "day" is coming, it's time to start throwing off the deeds that belong to this dark, dying world - it's time to wake up - to wake up to what God tells us about our sexuality - and to live in the light that's dawning, not in the night that's fast fading away.