

Sexual Purity

Genesis 39:1–12, 1 Timothy 5:1–7

This past Monday I received a text from one of our elders: “Did you all see the horrible news regarding Ravi Zacharias?” to which I replied, “Allegations of sexual impropriety? Tragic!”

Born in India, Ravi Zacharias was a gifted apologist for the Christian faith. I first heard him speak at my home church in Hazel Park, Michigan, back in the mid-seventies, when he was first beginning his ministry. I remember meeting him personally after the event. In ensuing years Ravi would conduct evangelistic crusades around the world and speak on countless college campuses (including East Lansing) on the topic of Christian apologetics, the defense of the faith. Ravi Zacharias died in May of last year at age 74, and many Christian leaders spoke in glowing terms about his ministry, but within three months there were multiple sources accusing him of serious sexual misconduct, including rape—obviously a very serious charge. Ten days ago the law firm hired by Ravi Zacharias International Ministry to look into these allegations, confirmed their veracity.¹ Indeed tragic!

Ravi Zacharias International Ministry released a statement that said in part, “To be victimized by unwanted sexual contact, advances, and behavior is horrendous. It is diametrically opposed to everything we believe about the value and dignity of every single person. We believe not only the women who made their allegations public but also additional women who had not previously made public allegations against Ravi but whose identities and stories were uncovered during the investigation. Tragically, witnesses described encounters including sexting, unwanted touching, spiritual abuse, and rape. We are devastated by what the investigation has shown and are filled with sorrow for the women who were hurt by this terrible abuse.”²

Sexual abuse is not only a violation of the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (which requires sexual purity), but of the fifth commandment as well. The fifth commandment is “Honor thy father and thy mother.” This commandment has to do with *interpersonal relationships*: “preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals.”³ Every Christian is duty-bound to treat other people with dignity, as Jesus did. The Christian world is shocked that a prominent spokesman for the faith as Ravi Zacharias was such a spectacular failure

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ravi_Zacharias, accessed 2-20-2021

² <https://www.rzim.org/read/rzim-updates/board-statement>

³ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 64, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 973

in his personal life. Yet we know that all human beings are capable of the vilest sin. How we need the grace of Christ to conduct our lives appropriately in a fallen world!

Our sermon this morning will focus on the first two verses of our New Testament text, part of a letter from the aging apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy. This young pastor would need instruction concerning various matters: proper worship, qualifications for church officers, and how to treat various classes of individuals within a congregation. Paul's message is this: as a pastor, Timothy must not only *speak* the truth, but *live* the truth! He must "live a life beyond reproach, giving believers a standard to emulate."⁴ This is a great need in the church in every age: leaders who not only know how to articulate the truth but actually *model* it, as did our Lord himself. Sadly, it is in this last area that Ravi Zacharias failed spectacularly. Publicly, he was a gifted apologist and communicator, but privately, an abuser of women. Indeed tragic!

The first two verses of our text this morning give terse instructions concerning interpersonal relationships. Paul writes, "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity." The main command in this sentence is "exhort." The basic meaning of this word in this context means *appeal to*. The Christian ministry involves both public and private duties. Paul "I have taught you publicly, and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). As he evangelizes, he *exhorts* people publicly and *appeals* to them in private. Public preaching is exhortation, emphatically urging his people to follow Christ. But on a personal level the Christian worker *appeals* to people, using a tone appropriate to each particular situation.

Paul uses family terms: "fathers," "mothers," "sisters," "brothers." The church is the "household of faith," the "family of God." Now Jesus could be very direct and confrontational when the occasion required it, such as when he confronted the Jewish leaders who were trying to entrap him in his words, or even when he rebuked the disciple Peter for suggesting that he should not go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. But when the person he was speaking to was receptive to the gospel, he could be very gentle. As the hymnwriter put it, "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness."

So in the case of the young pastor Timothy, as he dealt with the older saints in his congregation he was not to "rebuke" them (the word in the original means *strike at, beat upon*). He should gently appeal to them as fathers and mothers in the faith—men and women who during their lifetimes have earned respect. Significantly, younger saints should be treated as sisters and brothers. Now in the

⁴ English Standard Version, intro to 1 Tim.

providence of God I do not have a brother, but I do have two sisters. If one of them were about to do something foolish, I would not attack her with both guns blazing, I would not tear into her for the purpose of destroying her; rather, I would do something like, “Sister, is that a wise course of action?” “A soft answer turneth away wrath.” I would use gentleness, appealing to her as an adult, using reason.

It is significant for our topic this morning that in mentioning younger women, Paul adds “with all *purity*,” a word associated with chastity and propriety. As the younger man Timothy related to younger women in the course of his ministry he was to be especially careful that his motives and actions at all times be *pure*. *Pure* refers to a product that is not mixed or adulterated with any other substance.

Many people appreciate the taste and health benefits of pure, extra virgin olive oil. But extra virgin olive oil is expensive; moreover, it is perishable and must be properly cared for and transported to preserve the flavor and health benefits. If extra virgin olive oil is adulterated with other, so-called vegetable oils, it will be cheaper, but not as good. Our son in the Middle East knows local growers who produce small batches of olive oil. He says, once you have tasted fresh extra-virgin olive oil from a local farmer you will be spoiled; the taste is so much better. Pure, extra-virgin olive oil is oil that is unmixed, not adulterated with any other substance. Let the buyer beware! Not everything that is labeled “extra virgin olive oil” is actually pure olive oil.

But with regard to how the Christian minister is to relate to the younger women of his congregation, he is to associate with them “as sisters, with all purity”—that is, with pure motives. His desire at all times must be to relate to them as Christ would, both expressing with his words and living out in his actions the self-sacrificing love that Christ has for his people. In a sexually-obsessed and sexually-confused culture, sexual purity really stands out. Sadly, in the case of Ravi Zacharias, there was a disconnect and contradiction between his words and his person. In other words, Ravi Zacharias was a hypocrite. All the good that he accomplished with his words was destroyed by his uncontrolled sexual appetite. He did not treat younger women as sisters, with all purity.

God is pure. He is unadulterated, uncontaminated, unalloyed. He is the equivalent of sterling silver or 24-carat gold. He is pure. The patriarch Job recognized this. He said, “Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more *pure* than his maker?”⁵ The answer is no, God our maker is absolutely pure.

⁵ Job 4:17

His word is pure. “The words of the Lord are *pure* words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.”⁶ “The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is *pure*, enlightening the eyes.”⁷

Only those who have “clean hands, and a *pure* heart”⁸—that is, right actions born of proper motives—will enter heaven. No human being save Jesus Christ ever measured up perfectly to this high standard; that is why all of us need our sins to be washed away in his precious blood, and his perfect righteousness credited to our account. Brothers and sisters, no matter how circumspectly we have lived our life, we have all fallen short. Since none of us has clean hands and a pure heart in an absolute sense, we fail to meet God’s standard, and we stand in need of a Savior. But in his mercy God provided the perfect Savior, the sinless one who alone possesses the requisite “clean hands and a pure heart.” If we look to Christ in true faith, desirous of doing the good works that please God with clean hands and a pure heart, throughout all our days, as the fruit and evidence of our faith, then we can rest in his promise of eternal life. Through Christ we will ascend into the hill of the Lord and stand in his holy place.

The hymns and Psalms that we sing speak of this: “Rejoice, ye *pure* in heart”; “Wash me, make me *pure* within”; “The Lord’s commandments all are *pure*”; “Jesus, thou art all compassion, *pure*, unbounded love thou art.”

Perhaps at no point is purity more elusive than in the matter of sexual purity. God created us as sexual beings. The survival of the human race is dependent on this. When man fell in the garden of Eden, at that moment he died spiritually; he became alienated from God. But from that moment on he began to die physically as well. The Scriptures record this process poetically in the words “we all do fade as a leaf.”⁹ All of us begin life as a zygote, a single cell joined from the fusion of the male sperm and the female egg. We grow and develop and finally reach our physical and biological prime—imagine the beauty of a bride on her wedding day, glorious, radiant, resplendent. But at some point in our twenties or early thirties we pass our prime; we begin to decline. I remember our children and their classmates as bright-eyed high schoolers; now they and their friends are beginning to look middle aged; in a few years they will look old.

God made us as sexual beings. Sexual intimacy is a gift from our wise heavenly Father, but it is to be used always in a manner that is pleasing to him. “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will

⁶ Ps. 12:6

⁷ Ps. 19:8

⁸ Ps. 24:4

⁹ Isa. 64:6

judge” (Heb. 13:4). The seventh commandment is “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” As we saw this morning in our reading from the law, “God condemns all unchastity ... we should therefore detest it wholeheartedly and live decent and chaste lives ... We are temples of the Holy Spirit, body and soul, and God wants both to be kept clean and holy. That is why God forbids all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires ...”¹⁰ God wants all of us to live lives of chastity *before* marriage, and purity and faithfulness *in* marriage. But we live in a sex-obsessed culture where pornography is readily available. How can we live pure, God-honoring lives? Only by acknowledging our utter dependence on Christ, our Savior. Only through Christ will we receive the power to say no to sin and yes to godliness; only through Christ will we obtain the fruit of his Spirit, which is self-control.

The enemies of the gospel say that sexual experimentation is unavoidable. Young people are going to experiment with premarital sex; they are going to have a number of sex partners, both male and female, both heterosexual and homosexual. There’s nothing we can do about it. Recently a young man in England reportedly abandoned the mother of his two children while the woman was in the hospital giving birth to the couple’s second son. This man abandoned his girlfriend for his girlfriend’s *mother*—his children’s *grandmother*. The reporter ventured that he might be the worst father ever! But why not, if sexual experimentation is just a part of nature? Wasn’t the young man in England just living out the immorality so prevalent in today’s world? The world says that sexual experimentation is unavoidable, that the only hope for our young people is to educate them, to teach them to have “safe sex,” to use condoms and contraceptives. But Jesus is our example.

Think of it! The Lord Jesus Christ is the God-man; he is both fully divine and fully human. He is the eternal Son of the Father, absolute deity. He is also the son of the Virgin Mary, fully human. He was “conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person.” He is “very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”¹¹ Jesus of Nazareth lived to be about 33 years of age. During this time he grew and developed and reached his physical prime, sexual maturity. He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”¹² The Lord Jesus experienced sexual temptation, but he overcame it and was victorious over it through the power of his Holy Spirit. The fact that Jesus Christ,

¹⁰ Heidelberg Catechism Lords Day 41, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 892

¹¹ WCF 8.2

¹² Heb. 4:15

the perfect man, was victorious over sexual temptation proves that victory is attainable. But it can only be attained through the power of Christ.

Sexual temptation may be strongest in older teens and young adults, whose hormones are raging, but it is not unheard of in older people either—just witness the fall of Ravi Zacharias, who apparently kept up his sexual indiscretions even to his later years. Altogether different was Joseph, who had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his treacherous brothers. Although he was all alone in a strange land, far from the worshipping community and the means of grace, far from the oversight of godly elders, he withstood powerful sexual temptation and bore witness to God’s truth, telling his master’s wife, “How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9). And when she ordered him, “Lie with me,” he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and ran outside (v. 12). Joseph, in the face of fierce temptation, took decisive action to avoid sexual impurity. And God blessed him for it.

How can we achieve sexual purity? First, we must admit that we are vulnerable, no matter what our age. Even persons born again through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit are subject to sexual temptation. When we are in Christ, “all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). We have a whole new motivation. Before our conversion we were dead in sin, enemies of God, seekers only of our own pleasure. But after we are born again, Christ’s power is at work within us. Our job, 24 hours a day, is to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13). We are to “mortify our members,” putting to death the “old man,” the old principle by which we formerly lived.¹³ We are to consider ourselves dead to sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁴

Spiritual victory will not come instantly, but it *will* come as we do these things. We must realize that no temptation has overtaken us that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let us be tempted beyond our ability, but with the temptation he will also provide a way of escape, that we may be able to endure it.¹⁵ This is the victory that overcomes the world: our faith.¹⁶

One great blessing that our wise heavenly Father gave the human race is marriage. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.’” The apostle Paul taught that “because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her

¹³ Col. 3:5

¹⁴ Rom. 6:11

¹⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 10:13 ESV

¹⁶ 1 John 5:4

own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:2–3). If a Christian man and woman commit to each other and remain faithful to each other and show affection and mutual love to one another, living in holy wedlock throughout their days, then the problem of sexual purity is largely solved. But a husband and wife need to work at their marriage, speaking lovingly to one another, and being quick to forgive. A good marriage doesn’t just happen; both partners must work at it. The husband is advised, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?” (Prov. 5:18–20). Ravi Zacharias ignored this advice and made shipwreck of his ministry.

Jesus taught that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). What does it mean to look at another person with lust? It means to indulge your fantasy, to imagine being in bed with him or her, imagining what a sexual relationship with that person might feel like. O Christian, do not go there! The penalty is everlasting destruction. Your Savior warned, “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matt. 5:29). Whenever you are tempted to indulge in lust, go instead to God in prayer. Confess your faults to him. Ask for the forgiveness freely offered in Christ. Commit yourself to think God’s thoughts after him, to meditate on his holy word. Seek out good and godly companions who can pray for you and hold you accountable. Seek the assistance of your exalted Savior, who sits at the Father’s right hand making intercession for the saints according to God’s perfect will. Remember what he said to Simon Peter, the man of great ability who would later betray him: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not” (Luke 22:31–32).

God’s will for each of our lives is sexual purity. “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you” (1 Thess. 4:3–6).

So here, beloved, is God’s will, not just for a young pastor in Paul’s day, but for all of us: “Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity.” Let

us each, with Christ's help, treat *all* people as fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters, with all *purity*. Amen.