

Sexual Immorality and the Gospel (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, February 5, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 5; Romans 7; Romans 8; Galatians 2; Galatians 5; Galatians 6; Colossians 2
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:14:03 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Paul takes sexual sin in the church seriously enough to remove a man over it — and then, in the same breath, refuses to make rule-keeping the remedy. Knowing right from wrong does not calm the fire in us; it fans it. The gospel is not the boss level at the end of the Christian life. It is where the fight begins, because the flesh was crucified with Christ before we ever took a swing at it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5 is aimed at the man's restoration, not his ruin. The merciful thing is to let him feel how serious it is rather than help him grow comfortable in it.
- ◆ It is also for the church. You do not bring napalm into the helicopter evacuating people out of the fire, and you do not bring booze to a recovery meeting.
- ◆ The culture's fixation on one category of sexual sin lets most of the room off the hook. Premarital sex, pornography and affairs are where the church actually bleeds.
- ◆ Romans 7 says the commandment, holy and good as it is, gave sin its opportunity. Knowing is not half the battle — knowing makes the battle fiercer.
- ◆ Natural theology guesses at God from the outside in. Matt refuses both its cold conservative version and its sentimental liberal version: Christ is the lens, not a footnote in the last chapter.
- ◆ Scripture never asks us to mortify the flesh. It says the flesh has already been crucified with Christ; what we put to death are the deeds of the body, and we do it from inside a finished victory.

- ◆ A moralism with a Jesus sticker on it is still paganism. “Do better starting tomorrow” is the rally cry of dead religion.
- ◆ The Christian answer to someone suffering under temptation is not better management tips. Handing a suffering person a technique is the actual mockery of their suffering.

► 1:14:03

It was the week of the Austin ice storm. Power had been out, branches had come down across the church playground, and Matt opened by thanking the people who had cleared them and opened their homes. Then he named the text and the topic — 1 Corinthians 5, sexual immorality and the gospel — and told the guests in the room that no, Hope does not always talk about this. It came up because the series is walking through 1 Corinthians and this is chapter five.

Why preach the hard chapter at all

► 1:15:00

The alternative, Matt said, is to preach topically on the things you are comfortable with, forever. He sets himself the discipline of covering as many topics as he can in a year so that nothing gets avoided for the sake of comfort — and 1 Corinthians supplies plenty of opportunities.

He also named two opponents he would be arguing with all morning. The first is *moralistic religion* — an approach to God that is behavior-based and centered on earning favor rather than on Christ. The second is *natural theology*: watching a flock of geese, or the stars, and inferring backward what the maker of geese must be like. “Christianity isn’t based on a moralistic religion approach or a natural theology,” he said. Christ is the foundation, the blueprint, and the lens through which even the scriptures are read.

1. The man, and why Paul removes him

► 1:17:45

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?”

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1–2 ↗

Paul then tells the assembled church to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved. Matt was honest that nobody is entirely sure what that phrase means. What is clear is the shape of it — something like a baptism in reverse, a removal from the fellowship — and the stated aim: the man is saved in the end. Some read “destruction of the flesh” as sickness and death, though Matt noted the obvious problem with that reading, since it is hard to see how a dead man gets restored to the congregation. More likely it means: you are outside the protection of God’s people now. You may walk with Satan if you insist, but we will not make it comfortable.

► 1:20:54

“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6–7 ↗

Confrontation, in Paul’s mind, is preservative — and it is a mercy twice over. “It’s actually ultimately an act of cruelty to help someone drink the poison that destroys them and make it taste sweet as it goes down,” Matt said. The elders would rather this man be uncomfortable than have him believe he can walk with Christ and in total rebellion at once. And it is a mercy to the room, which is full of people being rescued out of slavish places: bringing the sin back in is like bringing napalm into the helicopter evacuating people from a war zone, or booze to a recovery meeting while lecturing everyone on your freedom.

► 1:21:54

The Corinthians had misread an earlier letter as an instruction to avoid immoral people generally, which would mean leaving the planet — or at least never going to HEB. Paul corrects them: the boundary runs inside the church, not around the world. And the list is longer than sex. Greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, swindling all sit in the same sentence.

2. The externalizing trick

► 1:23:39

This, Matt argued, is where the last twenty years have gone sideways. The culture’s fixation on homosexuality externalizes the whole subject — it becomes somebody else’s problem, over there, and the room can be glad the pastor is addressing it for *their* sake. Statistically, what the church struggles against is premarital sex among Christian couples, pornography, and affairs — and there is no victimless crime in any of it.

He stated the position plainly and without hedging: sex belongs within marriage, between one man and one woman who are not close relatives and who have made a public covenant until death. “It’d be hard to come away with a different view unless you’re really trying hard to find it.” And then he spent the rest of the message on the sentence that follows — knowing what the Bible says is not how this battle is fought.

3. Knowing makes it harder

► 1:25:55

“If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”

ROMANS 7:7–8 ↗

Matt reached for *Smurfs: The Lost Village*, which he has seen because he has young children — the moment where Clumsy is told whatever you do, don’t push this lever, and can now think of nothing else. The commandment is holy and righteous and good, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death. Which means the current debate — pinned entirely on what is and is not sinful — has an aggravating effect. It does not make the struggle easier.

4. Christ first, not the last chapter

► 1:28:06

Here Matt warned the room he was about to get mystical, and that he could not avoid it. Natural theology builds upward from what makes sense to us: the laws of logic first, then the stars and the birds, then Greek philosophy’s first principle, then the attributes stacked on top. Conservatives tend to start from a cold, distant power source; liberals from an idea — what does love mean to you — and induct from there. Both are guesswork from the bottom up.

“*Jesus on the cross and the empty tomb isn’t a footnote at the end.*”

Nor is it a mirage out ahead of you, reachable if you someday learn to pray longer — intimacy with the Father filed under things that are for Mother Teresa and not for you.

► 1:30:44

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

ROMANS 8:2-4 ↗

“That last one’s kind of intense,” Matt said. “I think if it weren’t in the Bible we wouldn’t believe it.”

God’s own holy law cannot reform the fiery passions of the flesh.

The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God and cannot submit — and it is right here, he said, that people quietly slide back into natural theology. This matches my experience, therefore this must be what Christianity is: struggling as a slave, knowing you cannot please God, feeling only hostility. Paul’s cry of *wretched man that I am* gets treated as the mature Christian address. But Paul knows perfectly well who rescues him.

5. The flesh is already crucified

► 1:34:14

Matt made a point he said he could not find anywhere contradicted: scripture never tells us to mortify the flesh. It tells us to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. The flesh itself is already dead in Christ’s crucifixion — not because we managed it, but because it was his death and it became ours.

“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

GALATIANS 5:24 ↗

Not *slowly put to death by other means* — crucified, past tense, at a particular hill. And

“I have been crucified with Christ... the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” is gobbledygook, he admitted, without a risen Lord actually interacting with us.

► 1:37:00

“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23 ↗

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Matt granted that Paul is addressing a different controversy there, but the question it leaves is exactly his: what *can* stop the indulgence of the flesh? “The restrictions themselves aren’t bad, but that’s not where the power for fighting comes,” he said. “The yeses and no’s that we find in scripture are always for our benefit, but they are never the power source.”

6. Christian paganism

► 1:39:24

He voiced the objection in mock-clerical register: without behavior control and sin mitigation protocols, what is left? If you take away discipleship programs aimed at behavior management, is there anything in the box? “But if we think that way, I think we’re pagans,” he said — “because there’s a Christian way of doing paganism.” The moral pagans of the ancient world held that you had to be moral in order to be illuminated about who God was. Put a Jesus sticker on that and it is not much of an improvement.

The sad version of this is a person walking the do’s and don’ts faithfully, learning the law well enough that it arouses what it forbids, with a Jesus-shaped hole at the center of the whole arrangement. “That’s the best we can do without the real risen Lord. Okay, well, starting tomorrow, do better. The rally cry of dead religion.”

► 1:45:33

He anticipated the sharpest objection himself: people are genuinely suffering under temptation — is preaching the gospel at them again any comfort? His answer was that the alternative is worse. To meet real suffering with more tips and management is the actual mockery of it. The gospel is not a promise of ease; the Christian claim has never been that life gets easy. It is that Christ enters into our misery and sets us free from the power of slavery to sin.

7. Cleanse out the old leaven

► 1:47:15

“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

GALATIANS 6:14–16 ↗

The Greek behind *new creation*, Matt noted, is not the word for an updated version of the same thing. It is the word for something never seen before — a prototype. Principles and general jesusiness do not count. A new creation counts.

► 1:52:00

And that sent him back to where he started. Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump — not because you were a good boy and simply hadn't noticed, but because Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Underneath strong drink and sexual company, he said, is usually loneliness, boredom, confusion and hurt. People are numbing because they do not know the true medicine. What they are looking for out there — to be acknowledged, to be accepted, to belong — is what is already true in Christ. The congregation had eaten the bread and drunk the cup an hour earlier, which he pointed out as evidence that Hope is already fine with a little mysticism.

"I know it's going to come off a little culty, but it's Jesus all the way down, and I'm okay with that. This is not a Boy Scout troop. This is actually a church."

He closed by asking the Father to fill the room afresh with revelation of Jesus — to let them dance in his glory with no shackles, no slavery to sin, because in him they really are unleavened.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 1 Corinthians 5:1–2
- 1 Corinthians 5:3–5
- 1 Corinthians 5:6–7
- 1 Corinthians 5:9–13
- Romans 7:7–8
- Romans 7:9–12
- Romans 8:2–4
- Romans 8:6–8
- Romans 8:13
- Galatians 5:24
- Galatians 2:20
- Colossians 2:20–23
- Galatians 6:14–16

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt called church discipline a mercy — to the person and to the church. Where have you seen that done well, and where have you seen it done in a way that only wounded?
2. Which sins do you find easiest to externalize, so that they belong to someone else and never to you?
3. Romans 7 says the commandment gave sin its opportunity. Where have you found that knowing a rule made you want to break it more?
4. Matt said we fill in the blanks about God from what makes sense to us. What have you concluded about God from your own experience that Christ himself would not have taught you?
5. If the gospel is the starting point rather than the finish line, what does that change about how you fight one specific thing this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_rx38KADws&t=4443s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.