

KEN
WILLIAMS

Sexual Purity In Missions

*"It is God's will that you should be sanctified:
that you should avoid sexual immorality;
that each of you should learn to control his own body
in a way that is holy and honorable."
1 Thessalonians 4:3-4*

We all are aware of cases of moral failure among missionaries. And how disheartening this can be for all of us, especially when it happens to close colleagues. The church in Western societies has been so inundated with sexual stimuli that what was once seen as grossly inappropriate, pornographic, and shameful is now treated as more or less "normal" and acceptable. This proliferation of distorted human sexuality is a prime tool which Satan, the enemy of our souls, is using against people in general, the church, and the missions community in particular. No longer limited to subtle temptations, he now blatantly tempts us to immorality in ways that would have been ineffective only a few years ago.

Being sexual and sane these days is no easy thing. Each of us is responsible for who we are as sexual beings. This means that at times and as Christians, we must acknowledge our sexual issues or struggles, as well as engage personally in spiritual warfare to resist Satan's sexual temptations. We are also called to help others effectively do battle in this arena.

In this article, I would like to remind us that as missionaries we are as vulnerable to sexual sin as anyone else. I will briefly explain the dynamics of sexual temptation and will give some ideas for developing a personal strategy for maintaining moral purity. I have also included two brief self-assessment tools on maintaining sexual purity.

Healthy sexuality is a significant issue anywhere these days. Missionaries can expect to be challenged in this area as they follow the biblical guidelines/admonitions to live sensible and holy lives (Titus 2:11-15). Here are several practical strategies and tools for remaining pure in missions and for avoiding the snares of the Evil One.

Although this article does not specifically address adolescent MKs and sexuality matters, this is of course a critical issue. Missionary parents and educators may want to use this article with adolescent MKs to help them in their sexual journey into adulthood.

Be Aware of the Danger

We need to be just as concerned about understanding the normal and healthy aspects of human sexuality as we are about its potential dangers and downside. What a powerful and lovely gift we have from our Creator! An article of this nature could lead us to the false assumption that sexual feelings in themselves are evil. However, let us remember that sex was God's idea, created by Him before the fall (see Gen. 2:18-25). My perspective in this article is to focus more on safeguarding ourselves from the negative consequences of inappropriate sexual expression and temptation, especially in light of how Satan can use these things to attack us.

The first step in resisting temptation is to be aware of Satan's strategies. Paul spoke of being alert, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Cor. 2:11). Let us be aware of Satan's schemes for trying to destroy God's work. One of his primary strategies is to convince us that we could never sink so low as to commit sexual sin.

Missionaries often face special issues that make them vulnerable to sexual temptation. Carefully consider the specific factors in your situation that may hinder your ability to resist. These may include loneliness, anonymity, unmet emotional needs, greater sexual freedom in the local culture, and loss of support systems such as family, church, and friends. Also, unrelenting stress over long periods of time can undermine our ability to resist temptation.

Sometimes missionaries are more susceptible to sexual temptation because they think that it could never happen to them. They believe the possibility is unthinkable. In counseling several missionaries who

had committed adultery or fornication, I found that not one had considered himself or herself vulnerable to immorality.

You are probably well acquainted with 1 Corinthians 10:13, and you claim its precious promises: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." But do you also know and apply the preceding verse? "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" The Holy Spirit gave us this stern warning immediately before the promises, and both must be taken together. We cannot safely rest in God's promise of help in temptation, if we naively think we can stand without taking great care.

We need to face the facts. Each one of us is vulnerable to sexual temptation, no matter what our age, marital status, or maturity. You may be tempted to indulge in pornography. The worldwide availability of pornography on the Internet poses a relatively new and powerful temptation to missionaries, especially men. Not long ago, Focus on the Family reported that the number one reason pastors and their spouses called their hotline for help was addiction to pornography on the Internet!

Or you may find yourself tempted to "play games" with persons to whom you are attracted, without actual sexual involvement. These games can take many forms—flirting, showing special interest, touching more than is appropriate, engaging in too much eye contact, spending a lot of time together, joking about being in love, etc. While these things may not be sinful in themselves, they can put us and others in danger.

Many missionaries struggle with severe temptations to commit adultery, fornication, homosexual acts, and even incest or child molestation. Tragically, some of them succumb. What about you? Will you be one of those who end up as a lamb in Satan's slaughterhouse? Or will you walk in the

power of the Holy Spirit, aware of the dangers and prepared to victoriously do battle with the forces of evil?

Understand the Dynamics of Sexual Temptation

Many missionaries do not understand the powerful dynamics of sexual temptation. As you understand these dynamics, you are able to recognize forces and processes within you and take action to resist them. Here are a few principles to keep in mind:

1. We don't fall into sin; we slide into it. When someone commits sexual sin, we tend to think of that person as suddenly falling off the cliff into an abyss. This is rarely, if ever, the case. An act of sexual sin is the ultimate and logical result of long-term habit patterns of giving in to temptations to less obvious sins. According to our Lord, sexual sin originates in the heart (Matt. 15:19). The embers of adultery may smolder in the heart for months or even years before they burst into the flame of action. See Matthew 5:8, 28; 12:35-36; Proverbs 4:23; 6:18; 23:26-28.

2. The beginnings of the slide into immorality often seem so harmless that we may not even be aware of them. We live in a sex-saturated world. Each time we are exposed to a TV program, movie, magazine, or pornography on the Internet that appeals even slightly to sexual desires that are inappropriate, a powerful, unconscious process evolves. The process is often so slow and subtle that we are rarely aware of what is happening; but as the years pass, our hatred of sexual sin is gradually lost. In fact, the process has been going on in our society long enough that many young Christians have never developed that abhorrence. And so the seeds of personal sexual sin have been sown deep in the hearts of most of us, without our even realizing it.

3. Our capacity for self-deceit is virtually limitless, according to Jeremiah 17:9. Being a missionary does not dimin-

ish this capacity! While we rejoice in God's indwelling power over sin, we must be constantly aware of the power of our hearts to deceive us. If we fail to accept this difficult truth about ourselves, we stand in great danger of sexual sin. As a counselor, I know of no area in which the power of self-deceit is stronger than in the sexual area. Most of us know of believers who tried to continue serving God while living in secret immorality and who "repented" only after getting caught. See 1 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 6:7-8, Ephesians 5:6, James 1:22, and 1 John 1:8.

4. Close personal relationships are vital in the Christian life. God created us with legitimate needs for intimacy, and to deny these needs may make us even more vulnerable to sexual temptation. For married persons, intimacy with one's spouse must be primary, of course. But married and single persons alike need healthy, godly relationships with others. Intimacy and sexuality are not the same. A healthy, biblical view of loving intimacy allows us to relate in mutually upbuilding ways without romantic or sexual involvement. Read through the Gospels to see Jesus' model in His close friendships.

5. Intimate relationships often provide serious temptation to sin, and so they must be handled with great care and awareness of their dangers. Most missionaries slide into sexual sin through relationships that begin quite harmlessly and even out of righteous motives. The process usually develops in these stages:

- A man and woman are brought together naturally through work, common interests, or ministry.
- They begin to spend more time together, especially more time alone.
- One or both begin to have deep emotional and/or spiritual needs met in the relationship.
- At some point, they begin to touch each other, sometimes beginning with right motives. But eventually the touching, combined with the meeting of significant needs, generates romantic and/or sexual feelings.

■ Powerful self-deception enables them to justify and rationalize what is happening in the relationship.

6. Once we have begun the slide, sexual temptation will probably be the strongest force we will ever experience. Its power can grow to the point that we become willing to give up everything to gratify it: relationship with Christ, spouse and children, home, ministry, reputation, friends, *everything*. And no believer is so spiritual that he or she is immune to its power.

Involvement in pornography is particularly difficult to overcome. When one has become addicted, that is, compulsively drawn to pornographic images time after time and unable to stop, he/she will need help from a colleague, a support group, or a counselor to overcome the pull. No one makes it alone in seeking to recover from addiction.

Masturbation

We Christians are very reluctant to talk about masturbation. This is such a hush-hush topic, but it is so important that I want to address it briefly. It is one of those issues with which most people, Christian or not, have struggled or are struggling. Yet convictions of its sinfulness or lack of sinfulness are held very strongly. My purpose is neither to justify it as always OK, nor condemn it as always a terrible sin. As far as I can discover, the Bible never mentions masturbation, while it does mention virtually every sexual act that is sinful.

In giving five “indisputable facts,” Richard Foster (1985) summarizes the issue of masturbation in his book *Money, Sex, and Power* far better than I could: “First, masturbation is not physically harmful in any way.... Second, the Bible nowhere deals directly with masturbation.... But sexual desire also needs to be controlled, which leads us to a third affirmation: the more masturbation tends toward obsession, the more it tends toward idolatry.... A fourth affirmation: masturbation’s sexual fantasies are a very real part of human life that

needs to be disciplined, not eliminated.... The final thing we should say about masturbation is that, although it may electrify, it can never fully satisfy.” See Foster’s complete discussion for further treatment of the subject. Randy Alcorn (1985) also provides a helpful chapter on this topic in *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution*.

Build a Strategy for Ongoing Moral Purity

Here are 11 principles to help you develop a strategy for avoiding sexual sin:

1. Accept your personal vulnerability to immorality, and continue to grow in understanding your own personal responses to the dynamics of sexual temptation.

2. If married, make your relationship with your spouse a high priority. Do not let the stresses of life rob you of the rich, satisfying relationship God wants for you, according to Proverbs 5:18-20.

3. Make a list of sinful practices in which you are or have been involved. These may include thoughts, fantasies, feelings, and actions which stimulate or gratify you sexually but which you know are sinful. Then add to the list seemingly harmless practices in which you engage but which you know do not contribute to a holy life. These might include thoughts, fantasies, and feelings which are less explicit than those you first listed. They may also include TV programs and magazines which are not overtly pornographic but which you know appeal to the flesh. These activities may be permissible according to 1 Corinthians 6:12, but in time you can be enslaved to them, without even realizing it. They cause you to set your mind on the flesh rather than on the Spirit, as described in Romans 8:5.

4. Make a commitment to Jesus Christ and to your spouse, if married, to live a holy life free from sexual sin, even those sins that seem to be harmless. Write down your commitment and keep it where you will see it often. This is a com-

mitment that must be continually reaffirmed, sometimes on a moment-by-moment basis.

5. Make a lifelong project of studying, memorizing, meditating on, and applying Scriptures which speak to this area of life. See Psalm 119:9, 11. A few key passages in this area are Proverbs 5; 6:20-35; Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; Ephesians 5:3-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. God's Word must be a major part of your strategy.

6. Rigorously practice Colossians 3:5. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires...." Also see Ephesians 4:22. Ask God to forgive you and to cleanse you of any practices you listed under point 3 above. Then seek to achieve freedom from those things. This process will take time, and, being human, you will probably fail at times. But don't give up in discouragement! Satan will try to convince you that it's hopeless—that you will never make significant progress.

Timing is critical. When you are first aware of being tempted, reaffirm your commitment to Christ and to putting your earthly nature to death. In this battle, even a few seconds of wavering or inaction can make the difference between victory and defeat (Eccl. 8:11).

7. Continually work on being renewed in your mind, as described in Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:23-24. This involves a commitment that must be reaffirmed often, especially when you first become aware of temptation. Scripture explains the process of being renewed in our minds in different ways, so that we are able to understand it fully. Study this process in the Word, beginning with Romans 8:5-8, 12:1-3, Philippians 4:4-8, Colossians 3:1-4, and 1 Peter 1:13-17.

8. Develop a relationship of mutual accountability. We cannot hope to handle sexual temptation effectively alone. In fact, God didn't design us to survive alone in this spiritual battle. Hebrews 3:12-13 in-

dicates that we need close personal interaction with others in order not to be "hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

It can be very difficult to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other" (James 5:16). Yet every one of us needs to do this very thing regularly. Nothing will cause an illicit attraction or fantasy to shatter in pieces as much as sharing it with a praying friend. Specific details need not normally be shared.

9. Develop your own "early warning system" to detect the first signs of temptation. Christians often slide into sexual sin without being aware of temptation until it is too late. Romans 6:12 warns us that we can become slaves to sin and lose our freedom to obey God. If you are married, the slightest physical or emotional attraction to a person of the opposite sex should be dealt with immediately through prayer, application of God's Word, and mutual accountability.

10. Know and avoid your danger zones. The situations in which we put ourselves greatly affect our vulnerability to sexual temptation. To do battle effectively in this area, we need to know the situations that are dangerous to us. Then we must avoid them when possible. If that isn't possible, we need to plan ahead for spiritual warfare and take whatever steps are necessary to insure victory. Here are a few examples of possible danger zones:

- Traveling alone, especially overseas.
- Working alone with someone of the opposite sex.
- Counseling or praying alone with someone of the opposite sex.
- Meeting with a person of the opposite sex in a room where no one can see in.
- Getting so over-stressed that the ability to fight temptation is diminished.

11. Understand cultural cues. If you are in another culture, learn which cues signal moral looseness and which signal moral purity. Here are four questions to ask:

- What cues signal that a person is moral?
- What cues signal that a person is not interested in another person?
- What cues signal that a person is immoral?
- What cues signal that a person is interested in another person?

Be very careful to avoid immoral cues, and practice those which signal an unwillingness to become involved in illicit relationships.

Conclusion

Sexual immorality is not the unforgivable sin. Forgiveness and healing are available through the blood of Christ. If you have been or are now caught up in immo-

rality, you can experience God's forgiveness and cleansing through confession and repentance. But to commit sexual immorality may be the most excruciatingly destructive experience that can happen in anyone's life and ministry. Begin today to build your personal strategy for a lifetime of moral purity, knowing that you will battle great temptations along the way.

Reflection and Discussion

Go through the worksheet in Appendix 1 below, "How Am I Maintaining Moral Purity?" Consider doing this exercise with a close friend (same gender), accountability group, or spouse. The second appendix is similar and is intended for use by individuals and couples.

Appendix 1 How Am I Maintaining Moral Purity?

Use the following scale to indicate your responses:

1 = Rarely; 2 = Occasionally; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Nearly always

- ___ 1. I am consciously aware of my vulnerability to sexual sin.
- ___ 2. I have definite standards as to what I watch, listen to, and read, and I am careful to live by these standards.
- ___ 3. I am careful about how I touch people of the opposite sex.
- ___ 4. I meet with an accountability partner or partners regularly.
- ___ 5. My actions show that I am a moral person in whatever culture I'm in.
- ___ 6. When tempted to lust after someone, I "take captive" those thoughts and feelings, so that they "obey Christ."
- ___ 7. I refrain from flirting.
- ___ 8. I refuse to be entertained by anything that offends God.
- ___ 9. If I feel attracted to someone, I am extremely careful to act in ways that will suppress emotional involvement on the part of both of us.
- ___ 10. If I must go into morally high-risk situations, I consciously recognize the risk before I go there, and I plan on steps to protect myself.
- ___ 11. When I become aware that I am on the slide toward immorality, I take immediate steps to move back toward purity.
- ___ 12. I dress in such a way as to demonstrate my commitment to morality, both in my culture and in other cultures.

- ___ 13. I do whatever I can to see that my legitimate emotional needs are met in godly, healthy ways.
- ___ 14. I meditate on Scriptures that encourage me and strengthen me in maintaining moral purity.
- ___ 15. I maintain a love relationship with Christ that is so strong that engaging in any kind of immorality is abhorred.

Appendix 2

Maintaining Moral Purity: Opportunities for Growth

Here are some questions for prayerful reflection. Review these, and write an action plan.

Individual Issues

1. How would I describe my vulnerability to sexual temptation at this time in my life?
 - a. What factors are helping me to remain pure?
 - b. What factors are making it difficult for me to remain pure?
2. Am I on the slide toward immorality?
 - a. Where am I now compared to five years ago? A year ago? Six months ago?
 - b. What, if anything, do I need to do in order to move back toward complete purity?
3. Is there anyone with whom I am involved in the five stages toward immorality? (See point 5 under “Understand the Dynamics of Sexual Temptation.”)
 - a. If so, who is it?
 - b. At what stage am I?
 - c. What do I plan to do about it? When?
4. What does my strategy for moral purity look like right now?
 - a. What aspects do I now practice?
 - b. What have I stopped practicing that I used to do? What do I want to do about these things?
 - c. What new things do I want to add to my strategy? When will I add them?
5. What Scriptures have I memorized in this area?
 - a. How often do I review them?
 - b. What new “battle passages” do I want to add to my arsenal?
 - c. Memorize one of the following Scripture passages: 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, 2 Corinthians 7:1, or Ephesians 5:3-5.

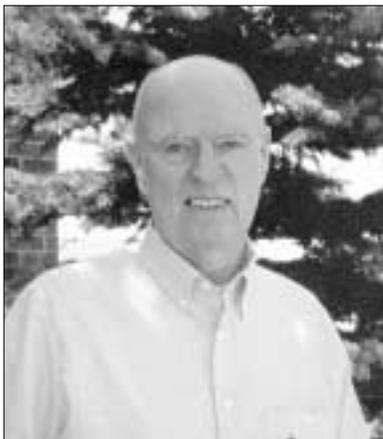
Married Couple Issues

1. Talk through the individual issues with your spouse.
2. What is going on in our lives and marriage that is helping us remain morally pure?
3. What is going on right now that makes it difficult to remain pure?
4. How free are we to talk about sexual temptation and other moral issues? What do we want to do to grow in this area?

5. What can we do to make it easier for us to keep our purity?
6. In what ways can we enhance our love for each other at this time in our lives?
7. How are we doing at meeting each other's needs? Emotional needs? Physical needs? Spiritual needs? How can we do better?
8. What does our strategy for moral purity *as a couple* look like? What specifically can we do to make our strategy more effective?
9. What else do we want to say to each other or ask of each other in this area?

References

- Alcorn, R. (1985). *Christians in the wake of the sexual revolution*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press.
- Foster, R. (1985). *Money, sex, and power*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Hybels, B. (1989). *Christians in a sex-crazed culture*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- Stafford, T. (1989). *The sexual Christian*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.



Ken Williams has a master's degree in psychology from Pepperdine University and a doctoral degree in human behavior from United States International University. Ken and his wife Bobbie have served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International since 1957. Ken translated the New Testament into Chuj, a language in Guatemala, then served for 22 years as a counselor, including six years as Director of Wycliffe's International Counseling Department. Since 1992, he has worked as a Wycliffe International Personnel Training Consultant, primarily serving other missions. He is Director of International Training Partners (ITP), a partnership of some 40 organizations and various host Christian leaders. ITP provides *Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills Workshops* and other workshops for missionaries and host people (www.RelationshipSkills.com). Email: kenwilly@mindspring.com.

Special thanks to Jim Holsclaw of Wycliffe Bible Translators, my mentor, encourager, and friend for many years, who spurred me on to write this article.