

Defining Fornication

The question came up last Sunday concerning whether premarital sex is a sin. Understanding what God is teaching us about this turns on the definition of the word that is translated fornication in the KJV and sexual immorality in the ESV, *porneia* in the Greek. There are a number of strong statements in God's word indicating that those practicing sexual immorality will not enter the kingdom of heaven (**Galatians 5:19-21** Also look at **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**).

In my early studies I was concerned that there is no simple declarative statement defining what sexual immorality is. And so I put some work into understanding this. The traditional definition of sexual immorality is sex outside of marriage. But that by itself is not at all a convincing argument. What did the readers and writers of the new testament understand about this term? And why is there not a definition simply provided in the text? Let me answer the second question first: If I am writing or speaking and I use a term of which I am uncertain that my audience understands the meaning I would include a definition. But if the term I am using is so commonly understood by my audience I would skip the definition. It's not necessary. In **Romans 6:3** Paul mentions baptism, he does not define what baptism is because he is writing to the church, everyone has been baptized and so there is no need for him to explain what "baptism" means.

Now to answer the first question. Let's turn once again to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul is giving guidance on various issues of concern there. Look at **1 Corinthians 7** where the apostle Paul discusses various situations relating to marriage, divorce and remarriage. I suggest you read the entire chapter first before continuing here.

The chapter starts off with Paul's response to a matter written to him. He mentions this quote in **verse one**: **"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman"** and then makes this statement: **"But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."** (**1 Corinthians 7:2**) The clear implication here is that one needs to be married if one wants to have sexual relations. Let's look at another example a little later in the chapter. In **verse 8** the apostle Paul advises the unmarried to remain single. He adds this caution though, **"But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."** (**1 Corinthians 7:9**) Once again here the clear implication is that one needs to be married if one wants to have sexual relations.

Let's look at one more example. Read **Matthew 19:1-12**. We are all familiar with this chapter. Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees with a question on divorce. Jesus makes this an opportunity to clarify God's instruction on divorce and give instruction on how we should regard divorce. When the disciples suggest that **"...If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."** (**Matthew 19:10**) Jesus does not back down on the gravity of his instruction. He ends his response to the disciples with: **"...there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."** (**Matthew 19:12**) The clear implication here is that one choosing not to marry is effectively making ones self a eunuch (no sexual relations).

With this understanding and with the verses quoted above we can see that premarital sex is sexual immorality and therefore a sin. Let me know what you think and we can continue the discussion next Sunday.

James Rattazzi - March 24, 2020



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