

Revelation 17 & 18 are about the sinful world in its opposition to God using the symbol of the wicked city of Babylon which is in turn symbolized by a great prostitute. Throughout the Bible, the city of Babylon opposes God and thus becomes a symbol of the world in its opposition to God. A prostitute is an obvious symbol of sexual immorality, but sexual immorality often stands for immorality as a whole. There are all kinds of details mentioned in these two chapters, but we are not going to look at many of them. We will be thinking about the general picture that is being drawn and the main applications that the text makes for the people of God.

What stands out in the description of the great prostitute is the immorality. Verse 4 of chapter 17 gives us enough of the picture. "The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality." She is a thoroughly repulsive figure and that gives us an idea of the way in which God views the world in its sin and that in turn informs us of the true nature of sin. It is a picture of gaudiness and uncleanness. The text uses the terms abominations and impurities.

It is significant that the picture includes luxuries. The prostitute is arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls. Wealth in itself is not evil, but it is often associated with evil both in the Bible and in life. The picture here of the prostitute combines conspicuous wealth and debauchery. The description of wicked Babylon as a prostitute includes luxurious living and sexual immorality. These are symbols of the seductions of the world living in rebellion against God. It is the world in which we live – a society characterized by luxurious living and sexual immorality and blasphemy and idolatry and hatred of the followers of Jesus.

Verse 6 of chapter 17 says, "And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus."

Chapter 17 also teaches that the world in its rebellion against God is self-destructive. Verses 16-17, "And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into the hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the word of God are fulfilled." The key here is that the world in its opposition to God is self-destructive. The world is united in its opposition to God but since the people that make up the world are wicked, they are self-centered and hateful and so there is conflict and malice between them. Part of the judgment of God on the world has to do with the fact that sinners ultimately hate and destroy one another. God has a role in this. Verse 17 says that God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose.

We see this clearly in our time. The more thoroughly our society rejects the Christian heritage the more it descends into hatred, bloodshed, and disunity. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death and the further society departs from God the more it becomes a culture of death. The wicked prey on one another. Love comes from God and the further from God a society drifts, the more selfishness and hatred dominate. This passage teaches that in describing the ten horns and the beast hating the prostitute.

The overall message of these chapters is about how God will conquer and destroy the wicked city of Babylon. Verse 14 of chapter 17 says, "They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen." Chapter 18:2 says, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast." Chapter 18 goes on and on about the destruction of the wicked city of Babylon.

That is reason for rejoicing in heaven and among the people of God. 18:20, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets for God has given judgment for you against her."

So we have a picture of the world in the gaudiness and the filth of its immorality and the judgment of God upon her both by means of self-destruction and by means of being conquered by the Lamb who is the Lord of lord and the King of kings. And in the middle of all that we have a call to the people of God. 18:4-5, "Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part of her sins, lest your share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.'"

It is this call to "come out of her" that I want to dwell on with you this morning. We are living in the midst of a sinful world. God's people have always lived in the midst of a sinful world and our time is no different. The symbol of the gaudy prostitute is an apt description of the world in our time. The chaos and the brokenness and the turmoil and the hatred are already God's judgment upon the people who are living in rebellion against God and the Bible assures us that there is more judgment to come. But God's call to us is to come out of her lest we take part in her sins, lest we share in her plagues.

This call is addressed to God's people. This whole book is addressed to the church. The people under God's judgement are referred to in 17:8 as "the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." That implies, of course, that God's people are those whose names have been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. This emphasizes the security of God's people, but it also emphasizes the sheer graciousness of salvation. If we belong to God's people, it is because he has written our name in the book of life from the foundation of the world. We cannot look down at the wicked people of the world as though we are somehow superior to them.

Apart from God's grace, we are no different than the most immoral person. We are sinners saved by grace. God's choice of us is the decisive move as far as our salvation is concerned, not anything that we do. God's purpose in choosing us was for the "praise of his glorious grace" (Ephesians 1:6). When we look out at the world in its rebellion against God, we should always do so with profound humility knowing that apart from the grace of God we would be part of that world. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-2 before God made us alive in Christ we "were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world ... and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." By nature, we are like the rest of mankind. That is something that we must never forget.

But we have been delivered from it. We have been made alive in Christ and therefore are no longer dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked. We no longer follow the course of this world. We are no longer children of wrath like the rest of mankind. By God's grace we have been rescued. God "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son..." (Colossians 1:13).

And so, we are no longer part of the world in rebellion against God. We are in the world and not of the world. And as such we are called to come out of the wicked city of Babylon lest we take part in her sins and share in her plagues. Like Lot of the OT who, with his family, was called to flee from the city of Sodom to escape the fire and brimstone that were about to be poured out upon her, Christians are called to come out of Babylon – the wicked city of man in rebellion against God to escape the plagues that are going to fall upon her.

This is a call to live differently from the sinful world in the midst of which we live. It is a call to separation from the world. It is a call to resist taking part in the sins of the world. This is a common theme in Scripture. In Romans 12:2 Paul tell us, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...." In 2 Corinthians 6:17, quoting from the OT he writes, "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing...." In 1 Peter 1:14-15, Peter writes, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct...."

And then we have 1 John 2:15-17, "<sup>15</sup>Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup>For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup>And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

Revelation 17-18 describe for us the wicked city of Babylon using the symbol of a gaudy prostitute and it urges us to come out of that city – not to take part in her sins so that we do not share in her plagues. The wicked city of Babylon symbolized as a brazen prostitute is a picture of the wicked world in the midst of which we live, and God calls us to separate ourselves from that wicked world by not taking part in her sins.

So, we are to be different from the world – that is the sinful world. The term "world" in the Bible is used in a number of ways. Sometimes it can just refer to the creation. We see that use of the term in Revelation 17:8 when we read of those "whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." There the term world refers to the creation. But many times, the term "world", refers to the unsaved people of the world in their rebellion against God. And that is the way I am using it when I say that this passage is teaching us that Christians are to be different from the world. We are to live differently in that we are not to be conformed to the sinful way of life that characterizes the world.

I want to look at two of the sins that are mentioned in these chapters in Revelation which describe the great prostitute. The image of a prostitute is an image of sexual immorality and sexual immorality is mentioned a number of times in the text. The idea of sexual immorality here refers to more than just sexual sin, but it certainly includes that.

Sexual immorality characterizes the world in rebellion against God. That has always been the case. The OT speaks against sexual sin. One of the Ten Commandments forbids adultery. Jesus spoke against sexual sin. The NT letters often speak against sexual sin and here in our text the world in rebellion against God is symbolized as a prostitute. Clearly sexual sin is a prominent characteristic of humanity in its rebellion against God.

It is obviously a prominent characteristic of the world today – the world we are surrounded by – the world that seeks to conform us to its likeness. We are living in a time of extreme sexual immorality. It has always been part of the lifestyle of the world in its rebellion against God, but since the second world war it has become more and more blatant to the point where there is very little restraint and it is celebrated as normal and healthy. It is now the common understanding that it is healthy to fulfill your sexual desires in pretty much anyway that you please.

There are still a few limitations, but for the most part any form of sexual gratification is considered legitimate as long as it is between consenting adults. And so, it is the norm for unmarried people to be sexually active. Many young people are sexually active before marriage. Common law relationships are almost as common as married relationships. Homosexual relationships are common and there is incredible pressure in society to affirm them as healthy and normal. Homosexual marriage is now permitted and celebrated. Pornography is a vast presence on the internet. Prostitution is barely illegal. All manner of sexual perversions are common and considered to be legitimate expressions of sexual preference.

God calls his people to reject all forms of sexual immorality and to reserve sex for intimacy within the marriage of one man and one woman. That simple biblical proposition is now considered to be hateful and harmful and bigoted, but it is the clear and unambiguous teaching of the Bible. Within the biblical perspective, sex within marriage is a beautiful and wholesome thing, and sex outside of biblical marriage is impure and abominable. That is the language used in our text.

The pressure upon us to conform is tremendous. In many of the stories our culture tells, sex outside of biblical marriage is portrayed as wholesome and inevitable and beautiful while the biblical teaching is portrayed as harmful and hopelessly outdated. There is tremendous shaping influence in those stories. The ease with which pornography can be accessed is a tremendous temptation. The way that homosexuality is affirmed in our society and traditional sexual morality disparaged puts us under great pressure to conform our thinking to what has become the norm in the world.

The way that this passage portrays sexual immorality is God's revelation of the truth. Sexual immorality in all its forms is impure, and an abomination to God and those who indulge in it without repenting belong to this city called Babylon which is headed for destruction. And we are being called to separate ourselves from that way of living and to live lives of purity as that is defined by the word of God.

And it is important to see that God's will for sex and marriage and self-control and celibacy for those who are not in a biblical marriage is beautiful and wholesome and pure and the way of the fullness of life. The call to

abstain from sexual immorality in all its forms is a call from the way of pain and death to the way of life and flourishing.

The biblical teaching about sex and marriage is beautiful and life-giving and intimately related to our relationship with God. Marriage is a reflection of the relationship between God and his people – between Jesus and his church. Biblical marriage is something that points beyond itself to the relationship between Christ and the church and what that means is that those who are not married can experience what marriage points to in their relationship with Jesus. One of the truths symbolized in Christian marriage is that Christian marriage points beyond itself to the relationship between Christ and his church in which the ultimate fulfillment is to be found. And one of the truths symbolized by Christian singleness is that marriage is not necessary for fullness of life because the ultimate fulfillment is found in the relationship between Christ and his church.

Sexual purity in all its manifestations is about fullness of life in relationship with Christ. And sexual impurity in all its forms makes the statement that the fulfillment of our sexual urges is more satisfying than being the bride of Christ. So, the call to be free from sexual immorality and to be sexually pure is a call to witness to the fullness of life that is to be found in Christ.

The text also has quite a few references to luxurious living. The prostitute is portrayed as being “arrayed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup....” Later on, in chapter 18 the city of Babylon is described as having made the merchants of the earth rich “from the power of her luxurious living. (18:3)” 18:7 says of the city, “She glorified herself and lived in luxury....” There are more references in chapter 18 along the same lines.

This too is what Christians are called to separate themselves from. The Bible often brings together immorality and overindulgence in luxury – overindulgence in the goods and pleasures that money can buy. When we as believers are called to avoid being conformed to the world, we are also being called to separate ourselves from sinful self-indulgence.

That does not mean that we are to aim to be poor. It does not mean that it is wrong to experience wealth and prosperity. God has created us and the rest of the creation in such a way that it is clearly his will that we experience enjoyment and pleasure in life. He has called us to work and to be productive and in many situations that will result in prosperity. The Bible does not glorify poverty as a better way to live. It is part of the way that God has created us that we are motivated to work to provide for ourselves and our families and that includes having more than the bare minimum that we need to survive. The Bible does not call us to feel guilty about prospering if that prospering comes about through honest hard work using the abilities that God has given us. This can all be done to the glory of God and it is part of the way God intended to be glorified in the creation.

But because of sin, our desires have become disordered so that we are prone to greed and over-indulgence. The command, “You shalt not covet” forbids excessive desires for what we do not have. It is one thing to have

a healthy desire to make financial progress in our lives.. It becomes sinful when the desire for more money and things and pleasures dominates our lives. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:24 that we cannot “serve God and money.” He condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they were “full of greed and self-indulgence.” In Luke 12:15 he says, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Paul in 1 Timothy 6:9-10 says, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

The world in its rebellion against God is characterized by greed, covetousness, and self-indulgence – by “many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” The Lord gives us much to enjoy and we may do so with thanksgiving, but he is to be more important to us than our money and possessions so that we seek to use whatever money and possessions that he gives us in a way that is pleasing to him. That will mean contentment with what he has given us, thanksgiving for the good things that we enjoy, moderation and self-control, thinking in terms of stewardship, being generous with our tithes and offerings, being generous in helping the poor. The way we use our money must reflect seeking first the kingdom of God, living for God rather than living for ourselves, living lives of love and generosity in our interactions with other people.

When God calls us in Revelation 18:4 to come out of the wicked Babylon “lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” he is calling us to separate ourselves from greed and self-indulgence of the world which worships self rather than God. And again, he is not calling us from more joy to less joy – from more satisfaction to less satisfaction. He is calling us to life rather than death. He is calling us from bondage into freedom. We are designed by God to flourish by living for him and in service to others. To live for self and for pleasure is slavery. It is the way of emptiness. It is the way of superficial pleasures rather than profound joy and fulfillment. When God calls us away from the ways of the world, he is calling us away from the way of death and into the way of life.

The symbols of Revelation 17 and 18 of the great prostitute and the condemned city of Babylon give us a sense of the tawdry and sleazy and destructive nature of life in rebellion against God. And it makes it clear that the world that lives that way is heading towards judgment of God. And the call for us is “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.”

God refers to the ones he is calling to separate themselves from the world “my people.” They are the people “whose names have ... been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.” In 17:14 they are described as being with the Lamb who will conquer the beast and the prostitute. They are described as called and chosen and faithful. The Lamb is the Lamb who was slain and who is alive forevermore. He “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4). What we have been thinking about in this

sermon is one of the ways that he does that. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ... to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (Revelation 1:5-6)

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## Table Meditation

To take part in the Lord's Supper is to reaffirm our commitment to live lives of obedience. That actions that we take in participating can be understood as our response to this sermon, affirming to God and to one another that we are indeed committed to separating ourselves from the sinful way of life that characterizes the lives of those who live in rebellion to God.

But it is not a claim that we can do this in our own strength. We certainly make a commitment to obedience when we take part in the Lord's Supper, but we do not make that commitment relying on our own strength, but rather we do so looking to the Lord to provide – to strengthen and to nourish us. That too is part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. By feeding on Christ by faith our faith and commitment is strengthened.

Furthermore, we come confessing our sins. By God's grace we are to repent from sin and to avoid many sins, but we still fall and fail. We must confess that we have not completely avoided the sins of the world around us. We are not as pure as we should be. We are not free of inordinate desires for money and things. When we hear God calling us to live differently from the world, we are aware that we are often too much like the world.

Now if we are just living like the world without restraint we are under the same judgment as the world, but if the sins that we commit are a burden to us and we are fighting against them, the Lord's Supper has been instituted to comfort and encourage and strengthen us. It is a memorial of Jesus' death for our sins. In it, Jesus offers himself to us as the one who died and who rose again. In the symbols of the bread and the wine he gives himself to us as our Saviour who has died so that we might be forgiven and renewed.

So I invite you to come to the table if you confess that you are a sinner in need for forgiveness, if you are looking to Jesus and trusting in him and if you are committed to seek to live for Jesus. That includes church membership in a faithful biblical believing church. If these things are true of you, you are invited to take part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper with us. The Lord's Supper is not for people who have it all together, but for those who know that they need Jesus. Come and take part in remembrance of Jesus's death. Come and receive Jesus' assurance that he gives himself to you. Come and recommit yourself to fight the fight of faith seeking in his strength to live the life that he died to make possible for his people.