

LIFE ACTION

PROFILE OF A SLIPPERY SLOPE

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- Fri, Nov 29, 2002
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We asked three of Life Action's crusade revivalists **Steve Canfield**, **Mark Bearden**, and **Tim St. Clair** to interact with us about the issue of immorality. Collectively they shared helpful insights into the nature of moral temptation, the consequences of moral failure, and hope for those who have failed, as well as practical advice for avoiding moral pitfalls.

- In any given year, you dialogue with hundreds of men on a personal level. Of those who come to you for counsel, what percentage are dealing with sexual purity issues?

At least 70 percent.

- And how many of those men have acted on temptation and are engaged in some form of immorality?

A large majority, probably 90 percent.

- What are they doing and where is the battle being lost?

The Internet has taken this struggle to a whole new level; it provides the easiest access, the greatest amount of privacy, and the least potential for being caught. What men used to have to go to a smoke-filled bar or dark alley to find, they can now experience while sitting in their office or den. Privacy is a key issue, because all moral impurity is shrouded in privacy, so anything that makes it more private is going to make it more accessible and more alluring.

There also seems to be a larger number of immorally-minded people on the prowl. The looser our society becomes, the more likely it is that you have immoral people nearby.

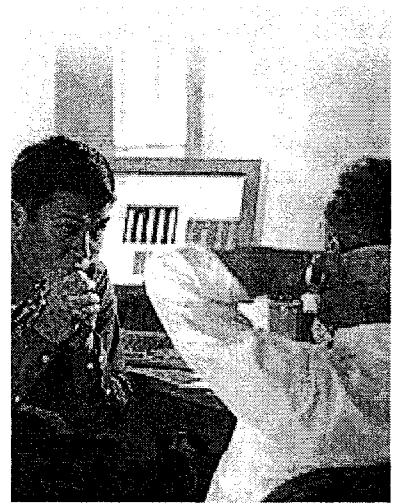
- Have you noticed any common patterns in the lives of those who proceed into sexual sin?

The most observable pattern follows the nature of all sin. You initially draw a line and say, "I won't go beyond that line." But if you step over that line, you draw a new one, and then another and another . . . and as you do, you deaden yourself to the sinfulness and danger of what you're involved in.

But the problem actually starts if and when you draw a line that's different from the one God set. For example, Proverbs 4:25 reads, "Let your eyes look straight ahead." One reason men struggle with impure thoughts and actions is that they are careless in what they do with their eyes. They don't follow God's guidelines at the outset, so they end up gazing at things they could have avoided seeing altogether.

Another pattern is innocent exposure, curious search, toying with sin. A lot of temptation begins with innocent exposure. Through no fault of our own, we may be exposed to something that becomes a temptation. We might see an inappropriate ad in a magazine or catalog. We might do a legitimate search on the web and inadvertently come upon a porn site. There's no sin in being tempted if we honestly had nothing to do with placing that indecency into our vision but so many yield at that point and move down to the next level: the curious search.

Romans 13:14 instructs us to "make no provision for the flesh," so when we willfully put ourselves in a place where we are likely to be exposed to sin, we actually empower temptation. Even though we try to justify our activities or choices, if we are



honest, we'll have to admit that we sometimes do certain things or go certain places hoping to see or hear something sexually impure. This can range from a casual, yet intentional stroll through the lingerie department to our choice in television programs, movies, and music.

From there you start actually toying with sin. If that inappropriate website comes up on your computer, rather than close it, you linger to look. You begin to rent movies or buy magazines that you would not have previously. Now you are involved . . . and your downward momentum accelerates.

- Are there times when we may be more vulnerable or more likely to give in to temptation?

Proverbs 7 gives insight as to what often sets a man down the slippery slope. Describing how an immoral woman entices men, verse 26 reads, "*For she has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men.*" This should be a warning to us that the times we are most susceptible to moral failure are when we're wounded or hurt, and when we're proud and perceive ourselves to be stronger than we really are. We may think we can handle the temptation, but we can't.

- This sounds like mostly a men's issue; do women struggle in this area, too?

Studies indicate that an increasing number of women are being drawn into types of immorality that used to be more common to men. Pornography use by women is increasingly common. However, women are naturally more tempted by emotional intimacy than physical, which is why romance novels and soap operas have appeal to women. And, once again, the Internet has made the struggle more difficult, with the majority of the explosive growth of sexually explicit chat rooms attributed to female participants. One pastor recently said that in seven years, five women in his church met men over the Internet; two actually left their husbands and went to be with these men.

Our culture has also retrained women, mostly through mass media, to believe that a successful woman is sexually aggressive and brash. Sex is a god in our society, and if you want to be powerful, you have to be boldly sexual.

- What are some consequences of immorality?

In the case of a married man, the first thing he does is to break the covenant relationship with his wife by violating their oneness. He becomes desensitized, and that damages every right relationship he has. Immorality brings such a sense of shame that he naturally deadens himself to whatever spiritual sensitivity he may have had. Once he deadens himself spiritually, he loses the ability to love. There can be no intimacy with God and none with his mate or anybody else.

Also, whatever trust others might have had in him is gone, and that's a big obstacle to overcome even if there's restoration later. In "gaining" an immoral relationship; if we can even think of it in those terms he loses nearly of all other meaningful relationships.

If we take the warning of 1 Peter 2:11 seriously "abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" then we have to face the fact that to become immoral is to send our soul to war. There will be casualties.

- What are some of the lies that a person involved in immorality believes lies that tend to keep him in bondage?

One of the biggest is, "I have to be this way." Many have given in for so long that they've given up. They need to hear that victory is possible.

A number of people who are living immoral lifestyles today were sexually victimized in the past; this is especially true of homosexuals. This is why forgiveness is crucial to gaining moral freedom. If a person has been violated, they need to be helped through their hurt and brought to that very difficult place of forgiving those who wronged them. It's not an easy process, but it's a necessary one.

Another lie has to do with the "pride of life" issue that is mentioned in 1 John 2:16. When people believe they are the exception to the rule; that they can get away with sinful behavior without bearing consequences; they are deceived. Sin always has a price.

Closely associated to that is another lie: "This only affects me." As we've already discussed, a person cannot act upon his sinful impulses without losing intimacy with God and damaging every right relationship he has. The dilemma is further complicated because we never find in sin that for which we entered into sin to find. Immorality never delivers what we hoped it would, so there's always another level to try.

- What can we do to guard ourselves from moral failure and to help others do the same?

Accountability is crucial, but it's not a panacea. A man must first have a mentality of selling out for the battle. He must have an absolute commitment to do whatever it takes to be pure. So many men say they want help, but when you actually start helping them reorganize and prioritize their lives for moral purity, they say, "I'm not going to give up my TV," or "I'm not going to limit my freedom." When the rubber hits the road, resolve flies out the window. They want to be rid of the guilt, but are not willing to pay the price.

- What suggestions do you have to make accountability more effective?

A group composed completely around mutual weakness is doomed to fail. Therefore, the group should include at least one person who is winning the battle of moral purity, not just someone who has been honest enough to admit his struggle. While honesty is commendable and right, honesty alone does not qualify a man to lead. That's not to suggest that the leader doesn't struggle, but he should have a track record of purity.

An accountability group should meet regularly, at least weekly. Some groups meet sporadically, or only when someone "feels the need," but that's often too late like after a group member has fallen.

Group members also need to ask one another hard questions (e.g., What have you been looking at or watching? Have there been any conflicts between you and your mate? If you got hurt or angry, what did you do?). If a man is slipping in his commitment, he will likely try to hide it from the rest of the group. You may have to ask the same question four different ways before getting a straight answer. Persistence is crucial.

- What can the body of Christ do to help restore someone from an immoral lifestyle?

First of all, let's define "restoration," because many people assume, particularly when we're dealing with a church staff member, that restoration means to get him back into his position or ministry function. That is not always the case, and even if it is, we must first deal with getting him back to a right relationship with God, his wife, and his children. We must concentrate on restoring him to a vital, intimate walk with Christ.

Assuming this person has confessed, restorative action depends largely on where and how that confession took place. If it was with a group of men, then some of those men need to form a restoration team. (Due to the nature of the process, the team needs to be set up with men to deal with men and women with women.) This team, usually of no more than three or four people, becomes very involved in holding this person accountable by meeting with him regularly, asking direct questions about his thoughts and actions, and helping him set and observe boundaries.

- Explain what is meant by setting boundaries.

A boundary can be as simple as not standing in a checkout line where certain magazines are displayed, or as drastic as not going on a business trip alone. Boundaries are meant to keep temptation from getting a foothold. If, on a scale of one to ten, engaging in illicit sex is a ten, then let's help a man discover what are the ones, twos, and threes that got him there so we can help him stop. Boundaries will differ from person to person, but the point is: we simply cannot listen to what we used to listen to, watch what we used to watch, read what we used to read, or do what we used to do if we're serious about moral purity.

- What is the biblical mandate for sexual purity? Why should the Christian community be so concerned about this issue?

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 reads, "For 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." This passage describes an observable distinction between those who know God and those who don't, and a major emphasis is placed on moral purity. In writing it, Paul explained that in a pagan culture one of the things that clearly identified followers of Christ was that they did not live by lustful passions. That's a distinction the church needs to rediscover.

The gods of this age are sex and money, and if the church cannot be victorious over those gods, then we have nothing convincing to offer to the world.