Works of the Flesh: Lasciviousness-Sensuality

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Introduction

In this lesson, let us consider the Greek word aselgeia, translated “lasciviousness” (KJV) and “sensuality” (NASB), identified by Paul as a soul-condemning work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). Principles derived from such a study will help us make proper decisions regarding our conduct, communication, dress, and demeanor, etc.

Definitions

Thomas defines ἀσέλγεια [aselgeia] as of uncertain origin, meaning “licentiousness, wantonness” [766].

BDAG say it refers to “a lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable, self-abandonment.”

According to Thayer, aselgeia describes “unbridled lust, excess, licentiousness, lasciviousness, wantonness, outrageousness, shamelessness, insolence… wanton (acts or) manners, as filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females, etc.”

Louw and Nida say it refers to “behavior completely lacking in moral restraint, usually with the implication of sexual licentiousness… In some languages the equivalent of ‘licentious behavior’ would be ‘to live like a dog’ or ‘to act like a goat’ or ‘to be a rooster,’ in each instance pertaining to promiscuous sexual behavior.”

Kittel says that aselgeia [licentiousness] is defined as “‘license,’ mostly physical, figuratively spiritual. ‘Debauchery’ or ‘licentiousness’ is the sense in 2 Pet. 2:7 (Sodom and Gomorrah) and Eph. 4:19 (the pagan world). Sexual excess is probably meant in Gal. 5:19 and certainly so in Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:21; 2 Pet. 2:2, 18).”

Vine says that it denotes “excess, licentiousness, absence of restraint, indecency, wantonness.”

The Revel Bible Dictionary defines “lasciviousness” as “wanton, licentious. The Greek word means unrestrained greed, or an animal-like indulgence in any passionate desire. Lasciviousness appears in several lists of immoral behavior (Mark 7:22; Gal. 5:19). Paul describes its nature well: ‘Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality [lasciviousness, KJV] so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more’ (Eph. 4:19).”

Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines “lasciviousness” as the “KJV word for licentiousness.” In turn, it defines “licentiousness” as “undisciplined and unrestrained behavior,
especially a flagrant disregard of sexual restraints (Mark 7:22; 2 Cor. 12:21); (lasciviousness, KJV). The Greek word translated as licentiousness means ‘outrageous conduct,’ showing that licentious behavior goes beyond sin to include a disregard for what is right.”

**Occurrences**

The Greek word aselgeia occurs 10 times in 10 Bible verses (Mark 7:22; Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 1 Pet. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:2, 7, 18; Jude 4). In the KJV, it is translated as “filthy,” “lasciviousness,” and “wantonness.” In the NASB, it is translated “licentiousness” (1x), “sensual”(1x), and “sensuality” (8x). Let us examine each of these occurrences in succession.

**Relevant Verses**

**Mark 7:22**

To begin with, Jesus reminds us that moral defilement occurs because of evil that lies within the heart. Included within this list, relevant to the topic under discussion, are adultery, fornication, and sensuality (Mark 7:20-23). In this context, aselgeia is translated as lasciviousness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NASB), and lewdness (NIV, NKJ).

**Romans 13:13**

Children of light must disavow deeds of darkness, including carousing, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and sensuality. Those who have put on the Lord Jesus Christ must make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof (Rom. 13:12-14). Here aselgeia is translated as wantonness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NASB), debauchery (NIV), and lust (NKJ).

**2 Corinthians 12:21**

Writing a second time to the Corinthians, Paul remained fearful that many who had sinned would not have repented of their impurity, immorality and sensuality (2 Cor. 12:19-21). Christians must not seek to blend in with the mores and manners of a decadent culture. Conversion is predicated upon repentance, a radical transformation of attitude and action. In this context, aselgeia is translated as lasciviousness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NASB), debauchery (NIV), lewdness (NKJ).

**Galatians 5:19**

In listing the works of the flesh, Paul first addresses sins of sexual immorality: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, and lasciviousness. His warning is straightforward: those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21). Here aselgeia is translated as lasciviousness, (KJV, ASV), licentiousness, (RSV), sensuality, (NASB), debauchery, (NIV), and lewdness, (NKJ).
**Ephesians 4:19**

Followers of an unregenerate lifestyle face an inescapable paradox: Sensuality and callousness operate in concert (Eph. 4:17-19). An overemphasis on feeling inexorably leads to a loss of the same. Excessive consumption diminishes the pleasure derived from satisfying the appetite. Gluttons devour and savor not. Addicts of sensual pleasure no longer cherish the warmth of hearth and home; nor do they relish the wholesome pleasure of the marriage bed. Instead of rejoicing with the wife of their youth, they seek after forbidden fruit, strange flesh, and exotic pleasures. In the process, their capacity for fulfillment is diminished. In this context, *aselgeia* is translated as lasciviousness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NAS, NIV), and lewdness (NKJ).

**1 Peter 4:3**

Willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ is a true gauge of discipleship. So also is a reorientation of desire. Affections must be set on things above, not on things of this world. Conversion to Christ means cessation from sin. Accordingly, let us realize that the time already past is sufficient for us to have pursued a course of sensuality. It did not bring lasting pleasure in the past; nor does it do so in the present. Let us, therefore, not waste any more time in such futile pursuits (1 Pet. 4:1-6). Here *aselgeia* is translated as lasciviousness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NASB), debauchery (NIV), and lewdness (NKJ).

**2 Peter 2:2**

In the worst of cases, false prophets are given over to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Their appeal is rooted in carnality, and many will follow their sensual ways (2 Pet. 2:1-3). In this context, *aselgeia* is translated as pernicious ways (KJV), lascivious doings (ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensuality (NASB), shameful ways (NIV), and destructive ways (NKJ).

**2 Peter 2:7**

Sodom and Gomorrah stand as eternal examples of God’s judgment upon what is euphemistically called “alternative lifestyles” (2 Pet. 2:4-9). Lot was oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men. In a dramatic display of divine power, God delivered righteous Lot and destroyed the wicked inhabitants of Sodom. Here *aselgeia* is translated as filthy conversation (KJV), lascivious life (ASV), licentiousness (RSV), sensual conduct (NASB), filthy lives (NIV), and filthy conduct (NKJ). Can one who is honest and Biblically-literate question God’s critical assessment of homosexuality?

**2 Peter 2:18**

False teachers are again addressed: Superficially, they may seem impressive. Yet, being devoid of wisdom, they speak great swelling words of vanity. Their followers are weak, ignorant, and easily manipulated. Enticing others through an appeal to the flesh, proponents of error promise
freedom but produce slaves of corruption (2 Pet. 2:18-22). In this context, **aselgeia** is translated as wantonness (KJV), lasciviousness (ASV), licentious passions (RSV), sensuality (NASB), lustful desires (NIV), and lewdness (NKJ). For all involved, the latter end is worse than the first.

**Jude vs. 4**

Sanctification results in preservation if we remain faithful to our calling and earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints. Those who would fulfill this charge must beware of those who would turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny their Lord and Master (Jude 1-4). Here **aselgeia** is translated as lasciviousness (KJV, ASV), licentiousness (RSV, NAS), a license for immorality (NIV), and lewdness (NKJ). Unbelief and immorality go hand in hand.

**Relevant Application**

As evident in the aforementioned passages, lasciviousness involves the sins of debauchery, excess, indecent conduct, insolence, license, licentiousness, outrageousness, sensuality, shamelessness, unbridled lust, undisciplined behavior, unrestrained, animal-like indulgence in any passionate desire, wanton acts or manners, filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females, etc.

Within the relationship of marriage, sex is wholesome, meaningful, and good, the most intimate expression of a life-long commitment between a man and a woman (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 7:1-4; Heb. 13:4). Outside of a sanctified marital relationship, sex is dirty, cheap, and sinful, a superficial debasement of God’s plan and pattern (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:3-5). Unfortunately, in today’s society, that which should be shared privately between husbands and wives is openly flaunted in public.

**Salacious Literature & Sexually Suggestive Entertainment**

Many sinful situations confront today’s disciples that are not overtly addressed in Scripture. However, we are not left without guidance. For example, Paul’s catalog of the works of the flesh concludes with the statement, “and such like” (Gal. 5:19-21). While they are not explicitly identified, salacious literature, sexually suggestive movies, music, and television shows stand condemned by their obvious association with “adultery, fornication, uncleanness and lasciviousness.”

**Petting/Unchaste Touching**

Petting, the unchaste handling of males and females, is by definition lascivious. Not only must the overt act of sexual immorality be avoided, but also behavior that leads to such. We must also abstain from those things that tend to produce lust. Guard your heart against lustful thoughts, for that is where sin is conceived (Matt. 5:27-28). Do not place yourself in circumstances where you might be tempted to sin. Joseph showed respect for himself when he refused to lie with Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:7-12). He understood there is a difference between right and wrong. He
understood that the best way to overcome temptation is to run from it. A young woman might say, “My boyfriend wants me to come over to his house while his parents are away. I’m sure we will hug and kiss. We might even engage in heavy-petting, intimate touching, but I won’t let it go too far...” Don’t kid yourself! Understand that petting and other acts of sexual foreplay will arouse passions that you may not be able to control. Therefore, make up your mind in advance. Determine to live as a Christian, every day and every hour and in every circumstance of life. For good reason, the Bible says “Flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6:18) and “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Dancing

In his book, World History of the Dance, Curt Sach studies the background of dancing. He says that all dances, like any other art form, attempt to say something. The steps, positions and movements are designed to convey a message. According to Sach, the whole range of modern dances are designed to express “love-making.” The 1956 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica confirms this by stating, “To a certain extent all dancing is sexually stimulating...” [s.v. “Dance”]. Dancing’s charm is based upon sex appeal. Someone once said that it is the vertical manifestation of a horizontal desire. Dr. Leta S. Hollingsworth, professor of education at Columbia University, confirms this view. Although she approves of dancing, she still says that dancing “affords a partial satisfaction to the sex impulse which (among adolescents) cannot as yet achieve full and specific expression...” [s.v. The Psychology of the Adolescent, p. 122].

Again, consider what the 2000 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica has to say on this subject:

“Within this broad spectrum of forms, dance fulfills a number of very different functions, including the religious, the military, and the social. Nearly all cultures have had, or still possess, dances that play an important part in religious ritual. There are dances in which the performers and even the spectators work themselves into a trance in order to transcend their ordinary selves and receive the powers of the gods or, as in the case of Indian temple dancers, in which the performers enact the stories of the gods as a way of worshiping them. In some early Christian communities, processions or formal dance patterns formed part of the prayer service.”

“It is possible to view modern military marches and drilling procedures as descendants of the tribal war and hunting dances that have also been integral to many cultures. War dances, often using weapons and fighting movements, were used throughout history as a way of training soldiers and preparing them emotionally and spiritually for battle. Many hunting tribes performed dances in which the hunters dressed in animal skins and imitated the movements of their prey, thus acquiring the skills of the animal in question and, through sympathetic magic, gaining power over it.”

“Dance also plays a number of important social roles in all cultures, notably in matters of celebration, courtship, recreation, and entertainment. Courtship dances, for example, allow the dancers to display their vigour and attractiveness and to engage in socially accepted physical contact between the sexes. (The waltz, a relatively modern example of the courtship dance, was banned at certain times because its flagrant contact between the dancers was considered indecent.) Such
properly

Accordingly, we relearn the Biblical principles that govern modest attire, and chaste behavior. They are doing when they use scantily clothed models in relation to their actions which inordinately stimulate their sexual desires (Eph. 4:17-19; 1 Pet. 4:1-4).

Immodest Clothing

Is it O.K. to wear bathing suits in public? Is mixed swimming acceptable? Would any properly-thinking Christian visit a nude beach? No. However, many so-called Christians will go to a public beach or swimming pool where people wear a bare minimum of clothing. Yet amazingly, many folks think that a few inches of cloth separates modesty from immodesty.

While bathing suits, shorts, halter-tops, and other forms of immodest attire may cover the generative portions of the body, they nevertheless, are categorized – at least from a Biblical standpoint – as nakedness. The Bible uses this word to refer, not only to complete nudity, but also to a state of being inadequately clothed.

For now, simply consider the Brazoria County Jail Visitation Requirements involving proper attire: “Visitors wishing to visit must be properly dressed. Females must wear a bra, have their shoulders and have their chest and stomach area covered. No halter tops, no shorts, dresses, or skirts above the knee are allowed. Males must wear shirts with sleeves (e.g. no muscle shirts) and no shorts above the knee. All visitors must wear some type of footwear. No Bare Feet!”

Those who favor the wearing of immodest clothing (i.e., attire that exposes or accentuates parts of the human body that God expects us to cover, namely, the breasts, the buttocks and the thighs), need to explain why the Texas Department of Criminal Justice forbids such clothing. Why should females wear a bra? Why should they have their shoulders, chest and stomach area covered? Why no halter tops, no shorts or dress or skirts that are above the knee?

Can mature disciples argue that such clothing is not immodest? Can we really say that such attire does not provoke lascivious and lustful thoughts? Sadly, “the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8). Advertisers know exactly what they are doing when they use scantily clothed models in product promotions. Christians need to relearn the Biblical principles that govern modest attire, and chaste behavior.

Therefore, Christians should avoid clothing that is too short, too low, too tight, and too revealing. We should be mindful of how different positions and postures affect our modesty. Clothing that is relatively modest when one is standing up may be quite immodest when one is sitting down. Accordingly, whenever we are in public, let us exercise due diligence so that our bodies remain properly covered under any and all circumstances.
**Cheerleading**

The issue of cheerleading stands or falls with the aforementioned practices. First, it violates the issue of modesty. Paul said, “in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (1 Tim. 2:9-10). Typical cheerleading costumes are immodest. The dresses are too short. Even if the length of a cheerleader’s dress approaches the knees, her movements and twirling will inevitably expose her thighs and more. The undergarments of a cheerleading outfit are the same as underwear in most cases. When cheerleaders kick their legs in the air or twirl about in circles, they expose their undergarments/underwear for all to see.

Cheerleading no longer is merely about shouting cheers, snap-precision movements, etc. Today it involves a good deal of dancing. Modern cheerleading, as commonly practiced in high schools and at most colleges, is simply a lustful presentation of the flesh. Man’s sexual drive is stimulated by the sight of desire. God created men thus. Yet, such desire can have honorable expression only in the context of marriage. Jesus said that the act of looking on a woman to lust after her is as serious as the act of adultery (Matt. 5:28).

Several years ago, I attended a high school football game where the cheerleader’s dance routine was so suggestive – with pelvic grinds and thrusts – that I looked away in complete embarrassment. I remember thinking, “How could parents let their teenage girls engage in such a lewd and suggestive performance?” Even more astounding is that many Christians see nothing wrong with such conduct.

Even if a young Christian girl who wanted to be a cheerleader was to submit to certain restrictions on her dress and conduct so that she did not violate the principles of Christianity, another serious problem remains. What about her membership in the cheerleading squad itself? While she might be an exception to the rule, the typical high school cheerleading squad is known for immodest clothing, lascivious dancing, and occasionally suggestive cheers. These sinful excesses are not merely an occasional problem, but a regular and recurring problem. They are part and parcel of what a modern day cheerleading squad is all about. So, simply put, the question is this: Is it right for a Christian to be a part of such a group?

What if a Christian joined the Dallas Cowboy’s cheerleading squad? Instead of wearing the standard skimpy, suggestive uniform, she received permission to wear only modest clothing. While the other members of the squad performed their fertility ritual dances, she would stand at the end of the line, tapping her feet and snapping her fingers? Yet, she would be an official member of the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, a group known for immodesty and lasciviousness. Would this be right? Could she be a member of that particular group and still be a faithful Christian?

The typical high school cheerleading squad is no different from the professional variety, except in degree. Each is immodest. Each participates in sensual and suggestive body movements. Each appeals through the lusts of the flesh. If it would be wrong for a Christian to be a “godly” Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader, how is it right for a Christian to be a member of her high school football cheerleading squad?
What’s the point of being a cheerleader if one is not going to act and dress like the rest of the team? Cheerleading is a team function. In some cases, it is called a team sport. If a Christian is a cheerleader, she is a joint participant in the functions of the team. She is a part of the whole. What then does the whole squad do? In today’s society, in most cases, high school cheerleaders are viewed as a dance squad. They wear immodest clothing and engage in immodest dancing. How can you disassociate yourself from these things when these actions are a real and substantial part of what cheerleading is all about? If a Christian is going to jointly participate in a squad known for immodest dress and dancing, she will to all intents and purposes be condoning it. How can a Christian participate to that degree? When it comes to joint participation in evil, the Bible clearly says, “Come out and be separate!” (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

In my judgment, the only way that I can see that it would be acceptable for a Christian to be a cheerleader on her high school or college cheerleading squad is for the whole squad to agree to dress decently and avoid suggestive motions. If the whole squad were doing right, then a Christian girl would not be fellowshipping error if she was a part of the group.

**Conclusion**

This study leads us to an inescapable end: God intends for men and women to be clothed in public. We should realize that the very concept of modesty is tied to the sacredness of the marriage relationship (Heb. 13:4). Not only is one’s body to be preserved for his or her spouse in the sexual relationship, but the body is also to be covered until one enters into the marital relationship. Sadly, too many people miss the point of modest dress. When a person exposes their body in public, they are exposing something that belongs to their present or future spouse. If you have exposed yourself to others, you have given your mate used goods. You are not giving him/her anything that hundreds of other men/women have not seen before. You cheapen yourself by exposing your body in public.

Adam and Eve were ashamed when they realized they were naked. Nakedness is not something shameful between a man and his wife, but becomes an issue when third parties are present. In the case of Adam and Eve, they were ashamed when God came to visit with them in the cool of the evening. God intends for men and women to be clothed in public.

Young people, boys and girls, do not engage in events that require you to expose or display your body to the public’s eye. Some areas where this is done is cheerleading, drill teams, some athletic attire, school outings, mixed swimming parties, dances, and even formal occasions like the prom. Your body belongs to God in heaven, and to one person in this life. Therefore, strive to be pure and chaste in your appearance both before and after marriage.

All of us must consider the influence our decisions will have upon others (Matt. 5:13-16). What sort of example are you setting for other Christians? Will your choices in the area of modesty increase or diminish the respect that others feel for you and your family? Will the effect of your decisions encourage other young people to be set apart from the world, or will it encourage them to become more like the world?

Finally, let us make application of this lesson to leaders in the Lord’s church. What if elders and deacons are guilty of immodesty? What if they allow their family to dress or act immodestly?
Such failures must be adamantly opposed. God has set a high standard for leaders in the church. Let us note that there are no double standards. There is only one standard. However, elders, deacons and evangelists must be the ones who set that high standard. Then, hopefully, other members will raise their standards to match those of their leaders. In time, hopefully those higher standards will be passed on to those who are weaker. However, if the leadership of the church compromises its standards, how can we ever draw the line against sin?

James says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). Leaders hold a position of influence above ordinary members. Elders, deacons and preachers must be mindful of their influence and of the stricter judgment to which they will be subjected.

When an elder, deacon or preacher fails to control his family in the area of modesty, a harmful precedent is set. If such people could only know the damage they inflict on the church. They not only hurt themselves, but they also make it much harder for other young people to do what is right. A young Christian girl once sought to explain why she would not attend the school dance. However, her peers ridiculed her, saying, “Why So-And-So goes to the dance, and her daddy preaches for the Main Street church of Christ.”

Finally, if in doubt, please ask the question, “Would Jesus approve?” Would he approve of unchaste touching and sexual foreplay outside of the relationship of marriage? Would he be pleased with our participation in the various suggestive and sensual forms of modern dance? Does Jesus approve of immodest dress? Does he condone the public display of nakedness? Does our Lord ignore lewd and lascivious bodily movements that are designed to incite lust in the viewers of such? To ask the question is to answer it. The Mosaic Law was completely different from the fertility cults of antiquity. The Covenant of Christ, founded upon the premise of personal morality and holiness, was also radically distinct from the decadent Greco-Roman culture. Christians are called unto holiness. Therefore, let us follow Paul’s admonition to young Timothy: “Keep thyself pure” (1 Tim. 5:17).