

**BIG SINS OF THE SPIRIT VS SMALL SINS OF THE FLESH**

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**THE STRANGE DOCTRINE OF THE VALLEJO DRIVE CHURCH**

Four days after censuring Vallejo Drive member Elizabeth Iskander in a business meeting on April 15th for “making people uncomfortable” by discussing homosexuality in private conversations with other members, Senior Pastor Mike Kim had this to say in his sermon, “We do not want to be concerned about whether we have practicing homosexuals in our midst. Why? Because that's immorality of the flesh, and how important is immorality of the flesh? NOT VERY IMPORTANT AT ALL!” [yelling for emphasis]

Pastor Kim's new doctrine is his justification for taking a hands off attitude toward practicing homosexuals in his church, while formally disciplining a member who is concerned about homosexuals gaining entry into positions of trust and responsibility, such as choir directors, organists, and Sabbath School teachers.

In his sermon, Pastor Kim argues that prostitutes and tax collectors were more righteous than the Pharisees because the former were guilty only of “immorality of the flesh,” which is trivial, whereas the latter were guilty of “immorality of the spirit,” which is “a billion times worse.” He argues that Ephesians 6:12 (“our struggle is not against flesh and blood . . .”) means that Christians should not struggle against the sins of the flesh. He even implies that those Christians who point out sins of the flesh in the church are themselves guilty of the “moral filth” of having an ungoverned tongue.

It would not be worth pointing out and discussing one sermon in one local church if it were expected to be an isolated event. But our denominational administrators and lawyers are desperate to avoid a conflict with a homosexual movement that tries to crush those who are insufficiently enthusiastic about homosexual practice. Given the enormous social-cultural-legal pressure to normalize homosexuality, we will probably be hearing many such sermons in the days and years ahead. It is therefore worth spending some time with Pastor Kim's prototype.

**`Pastor Kim begins with the question, “why are prostitutes more righteous than the Pharisees, according to Jesus? (Matthew 21:23).”**

**ASKING A QUESTION ALREADY ANSWERED**

Much of the sermon was devoted to mooted answers to this question. But there is no need to speculate, because Jesus Himself answered it. Pastor Kim is evidently referring to Matthew 21:28-32, in which Jesus follows up a discussion about John the Baptist, whom the Pharisees had rejected, with a parable about two sons and a vineyard:

“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ “And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. “The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I *will*, sir’; but he did not go. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing *this*, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

Jesus compares the prostitutes and tax collectors who were converted by John's preaching to a son who said he would *not* work in his father's vineyard, but changed his mind and worked. These were sinners at first, but were converted. Jesus compares the religious leaders who rejected John's preaching to the son who said he *would* work but did not. These were the “righteous” people who should have affirmed John's preaching, but instead rejected it, and were not even shamed into accepting it by the conversion of the previously rebellious sinners. This is the biblical answer to why “tax collectors and prostitutes” will enter the kingdom before the Pharisees.

Pastor Kim ignores this answer, apparently because he wanted to engage in a colloquy with his congregation about Phariseism, and then supply his own answer. But while we're on the subject of John the Baptist, note what John was preaching:

- “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mat. 3:2)
- “Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (3:6)
- “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (3:8)

John was preaching repentance, confession of sins, baptism, and producing the fruits of repentance. The converted tax collectors and prostitutes would have evidenced a marked change of life (see, e.g., Luke 19:8), and certainly would not have insisted on being elders of the synagogue while continuing their old lifestyles.

### **NO NEED TO STRUGGLE AGAINST THE FLESH?**

According to Pastor Kim, Ephesians 6:12 is the key to unraveling this thorny question:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

The struggle that matters is spiritual and has little or nothing to do with whatever is happening in the physical life, argues Pastor Kim, and because the real struggle is spiritual, the struggle against the flesh is no longer of any importance. Is this a biblical teaching?

Ephesians 6:12 presents no mystery. Lucifer was the covering cherub in heaven, the highest created being; but iniquity was found in him, and he became the adversary, Satan. (Ezek. 28:2-19; Isaiah 14:12-20; Luke 10:18) In the course of his rebellion, Satan caused one third of the angels of heaven to fall with him. (Rev. 12:3-4, 9) Before the Fall, Adam had been the vice-regent of this world, its ruler under God (AG 41.4), but because Adam yielded to the tempter, Satan won Adam's position and became the “prince of this world” or the “god of this world.” (John 14:30; Luke 4:6-7; 2 Cor. 4:4) Hence, “the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” are Satan and his angels. These are the non-human tempters and malefactors we struggle against; this is the spiritual warfare of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 6:12.

In any case, Paul cannot mean that we no longer need to struggle against our carnal nature. Jesus, our example, gained mastery over His body, fasting in the wilderness for 40 days, and still overcoming Satan's temptation designed to appeal to His appetite. (Mat. 4:2-4; Luke 4:2-4).

Of himself, Paul states,

“I punish my body and enslave it, so that after preaching to others I myself should not be disqualified.” (I Cor. 9:27)

Of the Spirit and the flesh, he states,

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if, by the Spirit, you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” (Rom. 8:13)

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” (Col. 3:5)

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. . . . And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:16, 19-21, 24)

Scripture precludes an interpretation of Ephesians 6:12 pursuant to which we no longer struggle with our “flesh and blood,” our carnal natures. To the contrary, we are to “crucify” and “put to death” the flesh, and the carnal passions and desires that belong to the flesh.

### **IMMORALITY OF THE FLESH VS. IMMORALITY OF THE SPIRIT**

“Alright, write this down,” says Pastor Kim, “there are two types of immorality: immorality of the flesh. . . . Immorality of the spirit.” This bifurcation between two different categories of “immorality” seems to be the core idea in Pastor Kim's sermon, but he gives no scriptural reference for it. The whole notion lacks any biblical foundation or context; it appears to have been invented, *ad hoc*, to support Pastor Kim's assertion that immorality of the spirit is “a billion times worse” than immorality of the flesh, which is no big deal. This is his rationale for not worrying about practicing homosexuals in his church.

Pastor Kim quotes an unnamed writer as saying, “Christians with logs in their eyes have been condemning those with splinters with so much anger and hatred. Please, be not concerned about any immorality of the flesh.” Who wrote this, and why should Adventists consider that person authoritative? Your guess is good as mine; Pastor Kim never revealed who he was quoting.

There is no ranking of sins in Scripture or in other inspired writings. Indeed Ellen White tells us:

The Lord has not given us a list of graded sins, so that we may reckon some as of little consequence, and say that they will do but little harm, while others are of greater magnitude and will do much harm. MYP 91

Disobedience that seems trivial to us—like eating fruit from a tree that God has placed off limits—can have the gravest consequences imaginable. Scripture teems with examples of seemingly slight transgressions—reaching out to steady the ark, bringing strange fire into the sanctuary, striking the rock instead of speaking to it, or falsely claiming to have donated all the proceeds of a land sale—that had dire consequences. In light of these examples, it is presumptuous to preach that immorality of the flesh is “not even important,” or “not very important at all.” Our place is to obey God's directives, not try to prioritize which are important and which can safely be dispensed with.

## **Is it Morally Filthy to be Concerned for the Purity of the Church?**

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. . . . Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:19-21, 26-27)

Using this passage, Pastor Kim argues that those who are (by his reckoning) too concerned with moral impurity in the church are themselves guilty of “the moral filth and evil that is so prevalent,” and are “polluted by the world.”

Interestingly, in making this argument, Pastor Kim states, “Is it talking about anything that is external? No, it's talking about something that is within us, our attitude, something that is internal.” But Scripture states that sexual sin is internal, while every other sin, including an ungoverned tongue, is “outside the body.” (1 Cor. 6:18-20) Pastor Kim inverts the biblical description and argues that Phariseism is internal, while implying that immorality of the flesh is external and thus trivial.

### **Does James intend to condemn those concerned about moral purity in the church?**

I doubt that he who was inspired to write, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26) intended for Christians to turn a blind eye toward open sin in the church. Rather, he intended for people to,

“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” (James 4:7-9)

Likewise, Peter states that we must

“not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'” (1 Pet. 1:14-16)

Pastor Kim argues that Christians should not point out things that are wrong in the church:

“The pharisees always say, 'We're not judging anybody, we're just trying to point out the things that are not right in our midst. And it's our job.' Is it our job? Has God ever asked us to be the judges of the world? So tell me, why do Christians keep doing it?”

But, again, this is not scripturally correct. Although we are not to judge the world until after the Second Coming (1 Cor. 6:2-3), Scripture does ask us to judge disputes among Christians, and to be vigilant about protecting the church's reputation for moral purity:

But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.” 1 Cor. 5:9-13.

We cannot interpret James to be in conflict with Paul, when both writers are inspired by the same Holy Spirit. Clearly, Christians are to judge the church, and public sin must be reprovved. Ironically, Pastor Kim obviously accepts Paul's imperative that the church discipline itself, or he would not have disciplined Elizabeth Iskander. It's just that, in Pastor Kim's liberal regime, those who call attention to open immorality in his church are to be disciplined, not those engaging in it.

## **CONCLUSION**

This exercise is necessary because this type of preaching will become increasingly common in a church that is under enormous pressure to normalize homosexuality. Division, union, conference, and local pastors will not admit to having jettisoned our standards, doctrines, and high view of Scripture. Rather, they will continue to preach from the Bible, but their use of biblical passages will become increasingly de-contextualized, until Scripture is interpreted to mean something very strange, and nearly the opposite of what it actually says.