

Following Christ in a Sex-drenched Culture

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-week series

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Genesis 2:24–25 (Common English Bible)

²⁴This is the reason that a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they weren't embarrassed.

1 Corinthians 6:12–20 (CEB)

¹²I have the freedom to do anything, but not everything is helpful. I have the freedom to do anything, but I won't be controlled by anything. ¹³Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, and yet God will do away with both. The body isn't for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. ¹⁴God has raised the Lord and will raise us through his power. ¹⁵Don't you know that your bodies are parts of Christ? So then, should I take parts of Christ and make them a part of someone who is sleeping around? No way! ¹⁶Don't you know that anyone who is joined to someone who is sleeping around is one body with that person? The scripture says, The two will become one flesh. ¹⁷The one who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. ¹⁸Avoid sexual immorality! Every sin that a person can do is committed outside the body, except those who engage in sexual immorality commit sin against their own bodies. ¹⁹Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you? Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves? ²⁰You have been bought and paid for, so honor God with your body.

1 Corinthians 7:1–6 (CEB)

Now, about what you wrote: "It's good for a man not to have sex with a woman."
²Each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband because of sexual immorality. ³The husband should meet his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should do the same for her husband. ⁴The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband doesn't have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵Don't refuse to meet each other's needs unless you both agree for a short period of time to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come back together again so that Satan might not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶I'm saying this to give you permission; it's not a command.

The sexualization of American culture is a project that seems unstoppable. What's next we say? The lines we try to draw wash away with every new tide. What does God want us to hear about who we really are and the place of human sexuality in our lives?

We live in a world awash in sex and sexual images. A visiting Martian that spent any time in front of an American TV, movie screen, or iPad would leave convinced that the pinnacle of human achievement and fulfillment is a great sexual experience. When I started writing this, I thought I'd list a few examples – but what's the point, really. No one can realistically deny that our culture is soaked in human sexuality. The question for us is this: How can we follow Christ in this sex-drenched culture?

Now, perhaps "drenched" is a bit strong, especially compared to the culture Paul worked in. The Greco-Roman world of Paul's missionary journey was sex-saturated to a degree we'd have trouble imagining. Sexual stimulation was ever-present, "on walls and on dinnerware, in prostitutes on the street, in jokes and songs and public religious observances. For example, the Roman spring Floralia celebration included live sex shows"¹ So, I suppose things could get much worse. But one trip to the mall reminds me just how much sex, sexuality, sexiness, and the rest dominate our culture.

¹ From Sarah Ruden's book, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, Pantheon Books, NY. 2010. p. 19

The truth is that in our present world, the traditional teachings of the church seem quaint, old-fashioned, and utterly meaningless. God comes off as some sort of cosmic spoilsport who wants nothing more than to interfere with our endless quest for yet another thrill. Paul is seen as a dour, prune-faced chaperone who wants to put an end to fun. It is simply undeniable that over the last fifty years, we, the church, have been remarkably unpersuasive when it comes to sexual morality.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the Scriptural witness, the church has always, and still does, insist that marriage, the union of a man and a woman, is a gift from God. We hold that our sexuality is God's gift to all persons. And we hold that sexual relations are affirmed only within the marriage bond,² for the sexual union of husband and wife create "one flesh." Indeed, this union into "one flesh" creates a biological entity capable of reproducing – two becomes one.

All this is clearly scriptural, but is it simply arbitrary? How might sexuality and its place within marriage fit into the larger picture of our humanness and our relationship with God?³

Our Bodies Belong to the Lord

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians in the *Interpretation* series, Richard Hays, offers the following thoughts on Paul's claim that our bodies belong to Jesus, that we have been "bought and paid for" (v. 20).

Once we confess that we are not our own, that we have been bought with a price, all talk of sexual autonomy becomes nonsense. We are not free to do anything we like, not free to invent our own standards, not free to behave as moral "free agents." We are bound to a relationship of obedient faithfulness to Christ.

It is striking that Paul's argument against extramarital sex in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 never mentions the issue of infidelity to a spouse. Perhaps the specific fornicators he had in mind were not married, but another explanation seems likelier: he regards sexual promiscuity not primarily as an offense against any human relationship but, most fundamentally, as a sin against God. The union with a prostitute violates the believer's prior bond with Christ.

In Western culture today, by contrast, most discourse about issues of sexual and reproductive ethics is dominated by post-Enlightenment categories that sound eerily like a reprise of the Corinthian slogans: "rights," "freedom of choice," "self-determination," "autonomy." Even within the church, such language is rarely questioned by any of the factions into which our churches are divided. So, for example, the discussion of abortion becomes polarized into a debate over "the right to choose" versus "the right to life." How might our contemporary debates change if we would stop shouting such slogans for a while and listen to Paul? Do you not know that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. Such an approach would of course not settle questions about legislation in the secular world, but it might change the texture of debate within the church. The task of the preacher or teacher is to reframe the questions in ways more faithfully responsive to Paul's vision for the community. We need to learn anew how to talk about sexual issues—and other moral matters—as people who belong to the Lord, people whose moral decisions are shaped not by personal preference or expediency but by the desire to glorify God in our bodies.

Intimacy

Humans are sexual beings, remarkably so. Our sexual drives are so powerful that they often threaten to consume us and sometimes do. Surely there is more at work here than procreation. Our sexuality need not be such a firestorm if its only purpose is to ensure the survival of the species. Our sexual practices are not like those of other species. For humans, sex is not simply an act, it is a personal encounter, it is emotional,

²This is language from the UMC Book of Discipline and is consistent with the teachings of most Christians for the last 2,000 years including all the major branches and denominations of Christendom today.

³Philip Yancey is a thoughtful, honest Christian and an excellent writer. I very much recommend his chapter, "Designer Sex," in his book, *Rumors of Another World*. It was a big help to me in preparing this study.

it is intimate. To the extent that we try to separate personal intimacy from the physical act, we diminish our humanity for, of all creatures, we alone are created in the image of God.

The seemingly dry and boring doctrine of the Trinity is key here.⁴ We proclaim the unity of one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bound to each other in eternal relationships of love and community, each of them fully and completely God, though not all of God. We can't fully understand this glorious mystery, but we can understand that God is love, that God is inherently relational and that being made in God's image, we too are inherently relational. We are built for relationships. We are built for intimacy -- with God and with one another. And in our sexual intimacy, we experience for a time, a unity like no other, at least so long as the union is genuinely mutual, each giving to the other in genuine love and caring.

As Philip Yancey writes, "Two independent beings open their inmost selves and experience not a loss, but a gain. In some way – a 'profound mystery' not even Paul dared explore – this most human act reveals something of the nature of reality, God's reality, in his relations with creation and perhaps within the Trinity itself." Understanding sexual intimacy in this way helps us to embrace the becoming of "one flesh" as something that we need to protect. Perhaps we can understand better why God insists that sexual intimacy, this physical union, be confined only to an exclusive, covenantal relationship – to marriage.

Let's go one step further in this with Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is so obviously distressed by their sexual abuses that he tries to shock them into reality. He writes, "Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall become one flesh.' But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee immorality!" (1 Cor 6:16-17).⁵ Contemplate that for a minute. As Richard Hays writes, Paul's argument "presupposes that sexual intercourse cannot be understood merely as a momentary act that satisfies a transient natural urge. Instead, it creates a mysterious but real and enduring union between man and woman." And this union is to be only the union of marriage; it is a foretaste of our union with Christ.

Fidelity

Love is a choice. It is about what we do. True love is self-giving rather than self-seeking. Marriage is the loving union of one man and one woman. Through God's gift of sexual intimacy, husband and wife bond as "one flesh," a bond so profound that it is a sign to their union with Christ, a bond so intimate that it is to be shared with no other person. God values marriage so highly that God is willing to use marriage as a metaphor for his own relationship with us. In a striking image, so far as God is concerned when we chase after false idols we are committing adultery.

The biblical perspective on love, marriage, and sex is that these gifts are all far more valuable than many of us want to acknowledge. These gifts from God are to be guarded and cherished, hence the teachings on sexual fidelity. As husbands and wives, our sexual energies – body, mind, and spirit – are to be poured into our marriage, toward our spouse.⁶ Jesus taught that adultery is more than the physical act (Matthew 5:27); when our sexual energies are directed outside the marriage, our marriage is diminished. God calls us to lives of faithfulness in all things, and utter faithfulness to our spouse.

⁴Christian theology often seems awfully disconnected from the real world lives we lead, but this is only because we forget that beliefs and ideas have consequences. In truth, we are all theologians whether we acknowledge it or not.

⁵ When Paul says "flee immorality," his Greek is clear; the "immorality" is sexual relations outside marriage.

⁶This is why pornography poses such danger to marriages – it diverts our sexual energies outside our marriage and away from our spouse.

Being a Careful Reader of Paul

We often hear only bits and pieces of 1 Corinthians and those are usually pretty carefully edited so as not to offend. But Paul intends to offend. At times, he is simply astounded by the actions of many of the new Christians in Corinth. In an attempt to get them back on track, Paul answers many of their questions, ranging from whether meals ought to be eaten in the pagan temples to the sexual lives of husbands and wives.

Sometimes, translators of Paul's letters can be pretty unclear. Look at the translation of 1 Corinthians 7 above, which is from the Common English Bible. You might also look at the NRSV or NIV translations. Now compare them to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase from *The Message*.

Now, getting down to the questions you asked in your letter to me. First, "Is it a good thing to have sexual relations?"

Certainly—but only within a certain context. It's good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder. The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality—the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out.

Paul begins by responding to a maxim offered up by the Corinthians: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." They want Paul's comments on this maxim, in which "to touch a woman" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Thus, they are asking Paul whether it is a good thing or a bad thing to have sexual relations. Some of the Corinthian Christians seem to be preaching a message of celibacy for everyone. Now, Paul understands celibacy to be a gift; he is celibate himself. But Paul is no fool. He knows that most people are not given the gift of celibacy and that the only proper place for sexual relations is in marriage. As Paul says, "It is good for a man to have a wife and for a wife to have a husband." Indeed, by "have," Paul means what we sometimes mean – the husband and wife having the sexual enjoyment of each other.

All this matters because Paul has so often been misunderstood as hating marriage, or at least seeing it as a necessary evil. And the same for sex. But, this is because he has been misread. For Paul to acknowledge his own spiritual gift of celibacy does not imply that he devalued marriage.

Regrettably, we are also often blind to Paul's surprising challenge to the social world of his day. Paul insists upon mutuality in marriage, at a time when marriages were anything but mutual. He writes that each spouse possesses the body of the other; they are to satisfy one another. There is no standing up for one's rights. After all, they are one flesh.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When it comes to discussions of sex and sexual behavior, the church's teachings often devolve into rules-making. Why not have sex before marriage? Because God says so!! For many people, that is a pretty unpersuasive approach. If a young person came to you and asked you why the Bible teaches sexual abstinence outside marriage, what would you say? What would you say if the young person says that abstinence is just not realistic? What practical guidance might you offer? How might the church begin to recover the importance of its teachings about sexuality and marriage? How can we be persuasive?
2. English translations of Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes a difficult subject that much more confusing. But if we assume, as we should, that Paul values the marriage covenant as a gift from God, then you might discuss Paul's teachings about mutuality in marriage. Paul is very bold in telling a Greco-Roman husband that his wife has as much right to his body as he does to hers. What picture of an ideal sexual relationship for a husband and wife emerges from Paul's writings? What can we learn here about marriage?
3. Adultery, having sexual relations with anyone other than one's spouse, is one of the oldest taboos in the Bible. It even made the top ten list, alongside murder and theft. Why do you think this is so? What does the absolute prohibition against adultery teach us about marriage? Even if both spouses wanted to have some sort of "open" marriage (I think that is still the term!), the biblical answer would still be no. Why? Jesus goes further than Paul. If we think that we have avoided adultery by not engaging in the physical act, Jesus reminds us that it is our hearts that really matter. Energies, attention, and fantasies directed to someone other than our spouse diminishes our marriage. Do you agree? How might we go about ensuring that all our sexual energies are directed to our spouse?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Leviticus 18 Holiness in sexual behavior. This is a long list of sexual taboos. God's people are to be different from the people around them. ("Uncovering nakedness" in the NRSV is a euphemism for sexual relations).</p>	<p>Tuesday, 2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:23 The story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of her husband, and the death of their child.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is presented with a shocking case of sexual immorality. Paul's primary focus is on protecting of the Christian community, even if that means asking someone to leave the community.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Glorifying God in body and spirit.</p>
<p>Friday, Colossians 3:1-17 For Paul, this new life in Christ underlies all of his instruction and advice.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

