

The First Sexual Revolution

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning to you all. This morning, we typically in our church, we follow the lectionary. And so this morning, we come to this reading in 1 Corinthians chapter six.

And this is one of those passages that because of all of the things that have been attached to it in recent history, it's almost impossible for us to understand what this would have been like from a first century perspective.

What was really going on when Paul wrote these words? So what we're going to spend time doing this morning is to look at this passage through that lens and recognize that what we really see here, what we're really gonna be talking about is the sexual revolution.

When we hear the term sexual revolution, most people think of the movement, the events that happened in the 1960s onward in the West.

But according to Kyle Harper, the classics professor, the first sexual revolution, or what he would refer to as the real sexual revolution, actually happened in the 60s, as in the first century onward.

[1 : 12] And it was all the direct result of the Christian gospel. From the moment it was first proclaimed, the gospel began to transform every aspect of human life, including and really especially the realm of sexual ethics.

And the lifestyle of the early Christ followers was a radical departure from the surrounding cultural norms in ways that we have a very hard time appreciating.

But it was a radical departure from the norms, and the church grew rapidly in the first few centuries, largely because of this. Largely because people found this new way of life to be breathtakingly beautiful and attractive.

Again, hard for us to imagine with all of the lenses that we bring to this, but that was the reality in the first few centuries of the church. And what this did was to lay a foundation for much of what we take for granted in the modern West when it comes to everything from human dignity to universal human rights to justice for the vulnerable.

So what made this revolution possible? 1 Corinthians chapter six shows us that it was a result of at least three things. A revolutionary view of desire and identity, a revolutionary view of sex and the body, a revolutionary view of marriage and singleness.

[2 : 41] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we recognize, we have to recognize every week that this is your word, and that we're here to sit under your word.

You promise that wherever your word goes, you send it out, and it accomplishes all that you desire for it to accomplish in us, in the world. It never returns to you void, and so we pray that this word this morning would be living and active, that it would challenge those of us who may be complacent, that it would comfort those of us who may be here and be facing extraordinary challenges.

We pray that you would speak to us as your children in the ways that you promise to do. In the power of your spirit, and in the name of Jesus, amen. So a revolutionary view, first of all, of desire and identity.

Our society today, in some ways, feels very distant from the first century world, but in many ways, we actually have a lot in common with Corinth, and I think arguably we have more in common in this last century with Corinth than many previous centuries.

In verse 12, Paul quotes a common phrase that you might just as easily hear on the streets of D.C. as in Corinth. He quotes this slogan, all things are lawful for me.

[4 : 02] In contemporary terms, my body is my business. What I do is my business. It's not anyone else's business, and I have a right to do as I please.

Most everybody operates that way in our society. But look at what Paul does here. He quotes the saying, all things are lawful for me, and then he says this, all things are lawful for me, but I will not

be dominated by anything.

Now that's a key insight into the nature of desire. He's not saying, no, I don't want you to be free. He's rather challenging them, are you as free as you think you are?

Desire can be extraordinarily powerful, and if we're not extraordinarily careful. Our desires can, Paul says, come to enslave us. And in the previous section, verses 9 through 11, Paul gives us a list. And this is not meant to be comprehensive, but it is meant to make a point. Here's what Paul is saying with this list. Regardless of what your particular desires or proclivities might be, whether we're dealing with sexual desire, and he includes several examples that encompass both heterosexual and same-sex examples, whether it's the realm of sexual desire, whether it's the desire for other people's property, kind of a material desire for money, food and drink, or whether it's the passions within you like anger, whether it's something like anger that leads you to revile other people, in other words, to speak abusively to other people.

[5 : 47] There's always a danger, he says, of our desires coming to dominate and then define us. So it may start out with occasionally drinking too much here and there or occasionally sort of fantasizing about adultery, what would it be like to be with that person, or occasionally your temper gets the better of you and you say hurtful things that obviously you don't mean.

And it starts out like that, but what Paul's saying is that over time, the more you indulge those desires, the more you let them have their way in you, the more you will cross boundaries and the more you will take liberties and the more you will push limits until one day you realize, as you look back on your life, you've become a full-blown alcoholic or a serial adulterer or a reviler, a verbally abusive person.

And even if we're not aware of being dominated by any particular desire, you can hear this and think, well, I don't see anything like that at work in my life. We all live kind of in this constant oscillation between pleasure and pain.

Right? And that's its own kind of domination. This inescapable pendulum between pleasure and pain. I escape the pain of sadness with the pleasure of junk food.

I escape the pain of boredom with the pleasure of scrolling on Instagram. The pleasure-pain cycle is sort of never-ending.

[7 : 26] And one of the things that set the early Christians apart was their apparent ability to transcend and to overcome their desires. It wasn't the extinguishing of desire.

This wasn't Buddhism. It's not Stoicism. This is something more. This is people who have the ability to have desires, to choose to indulge those desires, or to choose to not indulge.

The desires had no control over them. They were the ones in charge. And that was extremely appealing. So God's desire for us is freedom.

It's true freedom. And people in the world begin to look at this Christian community and realize these people seem to be free. You know, if you want to read a great paper on this particular point, Father Jeff Bailey, who's a member, part of our church, actually wrote a fantastic paper on this. I'm sure he'd be happy to send it to you. But the question that we want to ask is, how was this kind of freedom possible? And the answer that Paul gives is very clear. Through spiritual transformation that brought about whole life transformation.

[8 : 41] So Paul says, you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. He's saying, you used to be dominated by these desires, but then you came to Jesus.

You admitted your spiritual brokenness. You admitted to Jesus that everything about you, every part of you needs to be redeemed and healed. And what did Jesus do?

He welcomed you in. He forgave all of your sin because of his sacrifice. And then he gave you a new identity. How do you know your baptism is a marker of that new identity?

He said, no longer belong to the world. You no longer belong to your desires. You belong to me now. And in the love of Christ, people began to find something greater than anything they might desire in the material world.

These lesser desires began to be displaced by the greater desire of the love of Christ. And then the Spirit begins to work. He says, you were sanctified.

[9 : 48] The Spirit begins to work this new life out in us to sanctify us. The early Christian church took this very seriously. And that's why they were committed to transcending desire and to not being mastered by it.

So the first point is this. God's desire for us is freedom. True freedom. And one of the greatest threats to our freedom is not external. It's not laws that determine what we can and cannot do. We can have lots of laws. We can have no laws. One of the greatest threats to our freedom is actually in here. It's the dominating power of desire. And I actually think there is a longing for this kind of freedom in our culture today.

There's a rise of what we might refer to as neo-stoicism in our culture today. Just one example of this, if you look at the many young men in our culture, and it's up to you to determine whether or not you fit that category, many young men follow people like Ryan Holiday or there's a Navy SEAL, Jocko Willink, I think is how you say his name, or Tim Ferriss or Jordan Peterson.

And all of these gurus are advocating for self-improvement centered on seeking a more virtuous life. Right? There's a term among some people, simping.

[11:17] Don't be a simp. Right? You know, if you're a young man, and you know, don't show or demonstrate or display your interest in women. Focus on, you know, your goals.

Focus on improving yourself. Let them come to you. Right? But there's a spirit, there's an undercurrent, right, in all of this that people are responding to.

And what is that undercurrent? It's people, I think, realizing we live in a culture where everybody around you is saying, indulge your desires, indulge your appetites, let your desires define you, give in to them.

That's what true happiness is. And I think people on an instinctive level know that's a lie. And they're tired of being dominated by their desires. They're tired of being stuck in the pleasure-pain cycle, and they want a way out.

And so you have these gurus who are offering a way out. But the difference is, the difference is, there were two key factors in the early church that we need today if we want to truly be free.

[12:18] Number one, they had the power of the Holy Spirit at work in them. And you're not going to find that in a book. And then two, they had a community committed to this lifestyle which made it much more plausible.

It's a lot more plausible if all of the people around you are advocating for the same thing in your life and in their lives. So this is the first piece of this revolution puzzle.

A revolutionary view of identity and desire. Number two, a revolutionary view of sex and the body. People in the pre-Christian world had a very low view of the physical world and the human body, and that led to a very low view of sex.

Paul quotes another common slogan you might hear on the streets of Corinth or D.C. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. What does that mean? Sex has no meaning behind it.

There's no bigger meaning. There's no bigger story. There's no spiritual component. Sex is merely an appetite. And like any other appetite, if you have to, satisfy it in whatever way you see fit.

[13:28] Now that really depended on who you were in society. If you were a high status man, if you were a freeborn man, a high status man, there was no expectation of sexual restraint put on you.

There's actually not even a word for male virgin in either Greek or Latin. Right? The concept didn't even exist. And so there was no word needed for it.

So a high status man was entitled to sleep with his wife or high end courtesans or brothel prostitutes or slaves because they were property.

That was assumed. Or other men or young boys or any combination therein. And this was not seen as a big deal.

Men need to satisfy their appetites. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. lower status people, right, in this kind of society.

[14:26] Because of this, the more vulnerable members of society, slaves, women, children, were always at risk of sexual exploitation. But it was no big deal because men have to satisfy their appetites.

And there are, I believe, some clear similarities between the ancient world and our modern world on this point as well. In the name of individual freedom, the modern sexual revolution of the 1960s sought to liberate sex from all of its constraints.

And that means disconnecting sex from everything that gives it meaning, from everything that might set limits around it. Right?

So, so the modern sexual revolution said, there's no meaning behind sex. It's just a basic appetite. And, and the question is, are we better off as a society when that's the case?

Are, are we better off, is the world a better place when sex has little to no meaning? Louise Perry is a feminist writer who published a book a couple of years ago.

[15 : 36] And the book's called *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*. Very much recommend you read it. The main thesis of her book is this. She says, the sexual revolution was all about liberating and empowering women.

And certainly, she acknowledges that there have been many welcome changes in the realm of women's rights. But if you actually look at the data, she says, who are the people who have suffered most because of the, the changes brought about by the sexual revolution?

Who has suffered most? It's women. It's women. Who are the true beneficiaries of the sexual revolution of the 1960s?

Who truly benefits? A small number of high status men are the real beneficiaries. Now, to me, that sounds a whole lot like first century Corinth.

You know, we love the, the idea of progress. We need to recognize and be honest when this may actually be regress. Not only, well, here's Perry's point.

[16 : 44] When we attempt to disenchant sex, when we, when we strip away all of its meaning, we not only deny that it is uniquely wonderful, that also means we deny that it can be uniquely violating.

And the cost of that low view of sex always falls disproportionately on women and the vulnerable of society.

It was the same in the first century as it is today. You know, G.K. Chesterton has this great parable that he shares about progress. And he says, you know, there are different ways to go about reform. And imagine a law or a boundary, you know, or a more, imagine that as like a fence across the road. And he says, there's one approach to progress.

The person comes along and says, here's a fence in the road. I don't know why this is here.

Therefore, we should get rid of it. And he says, but the more intelligent reformer would look at that same situation and say, well, because you don't know why this fence is here, that's the reason you should not remove it.

[17 : 52] Right? Go away, figure out why this is here. Only when you really understand why this boundary is here can you then decide whether or not you want to remove it.

Now, we're coming out of a period of time where for decades the kind of postmodern aim has been to eradicate as many boundaries as possible. And now we live in an increasingly boundaryless society.

But most people who are knocking the walls down really have no understanding of why they were there to begin with. And Perry's saying, listen, you're not getting the results that you think you are by breaking all of these boundaries down.

And in such a climate, the Christian gospel was staggeringly beautiful. Paul says in verses 15 and 16, do you not know that when you join yourself to another sexually, you become one flesh?

And here, flesh is not just talking about physical union. It means the whole person. See, in the ancient world and in the modern world, people tend to separate the spiritual from the physical.

[18 : 57] They assume that the physical is kind of down here and the spiritual is up here and that's what really matters. But the Bible says something very different about our bodies. The Bible says, listen, you're not a person with a body.

That's what other people believe. You are your body. You are your body. When God created Adam, the first human, he didn't create Adam and then look around for a body to stick him in.

You know, like a piece of Tupperware. Right? He formed Adam from the material physicality of the dust and the dirt and the mud and then he breathed life into him.

At that point, Adam came into being as a physical being. You are your body. You don't just have a body. So what that means is that what you do with your body is inherently spiritual.

Right? When the Bible uses the word soul, it typically means the whole person, not just a non-physical part of us. So another way to say this or make this point is sex is a profoundly spiritual act.

[20 : 05] And there is no such thing as casual sex. And that's why, by the way, casual sex never stays casual. While subjectively we might be able to say about a particular sexual encounter, oh, it didn't mean anything, Paul's saying that there is an objective way in which sex always means

something.

Very profound. And your body knows this. You may not know it or want to know it, but your body knows it.

Your body knows it. Over time, sexual intimacy leads to bonding and oxytocin and attachments are formed. And the people who become better and better at shirking off those attachments, for them, over time, it becomes harder and harder for them to ever make attachments.

Right? Sex is meant to be the full giving of one's entire person to the one to whom you belong. And this is why Paul says to flee from sexual immorality in verse 18.

And the word he uses is pornea, which is a broad blanket term for any and all forms of sexual intimacy outside of the covenant bond of marriage. He says flee anything, any kind of sexual intimacy outside of the bond of marriage.

[21 : 27] Because what he's saying is this, if you understand what sex is, if you understand what God has given us in this gift, you need to understand that it's about giving all of yourself.

So he says flee any situation where you might have physical oneness without whole life oneness, without social and emotional and economic oneness.

And this is a revolutionary view of sex in the body. I mean, in a world full of people saying sex is just an appetite, it's just about self-gratification, Paul says no, no, no, no.

It's not just about self-gratification. It's not just an appetite. It's about radical self-donation. It's about giving yourself fully and completely to another human being.

It's our God-given capacity to give ourselves fully and completely to another person to such an extent that we are transformed by it. So this was very radical.

[22 : 32] Right? So we have a revolutionary view of identity and desire. We have a revolutionary view of sex and the body. The third piece of this is a revolutionary approach to marriage and singleness.

Marriage in the first century Corinth was very connected to civic duty. You were expected to be married and you were expected to produce offspring to build the population.

And it was inconceivable that you would be an unmarried adult. You were seen as a drain on the resources of the community. You could be fined for that kind of thing. And of course, there were completely different, it would not be fair to say that there were, you know, there were double standards.

There were two completely different rule books for men and women. As we said before, the paterfamilias paterfamilias had complete authority over his wife and over his wife's body.

And the paterfamilias could freely engage in sex with any number of people outside the marriage with largely with impunity. But for women, of course, sexual purity was heavily guarded.

[23 : 40] When a woman was raped, the great loss, the great crime from a male perspective was not the violation or the trauma. It was the fact that she had lost her virginity and thus would not be desirable as a wife.

So that was the lens that they had on it. But again, the early Christians brought about a revolutionary approach to both marriage and singleness. Christian marriage was a lifelong covenant where both husband and wife were expected to remain faithful.

So if we cheat and look at the next chapter, chapter 7, verse 4, Paul says that in Christian marriage, I mean, just think through, do your best to imagine being a first century Greco-Roman person hearing this.

Paul says, the wife does not have authority over her body, but the husband does. Everybody would have been like, that's right. Then he says, likewise, the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does.

That's where everything would have gone silent. You could have heard a pin drop. See, Roman marriage was about power power and subordination. Power and subordination.

[24 : 49] A big part of what made you a man's man in this world was your ability to dominate and thereby express your masculinity. But in a Christian marriage, you have a man and woman giving themselves completely to one another, surrendering themselves completely to one another.

And that's because marriage itself, in the Christian view, is pointing to something bigger than itself. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he says that marriage between a man and a woman is a picture of the kind of relationship that God wants to have with his people.

The heavens and the earth joining together as one, right? Christ giving himself completely and dying on the cross for the sake of those he loves.

And then our calling to give ourselves completely to him and to die to ourselves, die to the life that we had apart from him. And as this Christian gospel began to redefine marriage, because it was redefining marriage, this was a completely new way to understand marriage.

As that happened, society began to change. Now fast forward down through the centuries after this revolution. There's a book that came out in 2020 by Joseph Henrich.

[26 : 05] He's a Harvard anthropologist, sort of evolutionary biologist. He's an agnostic when it comes to matters of faith. But he published a book in 2020. It's like a 700 page doorstop of a book called *The Weirdest People in the World*.

And he says that when we look at the modern West, much of what we take for granted, ranging from our economic systems and the prosperity that we've enjoyed to our love of democracy, to our moral and psychological makeup, he says, a lot of this is the direct result of Christian marriage and family ethics.

Right? The fact that Christians didn't allow people to marry their cousins was a big deal, because then you couldn't just keep it in the family. You had to go out and you had to form alliances with other tribes and people groups.

And that begins to lay the groundwork for urbanization and for economies to develop and trade, Christians enforced lifelong monogamy.

They didn't let people go out and it doesn't mean that people didn't, but Christians discouraged it as much as they could. They didn't allow polygamy. And all of these things laid the groundwork.

[27 : 21] This is the central argument of the book. They laid the groundwork that led to massive advancements in Western civilization. All right, so this is a part of our story. And much of what we love about the modern West is directly related to this first century revolution and the centuries that followed.

So that's marriage, but I believe perhaps the most amazing thing that Paul says in chapter 7 comes after the verse we just read when he starts talking about singleness. And he talks about his own singleness and he calls it a gift.

And he's speaking to an audience that would have thought of it as a curse. And he says, this is a gift. As we said in the first century, it was unthinkable to be an unmarried adult, but Christianity, for the first time in history, the world encounters a religion where both the founder, Jesus, and the first theologian, Paul, were single and celibate all their lives.

And Paul's attitude is essentially this. He says, if you have the gift of celibacy, as I do, Paul's saying, that's actually preferable to marriage.

And he just straight up says, I wish everybody had this gift. Now, he's not denigrating marriage. He has a very high view of marriage. We just talked about that. What does he do?

[28 : 44] He's elevating singleness. Not only is singleness a valid lifestyle, in Paul's view, it's actually superior in some ways. Down in verse 28, he says, you know, married people, they tend to be consumed with worldly troubles.

I don't have to spend time illustrating that. You know exactly what I'm talking about. He says, but if you're single, you can devote yourself much more fully to the Lord. He's not saying that if you're single, you don't have worldly troubles, but what he's saying is that married life can tend to just completely overwhelm you, and you can tend to just feel like you're just doing your best just to stay afloat and just to keep your head above water.

And, you know, what's that, is it Jim Gaffigan who said that, you know, what's it like having a third kid? He's like, well, imagine, like, holding a baby, you know, having a baby, or imagine you're drowning and then somebody throws you a baby, right?

You can be overwhelmed by worldly troubles. He said, if you're single, you don't have those distractions. And what we see in the subsequent centuries is, according to Kyle Harper again, in the first few centuries, the plausibility of lifelong celibacy as a viable lifestyle in the church was, as he says, a blaring advertisement for Christianity.

People say, you mean I can, this is an option for me? And people flock to the church because of it. So in Christianity, what we see is that we see a view that holds a high view of both marriage and singleness as lifelong vocations.

[30 : 13] And Christianity says you have, either one or the other calling, right? But they're both vocations. And they both put the gospel on display.

Marriage is a picture of the union between Christ and the church. But singleness is a picture of the single-minded devotion that Christ had to his Father's will. And that was, and I think, continues to be revolutionary.

So let's pull all this together. The first sexual revolution happened as a direct result of the Christian gospel. And it radically reshaped all of society. And it laid the foundation for much of what we love about the modern West.

Now certainly, the church has failed along the way many, many times. the sex abuse scandals and cover-ups, the misguided, shame-inducing efforts of the purity culture, the stigmatizing of anyone not fitting the mold of married with two kids and a dog.

But I would say this, the worst failure by far would be for us to abandon the gospel and the freedom that it offers. in the name of what? Progress or relevance? For all of the talk of sexual liberation, what has the modern sexual revolution actually given us?

[31 : 39] A 20-year-old young man who is incapable of feeling desire for another human being because his brain has literally been rewired by years of pornography use.

A 38-year-old woman who is watching her biological clock tick away while stuck in the purgatory of a situationship with a man who feels no pressure to commit to anything beyond his own immediate gratification.

Rapidly declining birth rates that will eventually lead to collapse in countries around the world, including ours. What I believe is that we have something to offer the world that it desperately needs. And we know that because we've seen a lot of this before. We have a gospel-centered sexual ethic. We have a community that makes such an ethic plausible as a lifestyle.

And we have the spiritual power to live it out. And I believe that in our lifetime, we're going to see a growing hunger and longing for the freedom that this brings, just as we saw in the first century Greco-Roman world.

[32 : 50] So as Paul says, may we glorify God in our bodies. May we live lives that provoke questions only the gospel can answer.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the freedom that you bring. And we pray, Lord, in the power of your Holy Spirit that there would be a possibility in our community that would not be possible with merely human effort, that we would have the kind of spiritual power and oneness that would make it possible for us to embody this otherworldly way of being human, that it would put on display a way of being human that people instinctively long for.

We pray that this would be a community where freedom is taken seriously and celebrated and sought after for the great and precious gift that it is.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.