

Pleasing God in Sex

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[0 : 00] I'll pray while we remain standing. Father, thank you so much for your word to us that touches every corner of our existence. Please, we pray that you would speak to us through it this morning and that you'd be at work in our hearts by your Holy Spirit that we might respond to you rightly.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, friends, just a couple of things to say before we get underway this morning.

The first is that this sermon will be a little explicit in places and I do that because I don't think I can avoid it by explaining to you what I think the text means.

So I just need to tell you that before we start. The second thing is I've started a new practice which is that I normally produce an outline for my sermons and if you're interested in the future, well, they were there this morning but probably you may not have worked this out, there is an outline to the sermon that will be available every Sunday and you can pick one up.

If an outline helps you, please pick one up. They'll be out on where the welcomers are as you come in in the mornings. So it's only a sort of half A4 page but if that helps you, pick one up and it'll help you to take notes and not only that, see how far I've got to go and how far I've come.

[1 : 26] Well, friends, the narrative is very common and it permeates our movies entirely, I think. You know the story very well yourself. The couple meet. They get to know each other at some casual event.

They find themselves attracted to each other. The evening wears on and before long they find themselves in a suitable location. They embrace.

Clothes are removed and sex is engaged in. Friends, that is the story of so many of our movies. It is so prevalent and that is the world we live in, isn't it?

That is the world we live in where that sort of activity is the norm of human relationships. Sexual union is not necessarily in our world today tied to marriage. It is as normal, as it were, as going to dinner together.

It is the natural and normal conclusion of an encounter between a man and a woman. That's what we see everywhere these days. That is the norm and our tendency is to think that that norm is a relatively new phenomenon.

[2 : 31] But let me tell you, friends, that is far, far, far from reality. The Old Testament itself recognises that that is far from reality. Take, for example, an incident recounted in Numbers 25.

The nation of Israel are encamped at a place called Shittim. They've been wandering in the wilderness for some time. They've grown tired of Moses and they've grown tired of his God. So they're now sort of somewhere in the middle of their 40 years of wandering and they've grown interested in the local women.

These are young women. They're vivacious. They're available and the temptation is too much for the Israelite men. So the Israelite men take the Moabite women into their tents and the Moabite women take the Israelite men into their temples and they eat together.

They drink together. They party together. They sleep together and then they worship the god Baal together. The world of Canaan, you see, was a world of fertility religions.

It was therefore a world that was oriented around sex. It lived for sex. It oriented itself around fertility. It was a world oriented around sex.

[3 : 42] The first century world, you might think, was somewhat different but no, it was similar again. You see, in ancient Greece, the phallus was an object of worship. Greek sculptures and art indicates that it was certainly a symbol of fertility.

The stories of the gods of ancient Greece are inextricably entwined with sex. You cannot read about the lives of the gods without reading about their sex life.

Homosexuality and bisexuality were social institutions in ancient Greece. They were integral to education, to science, to art, to religion, to politics.

Sex. Refined prostitution was believed to be necessary for pleasure. Sex was necessary. Sex was enticing. Sex was engaging.

Sex was not simply for procreation. It may have been full of potential danger but it was a normal part of life. Friends, the context that we live in, let me tell you, is not unusual.

[4 : 47] It is probably where most of society has been for most of the history of the world. The attitudes that are prevalent in our society today regarding sex are the attitudes of ancient Canaan.

They are very similar to first century Greek and Roman culture and therefore the words that Paul speaks into those cultures have great relevance for us today.

For as he speaks to the Greek and Roman world, he speaks to our world, to the world that we inhabit for it is not that different from the world that they inhabited.

And he speaks God's word into that context. So today I want to urge you to listen very carefully to what the Apostle Paul has to say. You see, he speaks God's word.

He speaks God's word to a first century world and he speaks God's word to a 21st century world.

He speaks God's word to us today here in Doncaster and he speaks it to a word, he speaks a word that is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, that is able to penetrate into our lives, that is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

[6 : 02] It is God's agent to expose us before our Creator to whom we must give an account. So I want you to turn with me this morning to Scripture and to see what God has to teach us there and I pray that you will, that we will together be transformed by this word.

Now before I take a quick run through the passage, I want you to notice something particular about three places in it. I want you to look with me at verse 1. You see, in verse 1 Paul says these things. He says, Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus. Now I want you to turn and look at verse 6.

You see, Paul is talking about Christian conduct in verse 6. He's urging a particular form of action and in the process of doing it he says these words in verse 6, that no one wrong or exploit a brother or a sister in this matter because the Lord is an avenger of all these things just as you have already been told beforehand and we solemnly warned you.

Now look at verse 8. Paul says in verse 8, Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. Now friends, can you see what is going on?

[7 : 21] Can you hear from the beginning, the middle and the end of this passage the seriousness with which Paul speaks? He is asking and urging in the Lord, in the Lord Jesus.

He is solemnly warning in the middle. He is emphasising that to reject what he says is to reject what God says and to reject God himself. His goal, you see, is to drive these people to a lifestyle that is pleasing to God and Paul wants his ancient readers to know that these are very serious matters and he has very serious words to say about this very serious part of life.

God wants us, his contemporary readers, to hear that God has some very serious words to say to us about a very serious part of our lives.

Friends, we live in a world where sex is trivialised. We live in a world where it's just a way to spice up a comedian's script that has got no real humour in it at all.

But sex is not a trivial matter to God. Sex and sexuality matters enormously to God. You see, sex and sexuality are an integral part of life.

[8 : 39] Sex was created by God and God has a view on it and that view is very different from the prevailing view both in the first century, Canaanite culture and in our century.

This is the first thing to say. This is a very serious topic for God and he has very serious words to say to us this morning.

Now, that in mind, let me take you for a quick run through the passage to see what we can, if we can get a feel for what's being said and then I want to hone in on some difficult parts. So, first, in verse 1, Paul stresses that his serious words have a goal to them.

That goal is a life, he says, that pleases God. That is, it has a life, it has as its focus, a life lived in the world before God.

It's about how you live before God in the world. It's about how you live and please God. It's about how to get better and better at it. Did you notice that?

[9 : 38] More and more, he says. You see, we live in a world, don't we, which is full of what we consider to be deteriorating moral standards and practice and Paul urges us to focus on pleasing God.

God. And he says to these Christians, your life, your practice should be continually getting better and better. That's what he's saying, more and more. Not getting worse and worse, but better and better.

In verse 2, Paul reminds his hearers about his original teaching to them. When he had first come to them, in his first missionary encounter with them, and it was teaching through the Lord Jesus. In other words, it was teaching that had its source in the Lord Jesus, that had the authority of the Lord Jesus behind it and those instructions with the authority of the Lord Jesus have a focus to them.

It's in verse 3. Look at it with me. Paul says this. He says, For this is the will of God, your sanctification. Can you notice what he's saying?

[10 : 37] In the immediately preceding verses, just flip back to the end of chapter 3, he's prayed that the Lord would strengthen their hearts in holiness. Well, the word sanctification comes from the same root as the word holiness.

And the idea has very deep roots in that passage we read earlier on and in all of Leviticus. In Leviticus chapter 19 verse 2, God says, Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

Can you see what God says about holiness in Leviticus? He says, Holiness is like being like me. That's what holiness is. It's God likeness. It's about reflecting my character.

It's about reflecting my character in your behaviour. It's about reflecting my character when you work out where your boundary markers are. When you work out what you're going to do with the edge of your fields.

It's when you work out what you're going to do with your neighbour. It's have I found out what God is like and how am I going to reflect that in my ordinary everyday conduct? What Paul is saying is he's lining up with the book of Leviticus and he's saying God's goal for us is to be like him.

[11 : 50] It is to reflect his attitudes, his character, his being, his behaviour. As God's people we are to be like our God, to be holy as he, the Lord, our God, is holy.

That is God's will. Can you hear, Paul? Our sanctification, our holiness. Our God likeness. And then Paul moves on to define what that means even more and he defines it by getting increasingly definite.

Have a look at it there. Sanctification, he says, first means abstaining from fornication. You can see that in verse 3. Now, the word fornication here is the word that you use for any sort of illicit sex. that is, whether it be premarital, in marriage, when you're single again after marriage, whatever it is, it is, it's homosexuality, it is any illicit sex, any sex that is against what God says.

Sanctification means abstaining from all sexual conduct that God bans. Any of that is fornication. Second, sanctification means controlling your own body in holiness and honour rather than in lustful passion like those who don't know God.

[13 : 06] So, first he says, it's about avoiding fornication. Then he says, it's about controlling your own body. You can see that in verse 4. Third, sanctification means not wronging or defrauding a brother or a sister.

You can see that in verse 6. But in verse 6, Paul makes an additional point about sanctification. In verse 13, remember back to last week, in verse 13 from last week, he prayed for holiness and blameless of God's people before God.

And he prayed that they might be blameless on the day when the Lord Jesus comes. Now he warns that when the Lord Jesus comes, he will come as an avenger of ungodliness and unholiness.

He will judge those who are not sanctified in their relationships with each other. Friends, God calls us. He calls me. He calls you to sanctification.

That is, he calls us to godly behaviour. He calls us to be holy as he himself is holy. And he says, I will judge your ungodly and unholy behaviour.

[14 : 17] And he will particularly judge our lack of love for our neighbour. Look at, and listen to verse 7. Paul is clear. God did not call us to impurity but to holiness.

Holiness and sanctification are the marks of Christian existence. God-like character is to be the characteristic of God's people and to think otherwise, he says, is to contradict God.

Very sobering words, aren't they, in verse 8? Have a look. For God did not call us to impurity but holiness. Verse 7. Verse 8. Therefore, whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God who also gives his Holy Spirit to us.

Friends, this is God's word to us. Paul's word here is God's word. It comes with the authority of God himself. It comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it is a word that says God's Holy Spirit is given to God's holy people. His Holy Spirit is to produce holy people who are godly in their behaviour, who are holy in their living.

[15 : 26] He makes us holy like the God we serve. And that holiness is to saturate every corner of our existence. It is even, says Paul, to affect our bedrooms and our sex lives.

So, friends, that's an overview of the chapter. It's a very stark chapter when you look at it that way, isn't it? But let me tell you, it gets a little starker as we go on. Now, as it's presented in our English text, I think it's relatively clear.

However, I should tell you that in the original language, it's a little more complicated. And our English versions give us a little hint to this. Have a look at verses 4 to 6 verse 4.

So, have a look at verse 4 and you'll see it says, that each one of you know how to control your own body, footnote, in holiness and honour. Now, look at the footnote.

It says, it could also be translated, how to take a wife for himself. You think, how do those two work together? How is, you know, looking after your own body and taking a wife?

[16 : 31] How would you get that out of the same thing? Well, let me tell you how you get it. The original says something like this, that each one of you know how to acquire, control your own vessel in holiness and honour.

That's what the original verse says, the original language says, your own vessel. Now, if we leave the word, you know, if that is the case, what could vessel mean here?

What might it mean? Well, it could mean this vessel. It could mean my body, couldn't it? That is how the NRSV translates it. That's its default translation and many other versions will translate it that way.

But that's not the only interpretation as the NRSV shows us. The second option is that vessel could mean what it means in 1 Peter 3, verse 7, where the same word is used. There Peter talks about a wife being a weaker vessel.

And so in that case, it could refer to wife, which is what the alternative translation is. But let me tell you, there's a third option as well. The third option is that it could also, the word control might also mean acquire, sorry, this is a bit more about the second one, and Paul could be saying, this is the will of your God, your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication, and this is how vessel, if it means wife, might mean, that each one of you know how to acquire your own wife in holiness and honour, not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God.

[18 : 06] Now it sounds very patriarchal, doesn't it, at this point? But that's how things were in the ancient world, it was largely the man who took the wife, so he acquired a wife. But if that's what it means, what is Paul saying here?

He's saying Christian marriage is not about lustful acquisition and possession of a man, by a man of a wife, no, rather acquiring a wife is to be done in holiness and honour, in other words, it is not something that's based on your lustful passion, that you go out and you say, I want this woman for myself, it's based on holiness and honour and proper care for a wife, so that's the second option. Here's the third option for you in terms of interpretation, vessel could mean one other thing and it could mean, it could be a euphemism for genitalia and in it's used this way in the Greek translation of 1 Samuel chapter 21.

In other words, vessel might mean, if I could put it this way, penis. Now if that's the case, a modern euphemism, just like this is probably a euphemism, could be implement or tool or something like that and if I translated it that way, it might be translated like this.

This is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication and that each one of you know how to control his own tool in holiness and honour, not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who don't know God.

[19 : 29] I did tell you before we started, I'm sorry that this got a bit explicit in places but I need to explain the text here and I couldn't see any way around explaining what I think it's saying. In other words, can you see what it's saying?

It's saying, I've got something to say to you about your sexual natures and what he's saying is that our priority should not be the simple satisfaction of our sexual nature.

No, like all of life, the focus and priority of our existence should be on holiness and honour.

Therefore, and that should be the case whether it's before marriage, during marriage or after a marriage has been terminated for one reason or another.

You see what he's saying? He's saying your life is not about being dominated by your sexual being. Now my own take on this passage is that option three is probably the right way to go in interpreting the passage.

Paul is talking about human beings who see themselves as primarily sexual beings and as sexual beings the great tendency is to simply use sex as something that is driven solely by lust.

[20 : 40] Paul says, no, no, no, you cannot have this if you are God's people. Take God's perspective, view yourself as God's holy people.

View your genitals as being the subject of God's demand for holiness. Use your genitals for holiness and honour. And if you do this, you will not act in a way that defrauds and cheats someone else.

You see, illicit sex dishonours, not only dishonours God, it defrauds another person, doesn't it? You see, if I was to go and commit adultery with another woman, who have I cheated?

Not only God, but I've defrauded my wife as well. Heather has been hurt and damaged as a result, has she not? You see, illicit sex defrauds another human person.

It exploits and wrongs a spouse or a potential spouse of the other person. And where that happens in a Christian context, it is not only a sin against God, it's a sin against a brother and a sister in Christ.

[21 : 50] So if one of us here were to sleep out of marriage with another congregational member who is married to someone else, we have not only sinned against that person and against God, but we've sinned against the third person as well.

And that person is a brother and sister for whom Christ died. Friends, I've now given you an overview of the passage. I've told you what some of the difficulties are with it. I've explained some of the things that are not clear and to some extent I don't really mind whether you agree with me about interpretation three or not because there's one thing that's clear about this passage, isn't there?

You see, the general thrust of this passage is so crystal clear and it's this. Paul is reminding us that we are people that know God and as people who know God we are to reflect God.

That is therefore the start and we are to live a life that is based on God, that is based on God's character, that is formed by God's nature. Not only that, he makes clear that there is a God who observes all our conduct.

He watches how humans think and how humans act and humans will have to one day give an account to him. We are God's people. We have been called by God to be saved.

[23 : 07] We heard that in chapter 1. But verse 7 of this chapter, have a look at it, it's an intriguing verse. Look at it with me. He says this, For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.

Can you hear what he's saying? You see, we often think we're called to be saved and that is true.

God has called us to salvation but he's called us to sanctification and to holiness.

He has called us to be moral, to be godly, to be blameless in our living and we will one day have to give an account before him as to how we have lived our lives.

Friends, we are Christians. We have turned to God from idols. We have turned to serve a living and true God.

We are waiting today for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead. We are waiting for Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. But this Lord Jesus from heaven this day observes us now and he will judge us for our treatment of each other and he will avenge wrong.

[24 : 20] This is a very serious and solemn warning to us. Let me see if I can draw the threads of this passage together and see what we've learnt. The Bible is clear.

We humans are God's created beings. We've been made by him. We have been made for him and we have been made like him.

That is, he is a relational being. In his very being he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So he is relational even in his own being and he is relational to the core of his being and he has created us relational beings.

Not only that, he has created us sexual beings and he has tied sex and relationships together and made them integral with each other.

Friends, relationships and sex are tied into the very core of our existence. And these aspects of our nature can be an enormously powerful force for good and evil.

[25 : 23] We know this, don't we? Sex can be used and is being used this day in parts of our world as a weapon for war. It can be used for enormous evil.

Rape is regularly used in war and we all know how rape can destroy a life. Or it can be used to molest and destroy the lives of children as has happened in our country and around the world, often by clergy, the very representatives of God himself.

And it destroys. We know what it does. Sex can destroy lives. Sex can be used for enormous evil. To manipulate and to coerce in a normal marriage.

Sex can be used though as well as for enormous evil, for wonderful and enormous good. You see, it can be used to affirm.

It can be used to show affection, to express love, comfort, to create children together, to bind a couple together.

[26 : 36] Friends, God created us for himself. He created us to be like him. He created us for love and justice, for kindness and holiness, for love and generosity.

He created us to please him. And God calls upon us to please him in our sexuality, in this other gift that he has given us.

Our genitalia, if I can put it this way, belong to God. They are his for him to be used in holiness and purity. They are not to be used in passionate lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.

We must not reflect our society in our sexuality. For that sexuality that is out in the world comes from people who do not know God.

You see, we must not use our sexuality for fornication, for premarital sex, for sex outside of marriage, for adultery, for homosexuality, for the purpose of just satisfying our lustful natures and that is all, for sex that damages relationships, for sex that manipulates and abuses others, for sex that wrongs a third party, for sex that takes advantage of another.

[27 : 59] No, God did not give us sex for those things. He did not give us sex for those things. God gave us our sexual organs and our sexual natures to be used for holiness and sanctification.

Sex is a great and good gift from God. The book of Solomon, I love the way that God has caused, right next to the book of Psalms there, or you know, a book or two away, is caused the Song of Solomon to be inserted in the Bible.

Why would God do that? It's a book just about sexual intimacy. Why would God do that? Because he wants to say, I am for sex.

I think humans ought to enjoy it. I think humans ought to enjoy it together in the right context.

Friends, sex is a good gift from God.

God created sex and he gave it to us for our good and we Christians are to use it for God's good and we are to use God's wonderful gift to us.

[29 : 06] We are God's Christian people. Sex and relationships are part of our being. We can't deny it. We can't suppress it. We can't push it away. It's who God made us and God called us to get this part of our lives right.

Our faith is meant to saturate all of our lives. It is even to come into our bedrooms. We are to be holy even there.

We are not to be like our surrounding culture. We are to be people of holiness and love even in the bedroom. Not seeking what works best for us but rather seeking what is best for the other.

Treating people not as our genitals dictate but as our God dictates. As the gospel dictates. As God's love for us in Christ dictates.

And it's the fact that we will have to give an account before God dictates. As those who wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 08] This is who we are in our sexual beings. We are people who have turned to the true and living God from idols. People who are waiting for the Lord Jesus to return.

People who want to stand before him in holiness and righteousness on that day. Come Lord Jesus. Let's pray together.

Father. Father so often we sequester the parts of our life that we find difficult to handle or we don't know how to handle.

Father please even in this area thank you for this part of your word that you speak even into this sexual part of our beings and that even there you require of us holy and godly living. Father we pray. That you might cause us to increase and abound in love for one another and for all. And as you might strengthen our hearts in holiness.

[31 : 14] That we might be blameless before you our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints. And Father we pray that even in this area of sexuality we might not be ashamed to face you on that day.

And we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.