

The Sex Problem

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[0 : 0 0] Well now, as I mentioned earlier, this is the final sermon in our series on problems that people have with Christianity. Just by way of review, the topics covered up to this point are Christianity's exclusivity, wrath, the suffering of innocence, integrity, lifestyle, last week was the Bible, and today's sermon, the one that you've all been waiting for, is sex.

I feel like we've been talking about this for a long time, and you probably do as well. When I was ordained back in 1997, it was the hot topic in the diocese that we were in at that time, and that wasn't the introduction of the conversation on this subject.

I also feel like I've been talking about this for a long time because I'm married to an obstetrician and gynecologist, and of course this subject comes up on a daily basis in one form or another as well.

Our kids probably feel like they heard about it too soon, but the good thing about that was it wasn't too late that they heard about this subject. I don't know what it was like for you growing up or you raising children, but anyway, Brenda's and my response to this was to share early, and they can just kind of cut you out because they don't really know what you're talking about, and when they are ready, they'll listen in.

I don't know if that's how you feel this morning. You've heard enough of this and you're just going to cut me out, but maybe you'll hang in there and listen in. So what's the problem with Christians and sex, says your neighbor, friend, family member, maybe your colleague?

[1 : 3 7] I faced this one recently in a dental hygienist chair. I admit I didn't handle it as well as I'd like to, but I think I'll have another chance in less than six months. There are some analogies between dental care, I'm sure, and sexual ethics.

The problem non-Christians have with Christian sexual ethics comes down to what seems to be restrictive or regressive. The problem is what Christians used to call chastity, though we don't call it that anymore.

In other words, it comes in the form of a question like this. Why is Christianity so restrictive with respect to marriage? That is, that it's not to be before, but only in marriage.

Why not before? Why not extramaritally, alongside of? That's one. The other question is around sexuality, and that is only male and female, or man and women, only heterosexuality.

Why not same-sex or bisexual, says the world in which we live. The guiding principle in both cases with sex and sexuality, says the non-Christian. What's with this no restrictions?

[2 : 4 6] Why not have no restrictions or no limits on this? Or this principle of more is better, a plurality of options or choices with respect to this.

In the end, the expectation of our culture is that individuals are left to themselves to decide and act as they seem fit. So long as one, there is mutual consent and no one gets hurt.

So Christianity should just stay out of the conversation because adults can decide for themselves without Christianity's opinion on this. And because, let's face it, no one is actually getting hurt by what's going on.

Therefore, figuratively speaking, the world in which we live in is saying, keep your hands off my body and stay out of my bedroom. So today, we're going to look at sex once again between a man and a woman that are married and sex for male and female.

C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity said that the Christian rule of marriage with complete faithfulness to your partner or else total abstinence is the most unpopular of Christian virtues.

[3 : 58] Lewis delivered that message no later than 1943. Friends, Lewis stated that before the sexual revolution. You may hear that the sexual ethics of this day came in the 60s or the 70s, but that's just not true.

And longing for a kind of pre-sexual revolution just doesn't wash. Our Christian sexual ethic has called forth differentiation from our culture for a very long time.

The first half of this message is going to address the question of who then? Who is sex for? Our culture objects to the Christian principle and practice of sex only for married couples.

Our world says, sorry, it's for any and all consenting adults. Whether it is not during dating or during dating or yet to be married or yes, married as well.

And the practice and rule of sex exclusively for marriage between male and female is in contrast to all who want to throw the door wide open for sex.

[5 : 01] That is sex that is besides, before, or outside of marriage. And Paul calls this sexual immorality in verse 13 when he uses that phrase, including other aspects and dimensions of sexual immorality as well.

Paul states this, The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord. And the Lord for the body. He is saying our bodies are for a number of things and always for the Lord.

There is a physicality to sex and the body is meant for the Lord. Our body is used by us in this respect to the Lord. And this is actually one point for Christians in this conversation about sex.

And we can certainly agree with people that sex is for consenting adults, for procreation, it's for pleasure, for comfort. But there is a bigger, I think, and greater purpose for sex.

Paul is saying sexual immorality, including premarital or extramarital or non-consensual or same-sex sex, isn't consistent or compatible with the Christian morality.

[6 : 14] It isn't Christian because our bodies aren't for us to do with whatever it is that we like. And Paul is saying there is a deep connection and duty to dedicate and devote our bodies to the Lord.

And the key principle Paul points to with reference to who sex is for here is this word union. Now look with me at today's reading in 1 Corinthians.

Further then, if you're not there, turn to that. Chapter 6, beginning at the 12th verse, I've already referred to verse 13. But after talking about what is lawful or permissible or not permitted, Paul's stating the body is for the Lord and sexual morality, not immorality.

Paul does something surprising and easily missed here. He says what we do with our bodies, including sex, says something about the Lord. Paul fixes our minds on this subject, I think, of the connection, the union between us and God.

And so verse 15, he uses this word about members of Christ. We are members of Christ with respect to this subject. Verse 16, he talks about the two becoming one flesh.

[7 : 32] This oneness means actually unity, union. And in verse 17, he talks about not being joined with a prostitute, but actually being joined and one spirit with God.

There in the subject of unity again. And finally, verse 18, sexual sin is committed with the body. All of this has to do with our union with Christ.

So you see, sex is an expression of a union between man and woman. And it unites a man and woman in marriage. And further, sex and marriage is ultimately, though, an expression of our union with Christ.

Sex and marriage is understood by what it points to, namely, our Savior. And there are God-given purposes of sex. And marriage, of course, already named.

But the great story of sex is union with God. And due to this union, a man then joins with his wife and a woman with her husband only.

[8 : 35] Hans Berzma of Regent College says this about the subject of union. He says, Our spiritual union with Christ is the great reality in the physical union between husband and wife. And when we ignore union with Christ as the final purpose of sex, sexual union loses its truth, its goodness, and its beauty.

And Paul is saying here that the body is a good thing. And when applied to sex between a married man and woman, it is for the Lord. And that makes sex a good gift from God.

When enjoyed between a married man and a woman, it preserves that unity with them and with God. And when practiced in any form or time, outside of that, it breaks that unity.

Now, at times, Christianity has delivered messages of this, that sex is bad. In contrast to a world who delivered messages and who is delivering messages, that sex is God.

And presently, we send a message that sex today is a corruption of purpose when it is outside of marriage, which may not be entirely helpful.

[9 : 45] C.S. Lewis, back to him, I think is helpful here again. In mere Christianity again, Lewis wondered if instead of corruption, sex today as we see it is a matter of starvation.

By way of analogy, he compared sex to eating or food. Paul was actually talking about that earlier here, drawing an analogy between food and sex. Lewis wrote this, that the biological purpose of sex is children.

There are other purposes for sex, but that's the biological one. And then he says, just as the biological purpose of eating is to repair the body. Stick with me here for a second.

He then went on to show that if there were a country where members would come out to a theater to view a meal previously uncovered and then revealed, like members of society who watch an act of sex performed on a cinema screen, would you say that the viewers were corrupt or starved?

Lewis says starved. I would actually say both. Both starved and corrupt. But imagine, actually, if a spread of food was put out just for someone to come and view.

[10 : 58] What would that actually say about people? And we're somewhat satisfied but long for more of that, only actually to view that. So much of that actually goes on in the world when we're saturated with images, sexual images.

Well, the point is that our culture's overexposure to sex isn't better or healthy. But it also actually, I think, in that points to a lower view of our world actually having sex, not understanding its ultimate purpose.

And so I think we need to have a spirituality of sex and marriage. And when we talk about sex and marriage, we need to speak of the who in positive terms. We need to show that what it says and how it connects us to the Lord.

Sexual morality is a beautiful, a good, a wonderful gift, when it's consensual, covenantal, when it's complementary, when it provides comfort and ultimately connects us to the Lord.

And we need to speak of it with reference to the story of God's redemption. Paul ends chapter 7 saying, our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, verse 19. He continues by implying what we do with our bodies makes a real difference.

[12 : 10] So big is the difference that we apply our bodies well to all manner of things, including sex, as it was designed. And then he says this, when we do that, it glorifies God.

That is a good and holy thing because it shows that we know the price of our life, which is connected with Jesus' death and offer all unto the Lord. So that's the who of sex.

Yes, it's a husband and wife married in a covenantal relationship, but it's connected deeply, devotedly to God. And it's ultimately for His glory.

The second problem the world has with Christianity is when we have sex. Again, Christianity looks restrictive and prohibitive today. We say sex is only for marriage and not until that covenant, those vows, are struck.

This period now is getting longer and longer. I don't know if you know that. But the average first marriage in Canada in 2011, for men was at the age of 30 and for women was the age of 28.

[13 : 19] That period of when one is actually able to have, you know, sex, moving through adolescent and becoming an adult, is getting longer and longer before one gets married.

And so the narrative is, oh, church, do you really expect adults to wait that long? And why on earth would you do that? Says the Western world.

Well, you'll notice in chapter 7, beginning at verse 1, that the leaders of the church of Corinth brought a specific problem to Paul about when. Our world and church isn't the only time that we've struggled with our sexual ethics and practice.

The church may find itself in the thick of applying Christian truth to a whole range of subjects on this. Sex, same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria, sexual abuse, divorce, other matters around this.

And while this may seem different and maybe we think we shouldn't have to be doing this, these matters are a doorway to declare and care in a distinctively Christian way.

[14 : 17] So notice the problem the Corinthian church faced here. Some think this, from that first verse, that it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

It's actually talking about a marriage relationship. The problem wasn't sex restricted before marriage here, but altogether. Some wanted to put sex just kind of out of the picture.

And you think Christians in the 21st century are restricted. This goes way beyond that. Historically, the church has slipped into this air though. Some thought sex bad and others only for procreation.

In this case, some thought it better not to have sex than actually to have sex because it led to sexual immorality. And Paul says in verse 2, actually, sexual immorality is more likely than when a man and woman are married and don't have sex.

So Paul says, get married, stay married, so that you're not tempted to sin sexually. And the apostle's saying the big temptation comes before marriage.

[15 : 25] And if you withhold sex while married, you're more likely to be tempted to sexual sin. Paul's saying then, because the question is, should we withhold sex, is, well, if you're going to do that while you're married, only do it for these reasons.

And he gives two. One has to do with authority that he points to, and I think the other one has to do with spirituality. So, the Bible doesn't prescribe when to have sex once you're married. Okay?

But it raises the subject, Paul raises the subject, of rights actually within marriage and authority. Now, you know as well as I do that rights are raised with respect to sexual ethics in our culture.

And it is anyone's right to have sex whenever an adult gives and receives consent to that and it doesn't hurt. That's our cultural value. Christianity is quite radical with respect to sexual rights and authority.

Husbands and wives have rights and they actually surrender their authority to one another. That's what Paul's saying. That's not suggesting one is forced to capitulate or coerce to share, but this gift from God is one to share with one another.

[16 : 36] We live in a world that equates love with sex and romance. I don't think the same, but I wonder if we were to read 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and I won't do it now, verses 4 to 7, inserting in place of love conjugal rights or sex.

Read that sometime actually. It would be interesting if we treated it in those terms that Paul suggests with respect to love. This will revolution our view of rights and authority in marital relationships.

It tenderizes the gift of God and gives us a picture of marriage and sex that's other oriented. Instead of self-oriented in the technique-driven culture that we live in with respect to sex.

It's about authority. Paul also raises the subject of spirituality. Paul proceeds or concedes there is a time of abstinence from sex in marriage, not just before.

And Paul isn't prescribing this, but he gives this purpose for it, which I think is really capturing. And this purpose, it points us to this bigger purpose of sex in marriage.

[17 : 42] If a man or woman were to abstain from sex, then they are to use this time wisely, he says. It is a time to do another kind of work of the Lord.

Marriage is for spiritual growth, I think he's saying, and sex strengthens us, but abstaining from sex can also enhance it for a short period. And Paul says that abstinence then is for prayer.

This is this growth component. And you can work this out practically to say that, oh yes, abstinence frees us up for time of prayer. And when you pray, then you grow in grace and faith. But prayer instead of sex isn't something pragmatic.

Both prayer-like sex is something God uses to give us something that we can't get on our own. And so yes, a purpose of sex is procreation and pleasure.

Just as prayer, prayer though, isn't something we use to get God to give us what we want. It is something God uses to make us more like him. And so God uses sex in a covenanted relationship to make us more like him.

[18 : 51] It gives us some insight into what God is like. How is this? Well, a man and a woman united in the covenant of marriage, including sex and sometimes abstinence, learn interdependence and responsiveness to one another.

This learned behavior can come through prayer or meditation as it does in sex. Prayer and meditation which include praise and thanksgiving and the wisdom of God.

And when a premarital or married couple abstain from sex, God makes himself known and present through prayer and meditation responsibly.

Now this is not because sex is bad or tempts one to sin. In fact, in verse 5, Paul encourages the married couple to come together again so that they are not tempted to sin for lack of self-control.

And the biblical view of God of sex here is that sex is good. It's beautiful. It's a satisfying gift of God to a couple. The Lord is the one who created it.

[19 : 59] He gave it. And back to verse 25, he uses it for his glory. So this is to address the two subjects that our culture struggles with or thinks it knows about and that is the Christian view of sex, who it's for, when it actually takes place.

But let me just say these few things in closing and that is with respect to this problem that people have with Christianity and this being one of them. We're fortunate that people take our truth claims seriously.

I think. And when they take actually our objections on this matter seriously as well. The problem with sex is probably the most personal and intimate due to its nature.

When it is done in private, I think it actually has implications for our public life. I'm particularly sensitive to this for two reasons.

I'll just share this kind of personal in reflection. The first one is this. As I said, my wife is an obstetrician and gynecologist and she teaches sexual medicine with the UBC hospitals.

[21 : 06] She's in a really influential position for sexual health in this promise and sees the impact of an increase of partners on women's life and intimacy.

Brenna uses this analogy for people who have multiple partners. partners. She says the more partners that you have, the more it's like actually putting tape on your arm and tearing it away. You'll tear away the hair and before long the skin and then it becomes increasingly difficult to be intimate and close and connected with people.

That's kind of a big impact when we think about our sexual ethics. It should be shaped by what the scriptures say but also here's a kind of a reality of the outcome and the impact and even the trauma that it has when one actually pulls away all of the parameters and boundaries and paradigms that we have in Christian scriptures.

That's just the first thing. The second thing is this. I had some work recently with a ministry called Rachel's Vineyard which actually is a Catholic Protestant ministry that cares for women who are post-abortive.

Men as well if they wanted to come along. And one of the things that I noticed was that these women while being cared for the church really well sometimes have actually had their struggles with their abortions compounded by how the churches actually spoke about it.

[22 : 35] This ministry also actually has another ministry for women who have been sexually abused. And sometimes I think that our sexual abuse will give rise to what is called sexual immorality too and it is but I just think we need to be really careful how we speak about these things publicly and personally with other people.

We need to bring truth to bear with much much grace as we care for people and this subject that is quite intimate and we can talk about it in theoretical terms but it actually affects all of us.

Especially given that one in four women have an abortion and one in six women have been sexually abused. I think we need to be tender. We need to speak truth and we need to care for people in the way that we know that Christ shows his grace and fills people with his spirit to convince us of sin, to convert our whole lives to him and to realize that he is this Lord of glory that Paul speaks about and our savior.

And this I share with you today in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.