

The Act of Marriage

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 June 2026

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. We're up to marriage number seven, marriage week number seven, that is! We've been spending several weeks unpacking these passages, these verses in Ephesians 5, and particularly unravelling the profound mystery of marriage, the mystery that is the gospel of Jesus Christ and marriage between a man and a woman explain each other. As I've said a number of times, marriage is the ultimate human relationship, but it is the penultimate relationship. It points to the eternal marriage of Christ and his church.

And we've seen that marriage is a public, legal, binding covenant between a man and a woman to share all of their life together, in which their union, the differences in their union, in them as individuals made in the image of God, they are equal and they complement one another, shaping each other, preparing each other for the ultimate and eternal marriage with Christ.

And so therefore, the practice of truth and love and grace are essential in terms of shaping that. And so we're up to number seven of unpacking these verses, and you really can't have a series about marriage without at least one message on sex, especially so because in the Bible, in the biblical ethic, the marriage between a man and a woman is the only place which sex is to be practised.

And so that's what we're looking at today. And if you've got the St. Paul's app, there's four points today. Sex in the city, sex in the Bible, sex in marriage, and I was going to say sex in the future, but let's just call it the glorious sex instead.

Okay, so let's jump into that. We'll begin. I want to look just very briefly at three broad attitudes to sex throughout history, and they are very broad throughout culture and history.

[2:19] The first one says that sex is really a natural appetite. It's just a bodily function. And this view suggests that sex, like eating, is a good and natural appetite that ought to be pursued.

And so you even see glimpses of this in 1 Corinthians, where Paul pushes back against that view. The implication is that a person should always, therefore, be free to fulfil that appetite.

Whenever they get the appetite, they should fulfil it. In fact, forbidding that natural appetite, the satisfaction of it, or even limiting it in any kind of way, is as unhealthy as trying to stop eating for years.

And so in a culture that says, which we exist in our modern culture, that the pursuit of pleasure is the greatest good, that is, it's the philosophy of hedonism.

You pursue pleasure in life. That's why we exist. My personal happiness and satisfaction is why I exist. And sex being the ultimate sense of personal satisfaction and pleasure, then therefore it should be pursued without any form of hindrance at all.

[3:45] Now, we often identify this with the modern time, but it's actually something that has deep historical roots way back in history. Even into Greek philosophy.

The second view is one that's a bit more negative. Sex is seen as a lower physical nature, and it's distinct from a higher rational, more spiritual nature.

This too goes all the way back into Greek philosophy, and you'll see this in 1 Corinthians as well. And so therefore, this view generally sees sex as degrading.

It's a necessary evil to keep the human race going on, but that's really it. And in our modern day, this is viewed broadly as the Christian view of sex, that it's a necessary evil.

That's it. And it would see that this is the Bible's view of sex as well. Now, the third view, which is quite prominent in our society, increasingly so since the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the first view sees sex as an unavoidable drive.

[5:08] The second sees it as a necessary evil, and the third sees it as a critical form of personal identity and of self-expression.

Historically, in the various views of sex, this one is a very, very modern concept. It doesn't have historical roots.

It's very much a modern concept. And that is, sex, sexual expression, is a way that you are to be yourself and to find yourself.

And therefore, sex in a physical sense is primarily for my individual, physical fulfillment and my self-discovery.

It's a core of who I am and my self-expression. Now, the modern sexual revolution finds the idea of abstinence from sex in any form until marriage to not just to be unrealistic, but in fact to be ludicrous.

[6:20] It is absolute insanity. In fact, for many people, it does psychological harm. It's viewed as psychologically unhelpful and unhealthy to restrict yourself sexually, expressing yourself sexually.

So that's, you know, sex in the city and the third view is very, very prominent in our day and age. So what is the Bible's view of sex then?

It is, in fact, radically different. The Bible, in fact, does see, radically different and yet not entirely different. The Bible actually does see that sex is an appetite, but not in the same category that we might need food or sleep.

Nor does the Bible view any appetite as something that should be gratified whenever we feel like it as much as we like. And that is pretty common wisdom in our society.

Too many struggle to discipline their eating or their sleeping because our appetites for food and for sleep is seriously out of line with what our bodies really need.

[7:36] Most of us would rather be in bed right now. That's the reality. And when you have a buffet breakfast put in front of you at a hotel, you want everything.

It's not just about getting your money's worth. You just want everything. You want to have a crack at it all. And so, therefore, it needs to be restricted. And our sex drive needs more boundaries and discipline because sex does not just shape my physical being, it shapes our inner being as well. It shapes our heart. Sex, I'm sorry, sin in our hearts distorts our passions, all of our passions, our desires, and especially so for sex.

Because sex is for whole life self-giving. That's its design by God.

That's its purpose. It's designed for whole life self-giving. But the sin in the heart says, I want it for selfish reasons.

[8:50] And so, the Bible puts many rules around sex to direct its use in the right way not to diminish pleasures in life, but in order to protect us, to shape our hearts.

And so, the Bible does see it as an appetite, but with boundaries. Neither does the Bible see sex, it certainly doesn't see sex as dirty or demeaning or degrading. In fact, the entire Bible contradicts this view.

Biblical Christianity is, I would suggest, the most bodily positive religion in the entire world. It teaches that God made matter.

He made our physical bodies good. And the greatest evidence that it is so body positive is that God himself, God the Son, took on human form.

And the promise for those who trust in Jesus is a future in his presence with perfect, resurrected bodies in a physical world.

[10:13] The Christian hope is physical. The thing that we love in this world perfected and restored.

God the Lord. And as we've seen throughout this series, God created sexuality and gave a woman and a man to each other in the very beginning. The Bible is not prudish in any way.

It is pro-sex in every way. It contains great love poetry that celebrates sexual passion and pleasure. love poetry and love Proverbs 5, 19.

Husbands are encouraged to let their wives breastfeed them with delight and be intoxicated by their sexual love. Song of Songs is another Old Testament book that rejoices in the delights of sexual love in marriage.

In Song 5, verses 10 to 16, it is the wife who candidly expresses her physical attraction towards her husband.

[11:23] Now, when you go there and you read that, I think virtually every English translation hesitates in its translation of the Hebrew.

Every one of them does. The Hebrew in there is what you would describe as scholars as being embarrassingly erotic.

And most translators, frankly, cannot bring themselves to bring out the obvious meaning of those verses which is very clearly of her arousal and her preparation for sex.

That's what's happening in these verses. There's no shame here. I mean, the translators do it. The translators turn the lights off and dim the lights a little bit. But there's no shy, shame, turn the lights down, mechanical movement under the sheets.

It is very clear in the Hebrew what's happening. The two are standing before each other. They are round and feeling no shame but only joy in each other's sexuality.

[12 : 39] In other words, if you haven't got it, Song of Songs 5, 10 to 16 is foreplay if you haven't got that worked out yet. The Bible is very uncomfortable for the prudish.

The Bible also doesn't see sex as being primarily about individual happiness and fulfillment but that does not mean that sex is not about joy and pleasure and fulfillment.

What the Bible teaches us is that sex is primarily a way of knowing God and building community and if you use it for those things rather than for your own personal satisfaction, it will lead ultimately to greater fulfillment than you could ever imagine.

The first explicit mention of sex in the Bible is within the first two chapters, Genesis 2.24 which Paul quotes in Ephesians 5 that Mark just read out for us where it says the male and the female are united to become one flesh.

Now this is referring to physical and primarily a sexual union but it's referring to something much greater as well.

[14 : 11] The word flesh there is a figure of speech where it says God they become one flesh. It's a figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole.

In other words it doesn't mean just the meat and the skin and the tendons and stuff. It's not referring to that in terms of flesh.

It's referring to a part that represents the whole. In the same way if I said to you hey would someone just duck out and count heads for me out in kids church? Literally what I mean by that is I want you to get how many people are out there.

Not how many heads are out there. Joel chapter 2 verse 28 helps us understand what it means when it says here one flesh.

God promises to pour out his spirit on all flesh. Now that doesn't mean that when God pours out his spirit it's just for our bodies that's it.

[15 : 18] Just giving it to the meat and the tendons. Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5 is saying that marriage is a union between two people so profound that they virtually become a new single person.

The two become one. The marriage covenant and we've unpacked this already. the marriage covenant brings every aspect of two persons' lives together where they essentially merge into a single legal social economic union where they lose much of their independence.

In love they donate themselves wholly to the other. To call the marriage one flesh then means that sex is understood as both a sign of the covenant commitment of the personal commitment of the legal union and it's also a means to accomplish it.

It's also a means to accomplish the oneness. And that's why with the biblical ethic of sex it's very clear the Bible says do not unite with someone physically unless you are also willing to unite with the person emotionally personally socially economically and legally legally don't become physically naked and vulnerable to the other person without becoming vulnerable in every way because you have given up your freedom and bound yourself to them legally personally vulnerably in marriage and the Bible says that to protect us to protect us see once you have given yourself in marriage sex is a way of maintaining and deepening that union as the years go by in the

Old Testament when God formed covenant relationship with people he directed them to periodically for them to remember the covenant relationship and all of its terms of the covenant relationship by reading the covenant together and then recommitting themselves to the covenant relationship and what God says is you don't just need the covenant you need covenant ceremonies to remind yourself and to recommit yourself to that covenant and it was crucial the recommitment ceremonies were crucial if they were to sustain a life of faithfulness to the covenant and the same is with the marriage covenant when you get married you make a solemn covenant with your spouse and as time goes by with all the ups and downs and the complexities of life there is a need to rekindle the

heart and to renew the covenant and sex between a husband and a wife is [19 : 20] God's unique way to do that sex is God's appointed way for two people to reciprocally if you like say to each other I belong completely permanently exclusively to you and that's why the Bible says you must not use sex to say anything less than that because it's not designed to say anything less than that sex and that's why the Bible says that a covenant is necessary for sex it creates a place of security for the vulnerability and for the intimacy a marriage covenant is necessary for sex and sex is necessary for the maintenance of the covenant I'm not sure you've ever thought about sex before as being a covenant renewal service the

Bible does not teach sex sexual abstinence before marriage because it has a low view or a degraded view of sex it teaches it because it has the highest view of sex imaginable it's because of God's design and purpose for sex that it teaches us that sex outside of marriage is not just morally wrong but it's actually personally harmful if sex is designed to be part of making a covenant and experiencing that covenant renewal connected to to another person even when it's used wrongly and so the damage begins as we give ourselves away even if that's not we think that's what we're doing even if you are not married you may find yourself very quickly feeling marriage like ties to the person that you have just had physical union with feeling that the other person has obligations to you in some way because you've had sex but they have no legal social or moral responsibility even to call you back the next morning or even to be there for breakfast and this leads to jealousy and hurt feelings and obsessiveness if two people are having sex but they're not married it makes breaking up vastly harder!

than it should be and it leads many people to stay trapped in relationships that are not good because of feelings that they have connected themselves to this person sex outside of marriage eventually works backwards to the point where it makes you less able to commit and trust another human being so that's the biblical sex ethic and the high view so what does that mean for sex in marriage we should not be surprised that given that view that various passages instruct marriage couples to enjoy sex and to do so frequently 1 Corinthians 7 is one of those classic passages Paul speaks with real clarity about sex in marriage the husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband the wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband in the same way the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife do not deprive each other except for mutual consent and for a time now bear in mind that when those words were written by

Paul this is a time when women were considered culturally the possessions of their husbands and it was the woman who was bound exclusively to a husband but the husbands were encouraged to express themselves sexually culturally with whoever and in fact you often did not have sexual relations with your wife except for procreation and it was the servants the mistresses that the man of the house would more frequently have sexual relationship with and so it's profound what Paul says here profound don't miss it the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to the wife that's the sexual biblical ethic each partner is to be primarily concerned with giving sexual pleasure not receiving it and in fact the greatest sexual pleasure should be the pleasure of seeing your spouse getting pleasure and when you get to the place in your marriage marriage where giving arousal is the most arousing thing you're actually practicing the principle of 1

Corinthians 7 now just to clarify and get a little bit more details here, I'm not talking about performance.

[25 : 49] That primarily, if you were here earlier on the series, I talked about the world's view of marriage and being primarily about attraction, physical attraction. What drives in that moment is that sexual relationships ultimately come about performance. You know, have the sex act and you're thinking, did I do okay? Do you feel great? And if you go, oh no, actually, the previous guy was better, you feel deflated and your identity's wrapped up in it.

It's all about performance. And so when I'm talking about arousal here and giving of self and pleasure, I'm not talking, you know, is every time an orgasm. I'm not talking about that at all. I mean, for you and married, for those who are married, just start trying to simply love the other insects. Just love each other. That's it. Stop worrying about what you are getting and start working on what you can do to just give. Give.

Now, this also, I think, 1 Corinthians addresses the typical problem that many couples experience in marriage at various points in relationship where one person wants more sex than the other one does. And if your main purpose in sex is giving pleasure, not getting pleasure, then a person who

doesn't have as much of a sex drive physically can, in fact, give the other person pleasure as a gift. It's a gift. That's what Paul's instructing here in 1 Corinthians 7.

And according to this, in 1 Corinthians 7, it is a legitimate act of love, according to Paul. It's a gift to give. It's a gift to give. It's not a requirement you can demand. It's a gift to give.

Don't buy into the lie that says unless you're going to be all passionate, then you can't do it. Do it as a gift to each other.

[28:27] Now, related to this are the differences that many spouses experience over what is the most satisfying context for sex. Now, of course, this is not universal, but it might be.

But for males, context means very little. Really, all you really need is pretty much time, any time, any place, anywhere, you know, like, to just, that's the male context for sex.

The blind side to this means that us blokes can be oblivious to something that is more important to our wives. And that means the need for preparing for sex emotionally.

I don't mean by that flowers and candles, although it might mean that. But preparing for sex emotionally, conversation, connection.

We must, either way, what we need to understand with our differences, we need to be very patient with each other. However, the Bible gives such a very high view of sex.

[29:51] It is a sign and a seal of our oneness with each other and with God. And that is why sexual intimacy will often be the very first sign of problems in a marriage relationship.

Sex is such a great and a sensitive thing that you're not able to just sweep your problems, under the bedsheets.

It will be there. Unless your marriage relationship is in good condition, sex doesn't work.

A lack of sexual intimacy may be a sign of a deeper problem in the relationship. It is often the case that if those problems are addressed, then what happens is that sexual intimacy starts to improve.

That is, if you go to a counsellor wanting help with your sexual relationship, they don't draw pictures, they don't help you with techniques, they help you connect and understand.

[31:33] A fundamental rule of marriage is that over time you'll be married to many spouses, even if it's the same person you're being married to the whole time, because of the change and the shift.

There's time, children, illness, age. It brings its changes and its challenges. And if we don't confront and adapt to those changes and those challenges, they will ultimately erode our sex life.

Without joyful, loving sex, the friction in a relationship, a marriage relationship, will often bring anger, resent, hardness and disappointment, rather than sex being a commitment glue that holds you together, it can become actually a force to divide you.

And so my encouragement for you is to never give up on your sex life. If you're married, that is. Caveat there in case I haven't been clear previously.

Which brings me to the final point. And the purpose of it and the glory of it. Sex make wonderful bedfellows, but they make terrible gods. Sex is not God.

[33:00] Marriage is not God. God is God. And sex in the covenant of marriage is part of God's great plan. It is a plan, part of his plan to sanctify us and to point us to the rapturous delight of the ultimate marriage in the future.

Of the ultimate union between Christ and his church. A moment ago, I mentioned Song of Songs 5. It's candid description of the erotic love in marriage and particularly the description of the woman and her arousal at the man.

And what is remarkable about that, scholars will tell you that it is, that those words in Song of Songs 5 are highly unusual.

Highly unusual. In ancient texts. Because Song of Songs is primarily the woman speaking to the man.

[34:22] That's highly unusual in ancient texts. It's usually the man speaking about the woman's features. And in Song of Songs, it's her voice which is dominant.

She's the one who seeks. She's the one who pursues. She's the one who initiates. Highly unusual. And there are only a couple of ancient texts still in existence today.

Only a couple. Out of all that would be expressing the physical features of another human being, there's only a couple in the world in existence in all ancient texts where it's the woman describing the man's body.

And Song of Songs 5, 10 to 16 is the clearest of them. And this is therefore the only description in the Bible where a woman describes the man's body in detail.

The physical features of the man. Only other one. Except for one. In the book of Revelation. [35:55] Revelation 1, Revelation 19 where we read the symbolic bodily descriptions of the resurrected, ascended, glorified and reigning Jesus.

That is the woman's erotic, candid, joyful, rapturous description of her lover in Song of Songs 5. Her arousal. Her passion to be united with him. Is meant to point us to Jesus. It's meant to point us to the gospel.

It's meant to point us to the cross. And that's why for centuries biblical scholars have said that Song of Songs is ultimately about the love and the union between Jesus Christ and his church.

And so as we read Song of Songs 5, I mean, there might be some wives here who, well, that's my husband.

[37:04] Not when I look around the room necessarily or myself in the mirror. But we're meant to see Jesus as the one who is altogether lovely, our beloved, our friend.

Song of Songs 5.16. Jesus is lovely in his person, in his glory, in his majesty, in his resurrection, in his ascension, in his grace, in his power, in his wisdom, in his pardon, and in his selfless incarnation and death.

Jesus is the epitome of self-denial and self-giving. And John 17 tells us that from all of eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have been adoring and glorifying each other, living in high devotion to each other, pouring love and joy and pleasure into each other's hearts continually.

And God made man and woman and brought them together to be one flesh, to represent that, to reflect, and in sex, to reflect the joyous, the self-giving, and the pleasure and the love of God that exists in the very life of the Trinity for all of eternity.

Sex is glorious, not only because it reflects the joy and pleasure in the Trinity, but also because it points us to eternal delight, joy, pleasure of love that we will have in heaven in all our relationships with God and each other.

[38:52] This is not in your notes. This is not in your notes. But husband and wife, next time you have sex and you go, well, that was good, you say, my union with Christ is going to be even more spectacular.

More pleasurable, more fulfilling, more joyous. And unlike this moment, which I will forget in a couple of minutes, let's say half an hour, the presence of Christ will be eternal.

It will never end. Every physical orgasm points to the ultimate spiritual orgasm that will never end. According to Ephesians 5, Christian marriage should look like crucifixion, where selfless love and selfless submission collide.

It's where both husband and wife can say, God has given me a lover who preaches to me every day the gospel, a spouse who sings to me the story of our salvation, of God having reconciled selflessness through his selfless son for my pleasure and joy.

And the best Christian marriages are pointers to that deep, infinite, fulfilling and final union we will have with Christ in love.

[40:33] Let's pray.

We praise you, God of love, creator of the universe. We praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one person, one God in three persons, for making us to reflect you as male and female.

We thank you for giving us the gift of marriage to display the union we have with you through the saving work of Jesus. We pray for those whom you have joined in marriage.

That they may know your presence in all the joys and the sorrows. Amen. Deepen their love for each other and sustain them in their covenant commitment until they are parted by death and come into all the rapturous joys and pleasures of your eternal embrace at the great feast of the Lamb.

Speed the day, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen..