

SEX: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CHASTITY?

1 Corinthians 6:9–20

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Imagine yourself in a foreign culture. You enter a crowded theater, the lights go out, and all attention is riveted on the stage. Some music starts, the curtains go up, and there, in a ravishing purple spotlight, is a covered tray. As the music plays and the crowd roars with anticipation, someone lifts the cover little by little. Finally, just before the lights go out, the cover is lifted completely away, exposing a superb cut of prime rib. The crowd goes wild.

Wouldn't you think something had gone a little wrong with that culture's appetite for food? What if in the same country, everything from cars to house paint was advertised as *tasty*? Wouldn't you think they had lost contact with what taste really was?

"Ridiculous!" you say, but how different is this from a strip tease or "sexy" advertising? Isn't there something equally strange about the state of sexuality in our culture? We wallow in a great sexual bog of excesses these days. Not much seems shocking; we've heard it all. Free love, open marriage, child porn, and the new morality are all *passé*.

The great tragedy, however, is that we Christians can get hooked by our culture and dragged into actually believing the libertine voices around us. We get snared into beliefs and actions that damage something really special from God.

After all, where has the sexual revolution taken us? With the incidence of sexually transmitted disease--some fatal!--the breakup of the home and marriage, and the consequent suffering that brings for children; the high rate of teen pregnancies; the traffic in porn and degradation; the emptiness and heartbreak of uncommitted sexual encounter--have we gained anything except for the hollow, "terrible two's" satisfaction of rebelling?

A tragic song from "Les Miserables" never ceases to remind me of the hurt of sexual dalliance and misdirected passion. In the hit musical, "I Dreamed a Dream" is sung by Fantine, a young woman who loved and gave herself to a callous student who regarded her only as a summer diversion. The song makes us *feel* the heartbreak of sex misused. "Life has killed the dream I dreamed," sings Fantine. No, not life. Not a seemingly unforgiving God. What killed the romantic dream were poor decisions about something so very close to our beings: poor decisions about sex. Whatever happened to chastity?

A few voices remain to call us back to historic Christian standards, but are these the outdated voices of ethical Neanderthals, while the really savvy people follow the brave new world of the sexual revolution? After all, doesn't "Just say no!" go against our instincts? How unpopular!

C. S. Lewis writes:

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.' Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone

wrong.

As usual, Lewis has hit the nail on the head. So what *has* happened to chastity? Is there a positive, Christian way of looking at sex, a compelling, winsome way to encourage chastity? A Christian response to sexuality is one that makes God's sexual perspective our own. So let's examine how God handles sexuality in the Bible. What can we say about God and sexuality?

First, we can be assured that **God is not a prude**, wanting the Fantines of the world never to know love. Remember the Victorians? Trying to hide any trace of sexuality, they placed skirts around tables to cover the table legs. The body was an embarrassment to these prudes--to be kept as hidden as possible.

But God is not a prude, nor is he surprised by sex. Our sexuality isn't something we naughty people cooked up while God wasn't looking. God created it--on purpose! In the Genesis account of Creation, God made a companion fit for a lonely Adam. Built into that companion and Adam was all the apparatus needed for mating--part of God's beautiful and perfect creation.

Neither is God embarrassed by sex. He doesn't draw a discreet curtain on the marriage bed, acting as if sex doesn't exist. When God created male and female, he said, "It is very good." He also told us to fill the earth--and gave us the itch to insure that it would happen. Hardly embarrassed, God celebrates our sexuality.

But God is not obsessed with sex, either. It is just one of the many good things that went into our creation. Prudes are negatively obsessed with sex; people today are so consumed with sex that we practically drown in its overindulgence. Paul tells us that to the pure, all things are pure. Nakedness, the body, sexuality by themselves are not necessarily impure. It is an obsession with them that make them so. Paul also says in our text that all things are permitted, but not all things are helpful. By this he means that in its proper place, sex is marvelous, but it isn't intended for uninterrupted broadcast!

Simply speaking, God is at ease about sex. Sex is good, in the right place when it is not abused. It is our human obsession with sex that has tended to make God appear opposed to sexuality. God is all for it--kept in perspective.

No, God is not a prude, but **God could never be characterized as a playboy**, like Fantine's lover. God is not an "anything goes" kind of guy. Because God has such a high estimation of sexuality, God has enclosed it within optimal limitations. God created sexuality to be an integrated part of a total relationship between husband and wife. Anything less is a perversion of the intended use--and *wrong*. C. S. Lewis writes,

The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasure of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.

God has always regulated sexuality, not to spoil fun but to ensure that sexuality is placed in the best context for fulfillment. In Leviticus 20:10 we are told, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." God didn't mess around in the Old Testament times! The Bible in numerous other places very plainly categorizes both adultery and fornication as damnable sin. In Matthew 15, Jesus says that adultery and fornication defile a man. In our text for today, Paul says that adulterers and fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Adultery and *fornication* are such stark words. We much prefer to use "have an affair" or "make love," but even with pretty-sounding words, the actions are the same. Sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to one another is wrong in God's book. Period. We can't get around it.

But we sure do try. Lewis writes:

Our warped nature, the devils who tempt us and all the contemporary propaganda for lust, combine to make us feel that the desires we are resisting are so natural, so healthy, and so reasonable, that it is almost perverse and abnormal to resist them. Poster after poster, film after film, novel after novel, associate the idea of sexual indulgence with the ideas of health, normality, youth, frankness, and good humor. Now this association is a lie. Like all powerful lies, it is based on a truth--the truth ... that sex in itself (apart from the excess and obsessions that have grown around it) is normal and healthy, and all the rest of it. The lie consists in the suggestion that any sexual act to which you are tempted at the moment is also healthy and normal.

Lust--our desire to do things *our* way--is at the heart of sexual sin. First John 2:16 tells us: "All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." God doesn't give us lust. Jesus tells us that if we lust, we commit adultery; mental imagery is every bit as potent as the physical act. That indictment spares none of us. James says "each is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin: and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death." Lust leads to sin, which leads to death.

God, never the playboy, is opposed to lust. God wants us to live for his *will*, not *our* lusts, according to 1 Peter 4:2. What a world of difference in living for the dictates of our lusts or surrendering ourselves to God's will, in demanding our "entitlement" to express our sexuality versus struggling, with God's power, to remain chaste!

How we in an open society push to devise our own set of rules! We don't want anybody--especially not religious moralists--telling us what we can do with our own bodies: "Don't preach chastity to me!" If it were the case that I were just giving you my own prudish biases, I would be at fault. However, that's not the case. I am simply relaying what the Bible says. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, we find what the will of God is. Listen: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication." It is *God's will*, not some outdated custom. God does give us rules to govern our sexual practice. No, God is hardly a playboy.

Instead, **God is like a philanthropist**, giving us sexuality to complete our need for companionship and to encourage nurturing families. God is lovingly interested in relationships, in fulfillment. For most persons, this means a marriage partner. To make marriage even more fulfilling, God devised sexuality as a special gift of love. In Genesis, we see that Eve was finally right for Adam as a partner in every way. We are also given marital sexual expression as our way to complete in an orderly and loving way God's command to fill the earth.

The quality of committed relationship between a man and a woman cannot be divorced from our sexual acts without great loss. In our text, Paul says to join ourselves to God, not to a prostitute. Even so-called *casual sex* with another consenting party creates a kind of bogus relationship that obscures true relationship with God. God wants a good match, not a casual encounter. Within a marriage, the bond that sexual expression can bring is one more special way for a couple to be united. Anything less than this ideal drags our bodies, God's temple, through the dirt. God has a better purpose for the bodies he bought with his life than for them to be defiled, wasted. God wants our whole selves--bodies and all--to be in relationship with our spouses and with him.

Therefore, God the philanthropist warns us to flee fornication. Flee any unlawful use of our sexuality. And we can do it. We will not be tempted beyond what we can endure. In 2 Peter 2, Paul tells how God spared Abraham and Lot when they were righteous in the midst of astounding sinfulness, and he says to the readers, "Then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority." God is able to keep those who depend on him, just as he condemns those who war against him in any way, even sexual warfare. And God the philanthropist has a reward for the chaste: an undefiled relationship with himself, and, for the married, sexuality in its fullest, richest manifestation in the context of a lasting relationship.

We people sin sexually--through lust, through lasciviousness, through adultery or fornication--and we at times tend to regard these as the super-sins. We have to remember that not only can God forgive these sins, but God can also heal their scar. Sexual sins need not hound us all our lives, robbing us of the fullness of our sexuality that God wants us to have. Unconfessed adulterers will not inherit the kingdom, but neither will unconfessed thieves. Sexual sin, like any other sin, can be left at Christ's feet and forgotten. Let us not go overboard and paint sexual sin as something any more damnable than gossiping, hating, stealing, or coveting.

A skilled watchmaker took extreme care to turn out a fine watch. When he sold that watch, he told the owner how to care for it: keep it away from magnets, keep it out of water, and don't drop it. If these instructions are followed, the watchmaker assured the owner, she could expect years of satisfactory use. If however, the owner decides she knows better how to enjoy her watch and takes it swimming with her, would it be odd if the watch malfunctions? Thinking she can enjoy her watch more, she actually deprives herself of real, lasting satisfaction from it. How like Fantine this watch owner is!

Is it not true that God know us, since he made us? He sends with us a set of instructions

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for the most satisfactory use of our sexuality. Adultery, lust, fornication, and same-sex pairings go against those instructions and actually rob us of what we seek. Are we not wise to follow the instructions carefully?