

Whitton Avenue Distinctives

Week 4: Marriage and Sexuality

Introduction

Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman and sexual relations are to be enjoyed only within that marriage relationship.

A generation ago, this traditional, historic understanding of marriage and sexuality would not be included in a “Distinctives” class because it could be assumed that all evangelical churches hold to it. However, in the last 15 years attitudes toward homosexuality in general and gay marriage in particular have shifted at a dizzying pace, shocking fundamentalists and gay rights activists alike. While most conservative evangelical churches continue to hold to the traditional, historic view of marriage and sexuality, a host of moral questions that formerly could be ignored are now unavoidable. How should the church engage a culture where the sexual morality is drifting further and further away from Judeo-Christian ethics? How should our congregation treat those who profess faith in Christ and feel attracted to members of the same gender? How do we talk to our children about marriage and sexuality?

My aim with this topic will be to give a brief Biblical theology of marriage and sexuality. Then we will address some of the questions of how we address the realities of sexual brokenness that everyone faces, whether married or unmarried, gay or straight. In all of this, the desire is for the church to reflect the glory of God in all our relationships.

A Biblical Theology of Marriage and Sexuality

God: A Being in Intimate Relationship

Few Biblical passages address what was happening before “In the beginning” of Genesis 1:1. Most of those that do appear in John’s gospel and tell of a God who was a being in intimate relationship.

The apostle of love begins his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1–2). This description of the eternal Son and the eternal Father is a description of relationship. The word translated “with” (“the Word was with God”) could also be translated “toward.” It suggests an active, face-to-face engagement. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus, the Word made flesh, describes this relationship with his Father using the language of glory and love:

“And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5).

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

This nearly exhausts the Biblical data concerning what took place before “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), yet this slight glimpse is nothing short of profound. Before time or matter were created, God existed in relationship: Father and Son dwelling in a blessed, intimate communion of glory and love.

Humans: Image-Bearers Created for Intimate Relationship

This gives substance to what it means when God said, on day 6 of creation, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). To adequately represent what God is like, humans were created “male and female,” enabling them to be in a holistically intimate relationship with one another. In the Genesis 2 account, God’s creation of the woman causes the man to cry out “At last!” when he realizes that the woman has been custom made for him. The author adds this note about marriage, sexuality, and intimacy to their relationship: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:24–25).

This is God’s created design for marriage: a man and a woman in a relationship of oneness sexually, relationally, emotionally, and physically. There are no secrets and no shame in this relationship, only beautiful intimacy.

While this intimacy was fractured with the fall (which we will cover in the second section), the Biblical account continues to affirm the goodness of sexual enjoyment within the marriage relationship. The Song of Solomon is an entire book celebrating the beauty of sexual intimacy between a husband and wife. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul commands husbands and wives not to abstain from sexual relations except for specific, brief periods. Proverbs 5:18–19 tells a young man, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”

The Bible warns against sexual expression outside marriage as strongly as it blesses sexual expression within marriage. The Proverbs 5 text continues, “Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?” (Proverbs 5:20) Ezekiel 23 employs the language of intimate sexual contact between unmarried adults, yet it is a shameful depiction of Israel’s spiritual idolatry. Both Old and New Testaments unambiguously define sexual relations outside marriage as sin.

This stands in stark contrast with our culture’s categories of sexual morality. In America, sex in general is treated as an individual’s inalienable right. The question is simply of being pro-sex or anti-sex. The Bible rejects these categories. It is very pro-sex within marriage and anti-sex outside of marriage, because the covenant relationship takes precedent over the sexual experience.

Ben Patterson captures this dynamic with a natural illustration: “The pleasures and goodness of sex are heightened, not lessened by proper restraint, in the same way the Colorado River is made more powerful by the walls of the Grand Canyon. The very narrowness of the river’s channel there makes for a greater river. Farther south, as the river flows through the deserts of California and Arizona, it is shallow, wide, and muddy, even stinky in spots. Wider boundaries diminish the river; sharper, stronger, and narrower boundaries strengthen it. Less is more. The boundaries and proscriptions of sex in the Bible are for the sake of sex. Again, less is more — at least less as understood by one man and one woman together exclusively till death parts them.”¹

It is important at this point to clarify the distinction between sexual relations and intimacy. Marriage and sexuality are not prerequisites for enjoying healthy, intimate relationships. The Bible celebrates intimate relationships that are not sexual, such as David and Jonathan’s deep friendship (1 Samuel 18:1-4).² Likewise, the Bible records sexual acts that are completely devoid of intimacy, such as Amnon’s violation of Tamar (2 Samuel 13).³ This separation of sexual relations and intimacy will have great bearing in the next section on how we think about the sexual lives of those who are unmarried.

Addressing Sexual Brokenness Within and Outside the Church

Addressing sexual brokenness within the church

Sexual brokenness has been an issue from the first days of the church. The church in Corinth was permitting sexual behavior “of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans” (1 Corinthians 5:1). Ever since the days of Corinth, sexual sins of every kind have been secretly or openly carried out in Christ’s church, desecrating marriages and victimizing the vulnerable.

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-goodness-of-sex-and-the-glory-of-god>

² In 1 Samuel 18 we are told that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:1), and that “Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:3), giving him his robe, his armor, his bow, and his belt. In the next chapter it says that Jonathan’s soul delighted much in David. And the sentiment was mutual. When Jonathan was killed in battle, these are the lines David penned to mourn his death, “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26).

These verses describe a deep friendship between two men in which they tasted the intimacy of shared life and mutual support. Jonathan essentially gave up his claim to the throne and even risked his life for David. They promised one another to protect each other’s families for generations. There was nothing sexual about their relationship, yet they experienced the type of intimacy for which God made us.

³ “...being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Get up! Go!” But she said to him, “No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.” But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, “Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her.”” (2 Samuel 13:14–17)

Thus before we wring our hands about the sexual anarchy in the world around us, we must take stock about our own sexual health and purity within the church. As Peter declared, “it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Let me suggest these steps:

1. Let us be honest about the church’s historic role in permitting and even perpetuating sexual sin.
2. Let us repent of personal sexual sin, both inward and individual (lustful gaze, fantasizing, pornography) and with others (engaging in any sexual activity outside the biblical marriage relationship).
3. Let us speak honestly about our ongoing sexual struggles. If the letters to New Testament churches are permeated with a call to sexual purity, let us not be surprised that the contemporary church needs the same message. We will not normalize sin (“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” [Ephesians 5:3]) but we must not pretend that sexual struggle ceases at conversion. This type of accountability and support is typically best experienced in same-gender groups of trusted fellow believers.
4. Let us turn our sexual struggles into opportunities to pursue increasing intimacy with God and with other believers. Let us fight against the temptations that poison intimacy and do the difficult work of identifying the way in which our sexual sin is ultimately a failure to believe the gospel of God’s love for us in Christ.
5. Let us honor the goodness of God’s gift within marriage by encouraging married couples to intentionally pursue frequent, mutually delightful sexual intimacy. Let us refuse to treat marital sex as dirty or taboo but rather call couples to the pre-fall standard: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25).
6. Let us intentionally enfold single adults into our families, inviting them into the life of our family, whether gatherings, birthday parties, holidays, or even vacations. Let us provide support and honest accountability to those singles in dating relationships, understanding how tempting and prevalent pre-marital sex is, even in the church.
7. Let us be a place where followers of Jesus who are attracted to members of the same gender can find belonging and support. If they desire counseling and prayer for change, let us provide that. If, after pursuing this they continue to be same-sex attracted, let us commit to being family to them as they pursue Jesus in lifelong celibacy. Let us feel the cost of discipleship with them and join with them in the pursuit of sexual purity.

Addressing sexual brokenness outside the church

As we think about the changing sexual mores around us, we would do well to hear the broad spectrum of Paul's words concerning sexual sin outside the church. Writing to the Corinthians about church discipline toward those within the church he clarifies,

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" (1 Corinthians 5:9–12)

Clearly Paul does not expect unbelievers to act like Christ-followers. Indeed, he never seeks to win people to Christian morality but to Christ. With that being said, however, he has bold things to say about what the sexual immorality of unbelievers says about their spiritual state:

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:24–27)

Paul by no means endorses sexual immorality outside the church. Indeed, in Romans 1 he cites sexual sin as evidence of God's wrath on humanity. Yet neither does he expect unbelievers to live by Christian standards. Furthermore, Paul is not interested in winning people "in the world" first to Christian morality but rather to Christ.

In light of this, here are 5 convictions about how we should engage the world in which we live, specifically concerning sexual morality.

1. We live in a free country where we have the right and responsibility to vote for leaders and laws that will promote human flourishing. However, when the laws of our land contradict God's law, we must not fear, as if God's eternal ways have been upended. In particular, we have the right to protest the Supreme Court's decision that allows same-gender couples to marry while not fearing that it will harm existing Christian marriages.
2. America's drift away from Biblical morality means that we must raise our children to be counter-cultural in how they approach marriage and sexuality. We will have to teach them that God's definition of marriage and our nation's definition of marriage are different, just as God's ideal for our sexuality and our culture's accepted practice of

sexuality are different.⁴ We must teach them to hold this view with humility and to be prepared for charges of bigotry and hate, regardless of how gracious their tone is.

3. We must follow Jesus' example of engaging the sexually broken and exercise both compassion and truth-telling as we pursue relationships with unbelievers. Jesus reclined at table with prostitutes, which in its day was as shocking as frequenting a gay bar in our day. Jesus also told a woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). Whether through a ministry like Choices Pregnancy Centers or through intentional relationship, we must be in the lives of unbelievers, ready to show Christ's love and kindness in person. Yet we must also not shrink from declaring the reality of God's judgement on all sinners and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation from this judgment.⁵
4. As public debate about issues surrounding sexual practice and identity intensifies, we must keep our message centered on Christ, not sexuality. The offense of the gospel is Christ crucified, and we must keep this at the forefront of our proclamation. We should certainly have thoughtful answers about Christian sexual ethics for seekers, but we must bring every evangelistic conversation back to the question of Jesus: is he truly the Son of God, the only Savior, and Lord of all? Will you repent of your sins, trust him as Savior, and submit the whole of your life to him as Lord?
5. As homosexuality, gay marriage, and gender transitioning become more normalized in our culture, we must remain sensitive to the Spirit regarding how we can affirm our love for LGBT friends and family members while not endorsing their lifestyle. A close pastor friend of mine modeled this when one of his elders resigned from the board, divorced his wife, and began transitioning to become a female. My friend had a weekly coffee meetings with this man for years into the process, especially seeking to be present when the transition proved to be complicating and unfulfilling. We will all have difficult decisions about whether or not to attend a gay marriage or welcome a partner to a holiday dinner. There are no easy answers on these issues so we must remain humbly dependent on God's direction.

⁴ A few years ago I was shopping at Sprouts and came across a bin of cabbage. The sign underneath it read, "Cucumbers - 79¢." I thought this was funny, so I took a picture of it. Within 5 minutes of getting home, Stephan said something about wanting a cucumber, so I said, "Look, I took a picture of some cucumbers at Sprouts." I showed him the picture, and he said, "Wow, those cucumbers look a lot like cabbage!"

Here's the moral of the story. God invented marriage, and no matter how much anyone tries to change the signs and redefine what God has made, a head of cabbage is still a head of cabbage, a cucumber is still a cucumber, and marriage is and always will be the union between a man and a woman. Our conversations with our children may go something like this: "I know the sign says marriage, but that is not marriage. Those are two men, those are two women, and God says that marriage is between a man and a woman. Somebody has switched the signs."

⁵ One particular way to "get into the skin" of others is to read their account of struggle with sexual identity. I have been immensely helped by the accounts of two personal friends of mine: "Denial" by Jonathan Rauch, an atheist gay-rights activist, and "Washed and Waiting" by Wesley Hill, a Christian professor and writer.