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Obviously, there is a lot more to be said about these topics of sex, the lustful twisting of sex into fornication, the marriage covenant, the gift and call of singleness, etc.

This week's sermon touched on a number of areas, but only in an introductory way. I'll try to fill in the picture more in the coming weeks in my sermons.

In the meantime, I want to supplement the sermon with a several more thoughts on biblical sexuality.

First, a few matters of definition and clarification. In the sermon, I talked about chastity. *Chastity* should not be confused with *celibacy*. Both single and married Christians are called to chastity. For singles, chaste behavior means abstinence (celibacy). For married people, it means sexual fidelity to one's spouse -- that is to say, sex with your spouse, and with no one else.

And as I pointed out in the sermon, chastity is not just a matter of the body but of the heart. It concerns not just what we do with our genitals, but with our eyes, imaginations, etc.

Unfortunately, the church's defense of chastity has all too often been anything but winsome. One of the most pressing needs in the church today is the articulation, not of the rules, but of the rationales. Why did God set things up this way? What makes it so beautiful to do things God's way? We need to learn how to persuade people (beginning with our own children) to listen afresh to the Scriptures on this issue. We need to convince people that when God speaks about sex, he knows what he's talking about.

Second, do not confuse lust with sex. Sex is God's good gift, created for husbands and wives to enjoy within the covenant of marriage as an expression of self-giving (Trinity-like) love. Lust is fallen man's distortion of sex. Lust is to sex what alcoholism is to a bottle of fine wine, or what overeating is to a gourmet dinner, or what vandalism is to a great piece of art. It's an abuse of a good thing. And of course, the better the thing is that gets abused, the greater it's power to harm and destroy.

Lust is not the same as noticing that someone is physically attractive. There is nothing wrong with recognizing beauty. Indeed, when we critique lust, we need to be very, very careful that we do not denigrate physical beauty, which is one of the gifts God has given us. But there is a line that (as fallen people) we all too easily cross, when we move from appreciating beauty to objectifying it and desiring it for ourselves in an unlawful way. Thus, it's sometimes said that the first glance at an attractive person of the opposite sex is not lust, but more than that usually is.

At the same time, our infatuation with the physical in contemporary culture is entirely superficial. In our celebrity crazed culture, we probably over-emphasize

looks. Outward beauty is wonderful...but it still fades. Thus, Peter reminds women to pursue the unfading beauty that proceeds from a heart devoted to God (1 Pt. 3). All too often, men and women in our culture make superficial judgments about members of the opposite sex. It's been estimated that the average person "sizes up" a member of the sex within about 30 seconds, deciding purely on the basis of physical characteristics whether or not that person would be someone they would consider as a potential future spouse. The result is that singles cut themselves off from many potential mates too quickly. Obviously, physical attraction is important in marriage, but our culture has really taken it too far. We need to get our priorities back in line. We need to stop being physical perfectionists, comparing ourselves and others to the plastic gods and goddesses that Holly wood parades in front of us.

Third, I never really got around to defining marriage in the sermon. That may seem unnecessary, but in our day it shouldn't be taken for granted. Normatively, marriage is a lifelong covenanted, sexual relationship between a man and a woman. In marriage a man and woman leave their families to cleave to one another in a one flesh relationship, forming a new family. They complement and complete one another. They become lifelong companions, with a shared mission and purpose.

Nevertheless, there is such a thing a "biblical divorce," though it is always occasioned by serious sin (adultery, desertion/abandonment, a capital crime). Normally, marriage is "til death do us part." In cases of lawful dissolution of a marriage (by death or biblically-grounded divorce), the surviving/innocent spouse has the right to remarry.

The sermon should have made it evident that the biblical sex ethic is not repressive or stifling in any way. It may be *portrayed* as such in the mainstream media, but that's largely because Christians have done such a poor job presenting (and embodying) the biblical view. The Christian sex ethic is to human nature what water is to a fish, or the open air is to an eagle. It's what we were designed for.

The point is not just that doing things God's way is *right*. The point is that it is also more beautiful, more fulfilling, more satisfying, more life-affirming, more glorious. We can only enjoy God's gifts (in this case, our spouses) when we receive them according to God's Word. The biblical sex ethic is fully consistent with our created natures. To violate that ethic is to go against the grain of your humanity – and when you do so, you end up getting splinters. Our sex-soaked culture doesn't believe this, but it's true.

A great deal of confusion surrounds the body. Is the body good or bad? It seems you could line up Scripture passages on both sides. On the one hand, the body is part of God's good creation. The Son incarnated himself in a human body. We believe in a final resurrection of the body.

On the other hand, the Bible frequently seems to locate sin in the body (e.g., Rom. 7:24, 8:13). The Bible speaks of the flesh in highly negative terms. The body is under the curse.

So how do we fit all this together? Some have thought, "The soul is the good part of us, the body is the bad part." The body takes all the blame for what has gone wrong. D. H. Lawrence said something like, "Plato wounded the body; Christianity finished it off."

Not true.

Christianity is pro-body. We should not be ashamed of the body. One of the most radical claims Christianity makes is that the realm of the "spiritual" coincides with the realm of the bodily. God cares about the body just as much as the soul.

It's interesting to note that the sins of the "flesh" actually involve the "soul" (or "heart" or "spirit") just as much as the physical body. And redemption certainly involves and includes the body. There is a very real sense in which "you are your body." There is no deeper, hidden "you," floating inside of the body, detached from what happens to your body.

The Bible sees man as an integrated unity – body and soul integrated into one another. One theologian defined our humanity this way: "Man is a soul in bodily form." That sounds paradoxical, but it's true. Body and soul are so tightly interconnected, you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. Only death can rip them apart.

The body is certainly good, as a creation of God. But the body has been hijacked, it has been sabotaged, by sin. And of course, the heart has been as well. But when God redeems us, that redemptive grace obligates us to use our bodies from the heart in the way God intended. The whole person is put in the service of righteousness. Yes, the body will still die because of the curse (Gen. 3). But it will be raised again in glory at the last day.

Thus, the body (like the heart) is a battlefield. It's the arena in which our warfare with sin is played out. That's why Paul tells us to offer up the members of our bodies in slavery to righteousness (Rom. 6:12-13). Grace reclaims and redirects our use of the body, so that we employ it in the service of God's kingdom.

The problem with *every* non-Christian approach to sex is that it pulls body and soul apart. Every other sexual ideology either treats man as a beast or as an angel. Every other sexual ideology gives precedence either to the body or to the soul, but none of them attain to the balance found in the Scriptures.

The beastly view says that sex is just a biological drive, like any other drive. Sex is just a matter of the body, just another bodily function like eating (never mind that in truth, eating is more than just "biology" too!).

On this “beastly” view, sex holds no awe or mystery. It’s just another thing you do. Just another product. Just flesh and friction. Sex exists for nothing more than *self* – self-expression, self-fulfillment, self-satisfaction. Sex is all about ME – what I want, what I can get. It’s all about taking, not giving.

This is generally the view of the sex therapists in the media, sex ed books in public schools, Hollywood flicks, etc. The basic message is: use sex however you want. If it feels good, do it. But the price is high: to make sex into a meaningless act, you have to ultimately make *all of life* meaningless.

Others take the “angelic” view. This has all too often been the approach of the religiously scrupulous. Sex is at best a necessary evil. It is a grudging concession, made to propagate the species, but nothing else (and certainly not for mutual pleasure). On this view, the body is the bad part of the human, the soul is the good part. Because sex is bodily, it is automatically tinged with evil.

Even great church fathers like Augustine gave into semi-pagan, semi-gnostic views at this point. But this view, like the “beastly” view, is a denial of our humanity. Again, man was made as a body-soul unity. Both inner and outer aspects of man were made good, both aspects were corrupted by sin, and both aspects are redeemed by Christ. One of the most beautiful dimensions of marital sexuality is a man and a woman giving themselves wholly (including bodily) to one another in love. There is nothing intrinsically evil about it. God sees it and is pleased with it – he created it after all! Christians need to set aside all squeamish, Victorian approaches to sexuality.

Neither the angelic nor the beastly approach can do justice to who we are as human beings made in God’s image. (I heard a pastor once describe these same categories, beastly and angelic, as “pagans” and “prudes.” That works just as well.)

I’ll probably try to say more about 1 Corinthians 6:12ff later, but let me touch on something from that text here since it addresses the role of the body. Paul says that we are holistically united to Christ, not just in our souls but in our bodies as well. That is to say, our *bodies* are members of Christ (which is another way of saying our *bodies* are temples of the Holy Spirit). Our bodies (not just our souls) were bought with a price and belong to God.

Thus, Paul says if/when a Christian engages in intercourse with a prostitute, he is actually involving Christ in his sin in some way. Of course, that also means Christ is at the center of marital sex. When a Christian husband and wife come together, they do so *in Christ*.

Paul also tells us in this context that sexual sin is unique in that it is against a man’s own body. Sexual sin humiliates and insults and even destroys the body in a peculiar way. It cuts more deeply than other sins because it goes to the very core of who we are. That’s not to say such sin cannot be healed (though it is impossible to clear away all earthly *consequences*).

A few more thoughts on the biblical view of sex....

Sex was given by God to image and build community. Sex *images* the communion that exists between the Father and Son, as I talked about in the sermon. It *builds* community between husband and wife, as they complement and complete one another in their shared covenant life. And when a husband and wife are secure in one another, they have power and freedom to serve in the world. They have a surplus of love they can share with others (e.g., mercy ministry, hospitality, counseling). So their unique relationship with one another serves the common good.

Sex actually teaches husbands and wives a great deal about how they are to relate to one another. My point here is not technique, but approach. Any pastor or counselor will tell you that what goes on (or doesn't go on!) in the bedroom has a very determinative effect on the marriage as a whole. The key thing for spouses to learn is how to serve one another, how to put the interests of the other first. They must learn that their sexuality is part of a larger whole of who they are – and that that whole belongs to the other (cf. 1 Cor. 7:4). Or to put it another way, spouses must learn the pleasure of giving pleasure. When sex is used to give, to serve, to share, it reaches its full potential in bringing the man and woman together in covenant bond. The fabric of the marriage is strengthened until it finally becomes unbreakable.

Of course, sex builds community in another way. Sex brings new life into the world. In the case of a Christian family, the products of sex are included within the covenant community from their earliest days. Covenant children are claimed by God in baptism. So sex serves the kingdom, it builds the kingdom, it expands the kingdom.

On the other hand, when sex is twisted out of shape by lust, it destroys community. Obviously, adultery destroys community between a husband and a wife. It brings a third party between them, a person who does not belong there. It takes away the one thing they could share together in an exclusive way. Sex and exclusivity go together; when that link is broken, trust is lost.

But twisted sex destroys community in other ways. I won't go into all those here, but I'll just note one thing. When we structure our lives around personal satisfaction and fulfillment (“designer lifestyles,” as they've been called), we only enter into relationships (including marriage) for selfish reasons. We are more committed to our own autonomy and fulfillment than we are to the other person. But someone who approaches marriage this way will inevitably find all kinds of things wrong with their spouse, including sexual performance. In the end, they're just using their spouse for selfish ends. They aren't interested in using their marriage to build the kingdom of God, but in getting their self-centered needs met. Such marriages are doomed to frustration and failure.

Don't misunderstand my comments on Mt. 5. Yes, Jesus says we must fight lust or go to hell. But the point is not that we have to *succeed flawlessly*. After all, we all stumble in many ways, and (in one sense) all of us deserve to wear the scarlet "A." The point is that *we must resolve to fight persistently*.

We need to keep the stakes in view. Getting an STD or AIDS from illicit intercourse is nothing compared to eternity in the lake of fire. Getting caught and having your family or reputation ruined is nothing compared to eternity in the lake of fire. Etc.

Lust/sexual sin is serious business. Sex can serve as either a foretaste of heaven or can become the road to hell.

Fighting against lust does not save your soul in itself, but is the sign and proof that God is at work saving you. It's a sign of your covenant fidelity.

Obviously, much more could be said about the different ways men and women fall into sexual sin. Men and women share many common features, but they are also very different. Maleness and femaleness are basic to human existence, going right down to our deepest essences. There is no androgynous humanity underlying our biological sex differences. Maleness and femaleness are irreducible and are not interchangeable. Sexual differences are not merely cultural constructs, as postmodern culture tries to tell us. They are built-in to the very fabric of God's creation.

Not surprisingly, then, men and women approach sex differently. And they fall into sexual sin in different ways. This is not an absolute (as I showed in the sermon), but it is enough of a trend to consider.

If you were to survey 100 men who fell into adultery, you'd find that most of them (not all) had a self-control problem that was never dealt with. They lusted in their hearts and then followed through on it with their bodies. It's that simple. They were after the feeling of pleasure and power that sex brings.

If you were to survey 100 women who fell into adultery, you would find that most of them (not all) had a self-image/security problem that was never addressed. Sure, the promise of sexual pleasure was part of the package of temptation, but more than likely they fell into sin as a way of trying to meet some relational need. They craved male attention and affection they never got (likely from their fathers or negligent husbands) and tried to use sex to get that emotional "connection." Females who are promiscuous usually just want to be understood. They want to feel loved and cared for. They want male affirmation.

So sex becomes a bargaining chip. Men want sex, women want love, and a secret deal is made. But really it's no deal at all. He gets sex – only to find that his lusts still aren't satisfied, so he either has to try with someone else or try something

more perverse. And she gave herself away, only to find she got nothing in return. She's been used, not loved, and (at some level, at least) she knows it.

What about singles? I'll address the gift/call of singleness later on, but a few thoughts are appropriate here. This is important because in American culture at large, married persons are now the minority.

Remember what sex within marriage is all about: a picture at the creaturely level of the mutual giving-and-receiving-love that exists within the Trinity.

Because sex is a *picture*, not the *reality*, it is possible to live a fulfilled life without sex. But this is so *if and only if* you know the Triune God and live within the circle of his love.

Jesus lived the most fully human life ever, and he lived as a single man. So singles have a pretty good model to emulate!

We'll see later on that chaste, faithful singles have at least two things to teach the church:

[1] The kingdom of God is not a matter of blood but of the Spirit. The kingdom uses the family, but does not depend on it in an ultimate, absolute sense. Even if every Christian in the world was single (or every Christian woman barren), the church could still disciple the nations. While the growth of the kingdom includes the children of God's people ("covenant children" as we affectionately call them), it does not *depend* on procreation the way old covenant Israel did (since Israel existed for the purpose of bringing the promised seed child into the world).

[2] Such singles picture ahead of time the eschaton, the resurrection state, when the typological symbol of human marriage will have fallen away, to make room for the fullness of the reality, Christ's marriage to his people. Faithful, joyful singles, contented in their relationship to Christ, are a picture – a sneak preview – of what's coming for all of us. The single lifestyle is an eschatological lifestyle.

Thus, faithful singles stand as a stinging rebuke to the evangelical idolatry of the family. Many Christians who are members of nuclear families are not very sensitive when it comes to the interests, needs, and cares of single Christians. Churches should be careful to NOT design all their ministries around families, but should actively work to include singles in the life of the body. And singles should not feel inferior, as though they were "second class" citizens of the kingdom. They are most certainly not. Singles should also be careful to not fall into the idolatry of marriage themselves, thinking that unless and until they get married they lack in personal worth. You do not have to wait until you're married to begin living life to fullest, or making a contribution to the kingdom of God, or serving in the church. In fact, the single lifestyle often provides unique opportunities for service in the church and world.

Of course, there are still a number of thorny questions to deal with. For example, what if you don't think you're called to singleness....and yet you're still single? The problem is especially acute for women, as they grow older, and still Mr. Right doesn't show up. What then? How is possible to live a contented, joyful life, and yet continue to desire marriage? How does one really *know* what he or she is called to, in terms of marriage and singleness? Maybe those are questions I can take up in future sermons. I admit, though, there aren't always easy answers.

Bottom line: Guys who know they aren't called to celibacy should be actively seeking to find wives as soon as financially/vocationally feasible. Girls who are single but feel they are called to marriage should pursue a vocation in the meantime, but never give up preparing themselves for marital life.

I mentioned Laura Winner's book *Real Sex* in the sermon and I highly recommend it. It's a great read for mature teenagers, college students, parents, just about everyone. Winner doesn't have any shocking insights into marriage, but she does have a lot of biblical counsel for Christian young people who are striving for a chaste life in a culture that isn't exactly cooperative. Her book is very realistic and wise.

She gives some great guidance for dating couples on "where to draw the line." (You have to read it to find out what she says!)

Her book also makes the point that Christian singles will not be able to live chaste lives in isolation. It takes a community committed to helping singles (and married persons) stay pure.

On that note—

Why is pre-marital sex problematic from a Christian point of view?

There are a lot of ways to answer that question, but let me boil it down.

The bottom line takes back to the typological foundations of marriage. Marriage was given to represent [a] the Triunity of God; and [b] the relationship of Christ and the church. Just as Christ does not give himself to anyone outside of a structured, covenant relationship (with promises and obligations), neither should we give ourselves away outside of a covenant relationship. To do so is to distort the meaning of marriage, which is ultimately symbolic of the gospel.

We also need to understand what sex before/outside of marriage does to us. If you give yourself away sexually to someone not your covenanted spouse, you have nothing left to communicate to your future spouse that you belong to them in a unique way. This is why fornication and divorce go together, statistically and experientially. If sex has lost its specialness, there is no way to communicate self-giving trust to the other person. Your heart is like a piece of tape that has been stuck to something, then pulled off, and thus lost its stickiness. You can't "stick"

to someone in the deep, covenantal way God designed any more, and so when you do finally get married, you find your marriage is way too fragile to survive.

This brings us back to the purpose of sex as a picture of Triune love. Instead of talking about “losing” virginity, Christians should speak of “giving” virginity. That gift of sex seals (and then renews) the marital covenant in a way nothing else can.

Patty Griffin’s song “Every Little Bit” captures the problem with the world’s sex ethic. (It’s also a great piece of musical art, in terms of the match between form and content.) I’m not sure of the song’s background, but it looks like the singer is breaking up with her boyfriend (who she has obviously slept with). She’s remembering her now broken relationship. The lyrics begin:

It's funny how a morning turns a love to shame
Disguised and disfigured...
There`s nothing here but a shadow, nothing here
Now you know

This is the whole “morning after” syndrome. What was supposed to be so special turns to shame. Love has been disguised and disfigured by lust. The singer doesn’t know herself anymore – having given herself away unlawfully, she’s just a shadow.

The song continues, showing the angst and pain that uncovenanted relations can bring:

I spit, I spit in the eye
I tear, I tear out my heart
And I scatter the bits
I stay unseen by the light
I stay untold by the truth
I'm sold by a lie
By this I am able in all of my travels
To make these memories quit
But tonight I clearly recall every little bit

Later on the lyrics say something especially revealing:

But there was never a moment
Not a moment
Now you know...
You never got within a hundred million miles of my soul

Instead of the relationship bringing closeness....“You never got within a hundred million miles of my soul.” There was physical closeness, but the walls never came down. There was no sharing of the total person. No sharing of souls. No relationship of complete trust and security. Just shame and painful memories.

That's not to say those who have sinned in this way cannot be healed and restored. They cannot be re-virginized, so to speak, but they can live chaste lives that allow sex to regain its specialness (and thus its ability to communicate trust and love). But it is certainly difficult and painful to rehabilitate ourselves sexually. Much better to keep the fire in the fireplace to begin with, than to have to rebuild the whole house later on.

Sexual conduct has a huge effect on the health and growth of a civilization. Researcher J. D. Unwin concluded his massive historical study of this topic by pointing out that, "Any human society is free to choose either to display great energy or to enjoy sexual freedom; the evidence is that it cannot do both for more than one generation." In other words, the ongoing maturation of a civilization is dependent upon sexual discipline. A movement away from monogamy results in a huge dissipation of energy and other human resources. The family, a basic building block in any social network, begins to crumble, leading to a culture-wide malaise and dissolution.

When a culture separates marriage from sex, that culture has essentially killed itself. It will do nothing more than live off of whatever capital it accumulated while sex within marriage was the norm. Civilization after civilization bears out this pattern. When a culture obsesses over sexual pursuits, it ends up with little time for anything else. The result is decline, stagnation, and eventual extinction.

In our culture, this means that if the church practices chastity, she has a great opportunity. While the rest of the culture is spending itself sexually, burning itself out in pursuit of one broken relationship after another, if the church is faithful, her members should have a great deal more creativity and energy to spend on constructive pursuits. Christian children should be raised in stable homes, and thus have a huge advantage over their unbelieving counterparts. In other words, we should become the leaders in our culture if we practice chastity.

Sadly, this is not happening. The church does not seem all that different from the world in this area. Our families are in shambles too. Meanwhile, immigrant groups that are more committed to monogamy for traditional reasons (especially Asians, Indians) are rising to the top. If Christians lived distinctly holy lives, we'd find a great deal more cultural dominion placed in our hands. Chastity (and its accompanying stability in family life) might be the single biggest contributor to cultural transformation. But will the church rise to the occasion?

A few more thoughts about the conclusion of the sermon--

First, note that EVERY major religion condemns sex outside of marriage (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.). It's just about as close as you can get to a universal ethical norm in world history (though the reasons given in different religions are quite different). That fact makes it all the more amazing that our culture can so easily, unthinkingly throw off traditional marital monogamy as

the sexual norm “just because it feels good.” Our culture has done something very, very dangerous.

But this is what you need to remember: While every major religion in the world CONDEMNS sex outside of marriage, only Christianity can FORGIVE it.

Not only that, but only the gospel has power to deliver you from slavery to sexual sin. 1 Cor. 6 is very interesting – when Paul lists the lifestyle patterns that would bar someone from entering the eschatological kingdom of God (v. 9-10), he says “and such WERE some of you” (v. 11). But they have been set free in Christ. To be stuck in a pattern of sinful behavior in this area is NOT a “life sentence.” The gospel holds out the possibility of victory and transformation. The church is a place for “sex offenders” – a place where sexual sinners can find forgiveness and hope. The church needs to learn how to be firm when it comes to dealing with sin, but also gracious and merciful to sinners. The church has no business issuing self-righteous condemnations in this area.

Second, I misspoke in the sermon towards the end when I was recounting the David and Bathsheba story. I accidentally said that David had Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite, “married,” when I meant to say David had him “murdered.”

No, contrary to what a certain deacon claimed, this was not some kind of Freudian slip on my part. I don’t equate marriage with death. ☺

But while we’re on the topic...you may want to check out Mike Mason’s book *The Mystery of Marriage* sometime. He shows that marriage *is* a kind of death (suicide, actually) – it’s a death to self, a death to selfishness, a “good” death that leads to a more glorious, resurrected form of life on the other side.

Here are a few more books to check out:

All of Doug Wilson’s family and marriage books are immensely helpful – especially *Reforming Marriage*, *Federal Husband*, *Fidelity* (for men only), and *For a Glory and a Covering*.

See also:

Sex and the Supremacy and Christ, edited by Justin Taylor and John Piper

A Great Mystery by Peter Leithart

Bed and Board by Robert Farrar Capon