

Love/**Sex**

Intro

Two become one.

Thoughts = action.

Body and soul are inseparably intertwined.

Sex is sacred, a gift and a reflection of God's love.

Not exactly the type of language we usually hear associated with sex from media or American culture. Society has a lot to say about sex, and not much of it involves love. Infatuation—check. Lust—usually, yes. But love? Not so much.

So let's take a look at what the God who made sex thinks about it. In this study, we'll look at what God's design for sex was and consider where he plays a part, what love has to do with it, and how that should affect our views of sex.

This is a study that may be intensely vulnerable for some people. Questions will be asked that may be uncomfortable to answer in mixed groups. It's advised to go through the discussion questions only with members of the same sex. If your group is co-ed, we suggest you split up or find someone of your gender to have follow up conversations with after group.

Talking about sex can be a little awkward. But the Bible clearly addresses sex in multiple passages, and there are additional places that we can gather an interpretation of God's heart for it by looking at the context of scripture as a whole. Between the direct sound bytes and the overall context, there are two basic facts about sex found in the Bible.

Fact #1: God made sex.

Fact #2: God thinks sex is a good thing.

If you believe in God and believe he created the world, you probably won't dispute Fact #1. Most people, however, typically have a tougher time believing #2, no matter what their spiritual beliefs. To some degree, there's an assumption in our culture that since sex is pleasurable, God must not like it. Therefore, people who are following Him should avoid it as much as possible.

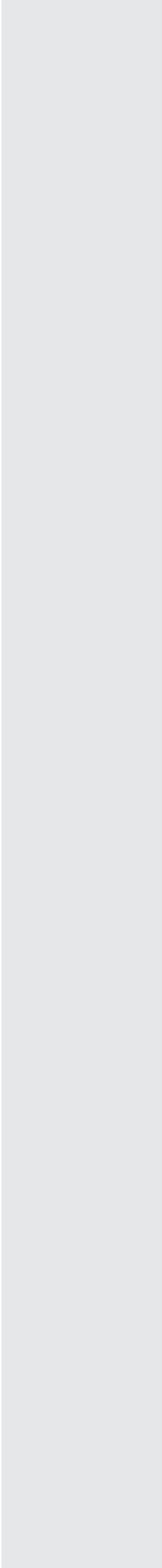
Nothing could be further from the truth.

Humans are the only species for which sex is more than just reproduction. Humans alone have the ability to enjoy sex—to derive pleasure from it as more than just a fulfillment of physical urges.

Yet it's more than just physical.

Read Ephesians 5:31. This is just one of the passages that intentionally link marriage and sex, going so far as to describe it as two people becoming "one flesh." It's not simply a physical act. There is an emotional connection, a spiritual connection—you can't have sex with someone and remain the same person you were before. Take a moment and consider that thought before continuing.

Sex was created to be a sacred union between two people: unconditional



intimacy and unconditional commitment. In that moment of greatest intimacy, there are no barriers. No walls. Nothing held back. We're naked, vulnerable and open to the eyes of someone else. We're utterly free of pretense, masks and the constant judgment and pride that our world runs on. It's for that pure encounter that God gives us the boundary of keeping sex for marriage—to experience the best he has to offer us, the original design of what he created, to be accepted once and for all exactly as we are.

Not only does God show his love toward us through sex, but he also is a God who pursues us, and loves us in all things. His point for sex was love, unity and understanding him, and that remains his ultimate purpose regardless of how we respond to him about sex. Sex was never meant to be the callous, momentary bit of physical pleasure that our society has turned it into. It was supposed to be a picture of God's deep, passionate love for humanity. But whatever our past looks like when it comes to the topic of sex, He is still seeking us with that deep, passionate love and waiting for us to experience his best.

For Discussion

Rank your comfort with this topic on a scale of 1–10.

(1 = very uncomfortable, 10 = very comfortable)

Do you believe that God made sex and that he thinks it's a good thing? What early life experiences can you remember that have shaped your view on sex?

Do you think you can have sex with someone and remain the same person you were before? Why or why not?

How do you feel about the idea of sex as a picture of God's deep, passionate love for us?

Challenge

This week, read Hosea chapters 1–3, and think through the times where you have been like Gomer—running from God when he's trying to pursue you. Think through how you've turned away from Him, why you did, and how it ended. Take time to ask God for forgiveness and return to him. You won't have to share this next week with the group, but do consider sharing it with someone—maybe a spouse, a mentor or a friend for accountability and encouragement to not repeat those types of moments.

Regardless of the context, there is a power in the world whose desire is to disconnect us from God by any means necessary. If we can be convinced that there is no hope for us, then we will close ourselves off from the very thing that we need the most. Later in Hosea (14:8), God says that our fruitfulness comes from him. To pull back from the

love that God offers—especially when it comes to sex—is to walk away from the very thing that will heal us. There is no one that is too far gone, no action we've done that is unforgiveable. This is the message of Hosea—that no matter how far we have gone, God is still willing to pursue and love us.

Sex is confusing business. Why is it that sex can sometimes leave us in a fantastic mood, while other times we're left feeling like trash? Sometimes you get a new burst of energy, and other times it's "lights out." One of you could be in the mood, the other not; and within 15 minutes those roles could be completely reversed.

It can make you want to laugh, cry, scream, sleep, walk, run or even clean the bathroom. The fact that sex can have so many different effects on us should be proof alone that there is more than just a physical act at work here.

Go back to Ephesians 5:31–32. In many ways, sex is a mystery. It's a mystery because there is more going on than what we can see.

Paul says that the way a husband and wife become one person through the intimacy and connection of sex is a picture of how God connects with the people who follow him. In either case, it's not a purely physical thing—there is an emotional and spiritual dimension to it as well. There is an ebb and flow to it, a constant interchange; and to fully understand it would require the perfect knowledge that only God has.

This is why sex can never be just a one-time thing without baggage. There are always emotional and spiritual dimensions that we cannot see with our eyes. God simply does not make the division between the physical and spiritual that we do.

For example, in Leviticus 17:14, the writer states that "the life of a creature is in the blood" and the word used for "blood" is *nephesh*. Then later in Psalm 23, it says that God "restores my soul." Guess what word is used there for "soul?" That's right—*nephesh*.

To see sex as purely a physical act is to try to separate body from soul, a distinction God doesn't make.

This is why casual sex ends up being so painful—there is an intense pain caused when we try to merge unconditional intimacy with conditional commitment. Sex is not simply limited to the body, as some in our culture would have us believe. To simply see it as "something that feels good" is drastically underestimating the significance and effects of sex. Sex was designed for the physical expression of deep, lasting spiritual and emotional commitment and connection.

In the same way, to see sex as something dirty that should be avoided misses the mark as well. This view of sex limits it to an act of the body and separates it from the supposedly “purer” soul. But God says that the mystery of two people connecting in the most deep and intimate way possible is a picture of how he connects with his people. In this definition, the spiritual is not “purer” than the physical, because God is intimately involved in all of life.

Whenever you encounter something mysterious that you don't fully understand, you have a choice to make. You can choose to give up and assume the mystery is beyond you and that God has set you up to fail in this area because it's too hard. To go this road is to buy into the lie that sex is purely physical and that you should just enjoy a moment's pleasure because that is the best there is. *Read Romans 1:24–28*. Many people have chosen that route, and as this passage tells you: God won't stop you.

Or you could choose the other option.

You could also choose the more hopeful approach: that is, to trust the creator of sex. Trust that He knows what he's doing when he gives us instructions on it. You can hope that sex was created for more than the brokenness and pain you experience when you take it outside His intent. You can believe that God is intimately involved in all areas of your life. You can be open to restoration because you understand that your past failures can be forgiven and made whole, and that true intimacy and connection with God is possible.

For Discussion

Have your life experiences influenced you to leaning toward either of these two extremes: believing that sex is just physical and doesn't yield consequences, OR that it is immoral and impure in any circumstance? **Which side do you lean towards and why?**

If you've experienced unconditional intimacy with conditional commitment, you've likely felt the pain we've talked about. **How does the statement that body and soul are intertwined and can't be separated make sense of those feelings?**

What parts of this study do you find yourself resisting and not accepting as truth? Share with the group any areas you feel you may be calloused and "turned over" as the Romans verse explains. Remember that any whisperings of it being too late for you are lies. Nothing is lost to God and all can be restored.

Hope is available to all—no exceptions. **Which of the following ways to have hope brings feelings of relief and joy, and which do you need accountability in learning to believe?**

Ways you can have hope, regardless of your past:

- When you surrender your past to God.
- When you create boundaries for your life and follow them. These can be rules like only dating someone with the same values and goals, or not leaving yourself in situations you know that you're weak to temptation.
- When we feel God do things in us that can't be explained by anything apart from him.
- When you replace the urge with something else. (*Hint: memorizing Scripture not only serves as a replacement to other items we allow in our minds, but it can be a real mood killer. Try memorizing 1 Corinthians 6:18–20 to bring to mind in tempting moments.*)
- When we see how God's love restores.

Challenge

Choose at least one of the ways to have hope from above to pray about this week. It could be one that fills you with freedom that you want to meditate on and be thankful for, or it could be one that you know you need God's help with. Whatever you choose, be intentional this week about asking God into this part of your life and revealing himself as pursuer, restorer and provider.

We would never use a vacuum cleaner to hammer a nail into a wall—why? It wouldn't work very well, and it would break the vacuum in the process. It wasn't designed to be used that way. Things work better and break less often when we operate them in the way they were originally intended. Sex is no different.

God created sex to be a sacred union between a husband and wife. He designed it as an example of his deep, passionate love for us and to show us a picture of the intimacy that he wants to share with us. So when we have sex within a committed, married relationship, it can be a beautiful thing. And if we have sex outside of God's design, like having sex outside of marriage, it can go horribly wrong.

Sex was not designed to be a selfish act. It is supposed to be an intimate act that connects two people. When we use sex simply to satisfy our own personal desires, we are going against the original intent of God's design. We might experience some temporary gratification, but we won't get to experience the fullness and beauty that God promises. Instead we may wind up heartbroken and disappointed.

The good news is that God gives us some pretty clear instructions in the Bible that tell us how sex is supposed to work. They aren't an attempt to take away all the fun or to turn sex into something old-fashioned and boring. They are meant to let us know the heart behind God's design, so that we know how it is supposed to work.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18–20. We must recognize that our bodies do not belong to us. We are not the ultimate authority over our bodies because we do not own them. God says that first and foremost they belong to him, because he paid the ultimate price for them. He also says that our bodies belong to our spouses—that this relationship between husband and wife is the way that God depicts his love for humanity. We become bonded to one another and do not have ownership of our bodies at all.

So sex can't just be about us or about what we want, because our bodies aren't even our own. Good sex requires humility. We have to get ourselves and what we want out of the way, and let go of our own selfish desires. And when we connect with the heart of God, our motivations become less about us and more about him anyway.

For Discussion

What comes to mind when you read “our bodies do not belong to us?”

To say that sex requires humility is certainly not the perspective the world gives us on the topic. **How would your perspective on sex change if you were to really believe that we have to “get ourselves and what we want out of the way?”** Not just agree that it might be true, but actually live it out?

How would living out these principles change dating relationships and marriages if our culture adopted them as truth?

“She just makes me feel needed in a way my wife doesn’t.”

“If only my husband would listen to me the way he does.”

These statements, and others like them, are justifications for why people seek intimacy (sexual or otherwise) in relationships other than with their spouse.

Yet if we understand God’s heart for marriage and sex, we understand that such attempts are ultimately doomed to failure because they are self-driven by nature. People don’t have affairs because they actually want deeper levels of intimacy. People have affairs because of a selfish pursuit to have their own desires met.

Regardless of what our culture tells us, relationships (marriage in particular) are not designed to be a vehicle for our own gratification. It isn’t like buying a new car when the one you have doesn’t have the features you want. No matter how hard we try, such a self-centered approach to sex and marriage (or relationships in general) will ultimately end in nothing more than heartbreak and disappointment.

Relationship problems will never be solved by looking for a new relationship. It’s like they say, “The only consistent feature of all your dysfunctional relationships is you.”

Challenge

This week is simple on paper, but it will require true vulnerability and authentic desire. Ask God to humble you. If you’re not sure how pride plays into your sex life, ask him to show you. Maybe it’s an attitude that leads you to habits no one knows about, maybe it’s the annoyance you feel because God hasn’t provided that perfect partner yet, or maybe it’s in the way you approach your spouse. Pray about it and ask God for strength to overcome it.

For the last three weeks, we have assumed that God indeed has something to say about sex, and that he attaches a very significant value to it. But what if He doesn't? What if we've been assuming the wrong thing?

We'll start from the very beginning. How do we know that everything the Bible has to say about sex reflects God's feeling on the matter? What if sex is just, well, sex? After all, the ancient world had no concept of anatomy and physiology, psychology or behavioral science. What if sex is actually nothing more than biological urges with no moral content whatsoever? What if the writers of the Bible were doing nothing more than rehashing their own cultural norms in God's name?

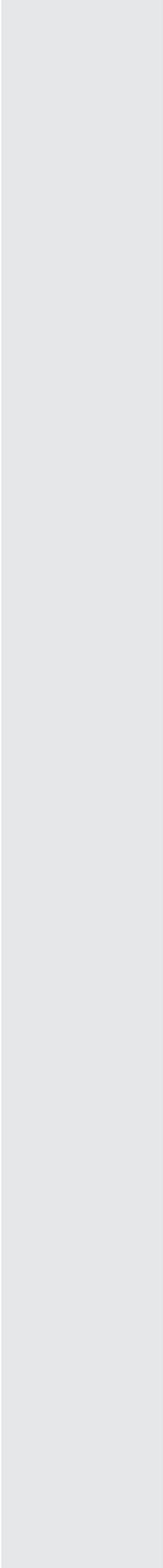
Read Romans 1:24 and Romans 6:12. In Romans 1, Paul basically describes the situation of a world without God. One of the interesting things about God is that he will never force you to love him, and that is what Paul describes here—people did not want God in their lives, and so he allowed them to have the choices they wanted with all the consequences that followed. If you read the rest of the chapter, it's pretty easy to think that Paul is describing our modern world.

Then later in Romans 6, Paul says to his readers (fellow followers of Jesus), "Don't let sin control the way you live; don't give in to your desires." You see, whether we are talking about sex or not, the Bible is very clear that if you are not in relationship with God, then you will be controlled by your desires. Connection with God is the only power in this world capable of freeing us from our selfishness and instinctual urges.

In other words, connecting with God is the only way of actually being human.

Otherwise, we are nothing more than animals, enslaved to our urges and desires; we just have better hygiene. So even if you want to say that God didn't really say any of the things about sex that we attribute to him, the fact remains that the Bible is still spot on about what happens when humanity is left to its own devices—particularly when it comes to sex. None of us want to live in a world where urges are the determiner of right and wrong.

But we can't just leave it there.



It is a question of value. If we assume that God is who he claims to be, then we must conclude that he wants the best for humanity in all things. Specifically, He wants us to be as intimately connected to him as possible. To make such a connection possible, God was willing to sacrifice his own perfect son, Jesus. So if God (who is the most valuable thing in the universe) was willing to sacrifice himself for us, then that means he sees us as having infinite value.

And if we have infinite value in God's eyes, then he must want the absolute best for us in all things—which includes sex. This means there is no such thing as morally neutral sex. No such thing as innocent, harmless masturbation. It's never OK to have sex with someone other than your spouse. Every one of these things is less than the best that God desires for us.

This is why questions like "How far is too far?" are ultimately irrelevant when it comes to sex. Sex is not just a physical act; it is an expression of the deepest intimacy possible. If God loves us enough to sacrifice himself for us, this reveals that sex is the closest picture of his loving intimacy with humanity. There is nothing simple, neutral or amoral about that.

For Discussion

How does the idea that rules aren't meant to control—but to protect, to provide you with God's best—influence your desire to follow them?

Take time with your group to dissect what “How far is too far?” means. **What does asking that question imply about your motives and who you're trying to please?**

Maybe this week hasn't been your deal at all. Perhaps you come from the other end of the spectrum, and you've bought into that little voice in the back of your head that says, “You're the only one like this. Your story is too dirty, too shameful for you to ever be loved and accepted if you let that out. Best to keep it bottled up and hidden—God won't forgive that and these people will nudge you out of their lives.”

If that's you, then you need to know that you have bought into a lie. God's desire is never

for you to live in guilt and shame, and there is nothing too big or serious that He cannot forgive it. (See Romans 5:6–8).

There is a crucial distinction that we must make between conviction and guilt. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit, and is a prompting that motivates us toward life, freedom and change. Guilt does not come from God; it is a twisted pain that keeps us in bondage, unable to let go and be forgiven of our past.

Discuss the differences between guilt and conviction. **What areas of your life are you experiencing guilt? Conviction? What steps can you take to remove the guilt and act on the conviction?**

Challenge

Examine your motives. Read Romans 6:1–2. Bring any areas of resistance you've felt in this study before God, and ask for forgiveness, taking into consideration the implications of this passage. Caution: if you're asking forgiveness for the same isolated incident again and again—stop. He's already forgiven you the first time you asked. Believe that He has, and move forward in freedom.

How God designed sex, and the value that he places on it, are not the whole picture. After all, it is one thing to sit around and think about how God intended sex to work, but it's a lot more difficult to figure out how to apply it to your life.

Read Matthew 5:27–29. Seems pretty harsh. In fact, Jesus sounds like a nutcase. That's why the context is important.

Jesus is talking to a society whose social customs and norms are based on religious rules. As a result, being acceptable in the eyes of God (and society) meant nothing more than outwardly following the rules—it never really got down to the heart. (This is the reason that He spent so much time being angry with the religious leaders.)

He is saying that there needs to be boundaries.

Most of us have a natural aversion to rules governing our personal life—somebody telling us, “You can't do that!” is nothing more than a blatant invitation to do just that. Yet each of us has boundaries that we follow with no argument or question whatsoever. For example, what keeps you from going out tomorrow and buying a brand new flat screen TV? You might have the money, so what keeps you from doing it?

You have a boundary in your financial world that you don't want to cross. You understand that buying that TV would cause undesirable consequences and take you away from your overall financial goals.

In short, you have rules for your money. (In fact, if you don't have rules for your money, you probably don't have any!) They not only serve as deterrents to keep you from making bad decisions, they also serve as a guide that helps point the way to where you want to go. In other words, I'm not buying the TV just because it would put me in debt, but also because I want to use that money for vacation with my family next month.

The same applies for sex. The reason that we don't go out and have sex with anyone and everyone is not because of the rule itself, but because we understand that crossing that boundary causes consequences we don't want, and it takes us away from the life we want to have. That boundary not only keeps us out of dumb decisions, but also points to the significance that sex should have in our lives. Put simply, we don't have random sex with the person we meet at the bar for two reasons—one because it will cause us pain and frustration at some point, and two because it will take us away from our pursuit of God.

Yet Jesus doesn't stop there. Read verse 28 again. Jesus is saying that it isn't enough just to follow the rules; this has to get down to the heart. It does us no good to avoid having sex with someone who isn't our spouse if we're already living it out in our minds.

It's not about adding a new level of rule keeping to our lives; He's pointing the way to the kind of people that followers of God should be. Remember that God's desire is that we have the best kind of life imaginable—one that is deeply connected with his heart and that lives out his purposes for the world. Regardless of whether or not we follow all the rules, if our inner motivations haven't changed, then we are still trapped and enslaved by the desires and sin He died to free us from.

God wants us to have life, not just to follow rules.

For Discussion

Do you have a natural aversion to rules? Where do you think that comes from?

What's your reaction to reading the Matthew passage?

That passage doesn't literally mean to cut out your eyes, but it does mean that if something is causing you to sin you should get rid of it. That could mean ending a relationship, drinking less, getting rid of a television or choosing new places to hang out. **What areas do you feel God prompting you to gouge out of your life?**

What steps can you take to bring yourself to a place of being fully yielded to God's design for sex? What attitudes, habits or relationships do you need to surrender to make that happen?

Challenge

The deeper we're in bondage to any given sin, the more overwhelming it can feel to try to break free of it. Thankfully, we're not expected to break free on our own. Your challenge this week is to rest in God's promise of restoration. Hold out your life, your hopes, your desires with open hands, asking God to fill you with the strength you need to overcome them.

"So if I'm single and struggling with this whole lust and sex business, then I should just get married, right? After all, since sex is for marriage, getting married will solve my sex problems, won't it?"

Maybe.

It's true that sex was designed for marriage, and that having sex within the context of marriage will help deal with the temptations of lust. Yet it is entirely possible to have unhealthy, immoral sex within a marriage relationship. Marriage alone will not solve sexual problems or temptations.

It again comes back to the issue of motivation—how are we approaching sex? If our motivation for sex is self-based, if it is in an effort only to gratify our own desires, then it doesn't matter whether it is in marriage or not, we are going down the wrong road.

The secret to sex is that sex is at its best when it's not just about you.

(Read 1 Corinthians 7:3–4)

Look back to your discussions and questions from last week. It is likely that you began to see there can be difficulty involved in living out a God-driven approach to sex.

It's trickier than you think.

After all, how do you avoid thinking about sex when sex is used to sell everything from cars to shampoo? Our entire clothing and entertainment industries are built around sex appeal.

In fact, sex is a primary vehicle for self-worth in our country. According to our society, it doesn't really matter what else you've got going for you—if you're not good in the sack, then you're in trouble.

So as people who don't want our lives to be driven by our desires or by a shallow, self-centered view of sex, what is our response?

We don't have to become prudish social hermits, completely cutting ourselves off from our society. But we do need to take a serious look at what we take into our lives. In some ways, it is the spiritual equivalent of how we approach secondhand smoke.

All of us (whether we are smokers or not) readily agree that smoke is bad for you. It's uncomfortable, unhealthy, and makes for a generally unpleasant experience. It does not dominate our minds or determine every choice we make, but we are aware of it. If we go into a restaurant where smoking is permitted, we make the choice—stay or leave, smoking or non-smoking? We become even more aware when someone who is sensitive to smoke—a baby or young child, perhaps—is present. We will scope out the situation ahead of time and make decisions with the health of the weaker individual in mind. We guard our health on a moment-by-moment basis, and think nothing of it.

The Bible calls us to a similar approach when it comes to our hearts. Read Proverbs 4:23, then Matthew 15:16–20. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, says in the first passage that the heart is the source of life. It is the wellspring of all you are, the essence of all that God made you to be. If it gets corrupted by outside influences, then you are in deep trouble indeed.

Jesus then takes this idea and plays it out even further. Keep in mind that He is talking to religious types who are ticked off because his followers aren't obeying their made-up religious rules. Jesus responds by going right to this principle that Solomon laid out—it isn't the outside actions that show whether you are in relationship with God. It is what comes out of your heart.

So how does this apply to sex?

First, we need to recognize that sexual influence and sexual temptations are significant issues. We have nothing to gain by minimizing or ignoring sexual temptation. If we recognize that what is being offered in temptation is not what we ultimately want, then it makes sense to do whatever is necessary to avoid that temptation. Whether that is seeking community, avoiding situations or canceling a magazine or cable subscription, it is worth it.

Second, we also recognize that we are not defined by sex, like our culture would tell us. Our worth comes from our connection with God. If anything in our life is convincing us that we are lacking, it has to go. If we have to have the latest fashions in order to feel worthy of love and affection, then we are not guarding our hearts. If we are constantly bouncing from one relationship to the next, looking for physical satisfaction, we are not guarding our hearts.

This is not just another rule to follow, another thing to check off the list. That was never God's goal. Jesus himself said, "I have come so that you can have life, and have it to the fullest." Jesus didn't say, "guard your heart" so that you wouldn't have any fun. He said it because he knew that he was going to be dying so that we could have life, and he didn't want us to give away the life that he died for.

He made us able to enjoy life-giving, mind-blowing sex. He died so we would be able to enjoy life-giving, mind-blowing sex. Don't settle for just sex.

For Discussion

How has the media influenced your life when it comes to the topic of sex? What insecurities or lies have you bought into as a result?

What are you tempted to define yourself by? Looks? Relationships?

Physical intimacy? These will be your weak spots. Discuss specific and practical ways you can avoid temptation and guard your heart in these areas.

Take a few minutes and share an experience you had with God, a moment you had with a friend or any other time that you received forgiveness and freedom as a result of moving towards purity in your relationship with God. Celebrate that with your group.

Challenge

As we wrap up this study, spend time with God asking him to reveal his best for you. If you're still feeling burdened or uncomfortable, ask if there is an area you haven't turned over to God. If you are still carrying a weight around, your challenge is to confess that sin to a friend this week. Secrecy only leads to bondage. Read 1 John 1:9 and then Galatians 5:1. Once you've confessed (or for those of you who've already been freed), take time to rejoice in God's healing, and the freedom you've received to live (and enjoy sex) the way God intended.

Romance is only suckers, right?

Wrong. Romance is not a trick to get you to get married. The reality is that marriage keeps you together long enough to actually find love. Love is not a feeling; it is not something that you fall into or out of.

Love is a choice. It is choosing every single day, good and bad, to honor a commitment that you have made. The initial romantic feelings that begin a relationship are nice, but those aren't the full reflection of love. The connection that is formed from years of choosing to care for someone, to honor a commitment—there is no power on earth capable of breaking it, and there is nothing on earth worth trading it for.