

ON SEX & MARRIAGE

From the Elders of The Garden Church

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Is sex good or bad? It seems that, in years past, some Christians have frowned on sex. They've made sex look like a bad thing. However, today, many Christians seem to have swung too far in the opposite direction: *all sex, and every expression of it, is good!* In this paper, we hope to show that sex is indeed a very good thing, however it is also our intent to show that sex, outside of God's design, is in fact destructive and sinful.

The Role of Sex Within Marriage

Starting from a broad view of the purpose or role of sex, we can refer directly to a few passages of Scripture (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 6, 7). The purposes of sex can then be summarized to be consummation of marriage, procreation, love, and pleasure.¹ We can judge the propriety of sex in a given context based on its ability to achieve these purposes. These purposes, though, are subordinate to the ultimate purpose of sex (or anything we do for that matter): the glorification of God. We see clearly in Scripture that we can either glorify God through sex or we can use it as a form of rebellion (Glorifying—See Song of Solomon, 1 Cor 6:19-20. Rebelling—1:24-25, 1 Cor 6:18). It is interesting and revealing that sex is never brought up in the Bible in a morally neutral sense: it either glorifies God or it separates us from him.

Can Sex Outside of Marriage Glorify God?

In short, no. Sex that is truly beautiful and glorifying to God is sex within marriage. And not only that, but sex outside of marriage is sin against the Creator. We understand, however, that the short-term ramifications of this are not easy, and that a number of questions arise. While we don't have the space to answer them all and do a full exegetical study on this question in this memo, here are a few brief answers:

Isn't the Bible silent on this? While you won't find a verse which says, "don't have sex outside of marriage," the Bible is not silent. In the Bible, God's Moral Law explicitly condemns any sex outside of a Biblical marriage between a husband and wife. And there are many verses in the New Testament which speak to this as well. For example, Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well shows that living with a man she is not married to is sin, along with the Apostle's instructions on marriage, purity, and fleeing sinful lusts. The Bible clearly shows us that sex is for marriage.

But what if it's too hard to abstain? God's will that we live with self control (2 Thes. 4:3-5). Not to mention self control is a production and enablement of the Spirit (Gal 5:22,23). The world tells you it's impossible to abstain; that's actually a lie. Many, many Godly men and women have found that, with God's help, they can freely abstain from all sexual activity with joy.

So should I get married? God calls us to commitment. (Eph 5:21-6:9) – No matter which type of relationship we're talking about, God calls us to be committed. Commitment (in a romantic context) means loving someone, and being faithful to them regardless of your current emotions and desires. In 1 Corinthians

¹ Taken from Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life*

7, Paul makes it clear that it's better to marry than to burn. If you are burning with desire, yet pursuing holiness and Godliness, and want to get married, then find a Godly man or woman and marry them! However, if God does not give you the gift of marriage in the moment, remember that singleness is also a gift. While being single sacrifices the joy of sex within marriage, being single comes with many opportunities to glorify God, serve fellow man, and live a full life.

So Let's Talk About Sex Within Marriage

Provided that we believe all sex outside of marriage to be dishonoring to God, we can look briefly examine the ways that sex is a gift from God, to glorify God, within marriage. As a rule in general for marriage (Eph 5:25-33) a husband and wife are to seek the good of their spouse through self-sacrificial service; this general rule applies specifically to marital sex as well. "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." (1 Cor 7:3-4) While it is extremely easy to view sex as a means to obtain personal pleasure, we must fight against the temptation to view it as such. Because while pleasure is a good and God-honoring purpose of sex, to view our own pleasure as *the* purpose subverts the ultimate purpose of glorifying God by loving and serving our spouses. Paul goes on, "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (v. 5) Here we see that sex is, indeed, mandated in the sense that a spouse should not deprive their partner. A Biblical marriage, then, barring unforeseen physical problems, *should involve* regular sex. Sex is a good gift God gives to His children, and it is also one of the best ways that husbands and wives can sacrificially serve their spouses. Married couples, then, are not to forsake having sex regularly. To regularly deny sex within a marriage would be sin (even if it is mutual). Sex, however, is not essential to the overarching purpose of marriage; namely, *providing a living example of God's love for his people through the continual love and sacrifice of each spouse* is the purpose of marriage. In the case of extreme medical conditions or other issues that would prevent a couple from having sex, this ultimate purpose of marriage can still be realized fully.

What Constitutes a Biblical Marriage?

As Pastors, we've heard it: *We're having sex. We just believe that we're 'married in the eyes of God' now, so it's okay. We'll get married in the 'eyes of the state' later.* Is it possible to have sex, and therefore be married in the eyes of God, yet not married in the eyes of the state?

The first wedding was performed by God before the fall in Genesis 1-3. God brought Eve to Adam and he received her as a gift. Marriage, according to creation, is a union between one man who leaves father and mother and clings to one woman for life, living without shame in a one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:23-25).

In our culture, today, it's a valid question to ask, "What, then, constitutes a Biblical marriage?" Four additional questions often asked.

1) Does sexual intercourse alone constitute a marriage? Sexual intercourse (becoming one flesh) is the seal and consummation of a marriage (Gen. 2:24, Mt. 19:5, Eph. 5:31) but not a marriage in and of itself. According to the Levitical law, sex before marriage was a crime punishable by death, not a wedding. In 1 Cor. 7, sex before marriage was seen as immorality, not marriage. Sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a Biblical marriage.

2) Is a ceremony necessary? Jesus himself attended and served at a wedding ceremony (Jn. 2). While this doesn't, in and of itself, mean that Jesus required a ceremony, it does mean that he honored and participated in the cultural expression of "coming together as one flesh." Marriage is not a private event between two people but begins with a public proclamation of the union. Every culture has some sort of event, covenant, or ceremony that accompanies a new marriage union. Individuals should honor their cultural customs in proclaiming commitment before witnesses. In our culture, this involves a wedding ceremony.

3) Is a marriage license necessary? Romans 13:1-7 explains that earthly government is a representative of God's own authority on earth and ought to be obeyed. As seen in creation, God's authority is at the center of a Biblical marriage. If there is a human government in place which regulates and blesses marriages, the government ought to be viewed as God's representative earthly authority and the marital institution ought to abide by the law. Where that government may require unbiblical standards for marriage, where no government may be in place, or where a government may not have formal procedures for marriage, then Christian marriages should go on without government recognition. In our culture, the government does formally recognize Biblical marriages and so therefore, Christians in the U.S. who desire marriage, in order to honor God, must receive a marriage license.

4) Does long-term cohabitation constitute marriage? In John 4, Jesus meets the woman at the well. He says to her, "You have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband." This woman is living with and presumably having intercourse with a man who is not her husband. Jesus, then, did not believe that long-term cohabitation constitutes a marriage.

In summary, a Biblical marriage is constituted through following the laws of the land where applicable (i.e. obtaining a marriage license), publicly recognizing the new union according to cultural customs, and, as long as it is physically possible, consummating the new union through sexual intercourse.

Conclusion

Sex is a wonderful gift of God and to be part of God's gift of marriage. Married couples should, if physically possible, regularly enjoy sex as an act of love for God and one another. Marriage, and therefore sex, is a picture of our union with God. It is a mere glimpse. This means that single Christians who abstain from sex (even for an entire life), will not ultimately miss a thing. They can freely abstain because their hope and happiness is Heaven, not in this earth. Married couples must remain faithful and find only one another as objects of sexual gratification. Living in these ways, for both singles and marrieds, is not restrictive but is living freely in the way God created us. There is only true happiness in holiness.

Additional Q&A

In a dating relationship, How far is too far?

All sexual enjoyment and gratification is part of the gift of marriage. First, anything that involves direct stimulation of genitalia would clearly be sinful. This would include oral sex, fondling, or excessive "making out." Sex *within marriage* is not merely the act of intercourse but all foreplay and sexual arousal leading to intercourse. Therefore, outside of marriage, these things are sin and should be avoided. Secondly, anything that *could lead* directly to sexual sins should be avoided. Hebrews 12:1: "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." In a nutshell, asking "how far is too far?" is probably the wrong question. The better question would be "How can I pursue holiness and love my boyfriend/girlfriend in a way that leads them toward Jesus?"

Is pornography or romance books okay as long as it stimulates good marital sex?

Here, the issue at stake is complete fidelity to one's spouse. Biblically speaking marital fidelity goes far beyond mere physical restraint. It also includes mental and emotional restraint (See Matthew 5:28). The possible 'ends justify the means' argument of saying that consumption of pornography or erotic literature leads to *good marital sex* does not hold water. Allowing oneself to be aroused by another, regardless of the reason, is in direct conflict with the Bible's portrayal of marriage. This is not to mention the fact that if pornography is sought to 'improve' marital sex, then the intent of sex is almost certainly not to self-sacrificially love one's spouse and glorify God but to instead pursue pleasure (which, as mentioned above, subverts the true purpose of sex). There are other arguments to be made against using pornography or erotic literature, but it is my belief that it would be especially damaging to marital intimacy and should be firmly discouraged in the pastoring and teaching of our church members.