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THE RIGHT AND WRONG PLACE FOR SEX

Hebrews 13:4

By

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Hebrews Lesson 52

The Right and Wrong Place for Sex
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Perhaps you're wondering why I would spend an entire message on a single verse that is fairly easy to understand, a verse that most churchgoers would agree with. Let me explain.

Over the past 40 years, our culture has taken a U-turn away from the Christian view of marriage and sexual morality that was prevalent before that time. While divorce and sexual immorality are not new, they used to be frowned upon and marital faithfulness was viewed as desirable. But beginning in the 1960's, our culture threw off Christian standards and openly embraced "free" sex and easy divorce. Openness toward homosexuality began to make inroads, so that now it is widely promoted as a way of life that should not only *not* be condemned, but be accepted as normal.

It would be naive to think that the church is insulated from these powerful cultural trends. Frances Shaeffer observed, "People drift along from generation to generation, and the morally unthinkable becomes thinkable as the years move on" (cited by Erwin Lutzer, *The Truth About Same-Sex Marriage* [Moody Press], p. 57). It is a commonly known fact that the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is no different than that of our culture at large.

Also, evangelicals are not doing well in the area of sexual purity. *Leadership* ([Winter, 1988], pp. 12-13, 24), a journal for pastors, commissioned a poll to determine how common is pastoral indiscretion. They found that since entering local church ministry, 23 percent of pastors had done something with someone other than their spouse that they considered sexually inappropriate. Twelve percent admitted to having extra-marital intercourse. Among those who were not pastors, the figures doubled! Also, 20 percent of pastors admitted to looking at sexually oriented media at least once a month, and that was before the internet! I assume that the numbers have not gotten better in the ensuing years.

Because of the importance of godly marriages as the foundation of our church and society, our text is extremely important. The

connection with the preceding context is that love of the brethren (13:1) must start in the home, between Christian couples. To practice biblical love, husbands and wives must guard themselves against sexual infidelity. To restrict sex to marriage was a novel idea to many in the first century. Men often had mistresses or could go to temple prostitutes. To call people to lifelong fidelity to a single spouse was radically counter-cultural. It has become so again in our culture. We have an opportunity, through moral purity and godly marriages, to shine in the darkness around us for Jesus Christ. We can sum up our text:

Since God ordained marriage and sex within marriage, He will judge those who practice sex outside of marriage.

Before we look at the verse, note that Satan tries to get us to go to extremes on one side or the other. If he can't get us to move towards sexual promiscuity, he tempts us with asceticism. Asceticism is the idea that you attain godliness by denying yourself certain things that are not prohibited in Scripture, whether food, certain comforts, or sexual pleasure in marriage. The apostle Paul strongly condemns asceticism in Colossians 2:16-23, where he concludes (v. 23), "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." In 1 Timothy 4:3, he warns against "men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth." So we need the balance of Scripture to avoid extremes.

1. Marriage, including the sexual relationship in marriage, is to be held in honor among all.

The word *honor* means *precious* or *valuable*. Paul uses it of "precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12). Peter uses the word to describe the "precious blood" of Christ (1 Pet. 1:19) and God's "precious and magnificent promises" (2 Pet. 1:4). "Marriage bed" is a euphemism for sex in marriage.

- A. We should honor marriage because God ordained it at creation.

Marriage is honorable or precious because God instituted it in the Garden, before sin entered this world. Before that, He con-

cluded that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and so He created Eve for Adam. Since marriage comes from God and was begun with the first man and woman, it should be held in honor among all. Note further:

- (1) All three persons of the Trinity honor marriage.

God the Father honored marriage by instituting it in the Garden. God the Son honored marriage by performing His first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). He also confronted the loose divorce practices that had evolved in Jewish society and reaffirmed God's original intent in marriage (Matt. 19:1-9). God the Holy Spirit honored marriage by inspiring the apostle Paul to write that marriage is an earthly picture of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:25-33; see also Rev. 21:9).

- (2) Honorable marriage as ordained by God is a covenant between a man and a woman for life.

God created *one woman* for Adam, *not* many women and *not* a man! While God tolerated *polygamy* in the Old Testament, you cannot find a single example of a harmonious polygamous marriage. It always created problems. Also, while God tolerates *divorce* under certain conditions, it always reflects the hardness of the human heart (Matt. 19:8) and God states plainly that He hates it (Mal. 2:16). As for the idea of *homosexual* "marriage," there is no biblical basis for it, in spite of the attempts of some to justify it. Homosexuality is uniformly condemned in the Bible as sin (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).

It is important to affirm that biblical marriage is a *lifelong covenant* relationship (Mal. 2:14). The sexual union is to be restricted within the bounds of that covenant relationship. To engage in sex outside of marriage is sin.

I want to mention several ways that we dishonor marriage and then some ways that we can honor marriage.

B. We dishonor marriage...

- (1) By viewing celibacy as more spiritual.

Paul makes it clear that celibacy is a special gift from God that enables a person to remain single and control sexual desires so that he or she has more time to be devoted to the Lord. But he readily

acknowledges that not all have this gift (1 Cor. 7:1-2, 8-9, 32-35). As we've already seen, he specifically condemns those who forbid marriage (1 Tim. 4:3).

But in spite of Paul's warning against those who forbid marriage, the early church developed the view that it is more spiritual to be celibate. Origen, an early church father, had himself castrated so that he could be free of sexual temptation. Augustine, who had a concubine and a son with her, thought that he had to give her up and devote himself to celibacy to follow Christ. I think it's sad that he did not marry her. He viewed sex in marriage as a necessary evil to procreate children, but not as God's gift to be enjoyed. The Roman Catholic requirement that priests be celibate furthers the view that celibacy is more spiritual. Martin Luther broke with that unbiblical view when he married a former nun and extolled the blessings of marital love.

(2) By saying that homosexual "marriage" is valid.

I've already commented on this, but let me add that we do not hate homosexuals by proclaiming God's holy standards. Sin of any kind always damages those who engage in it. If I saw someone blindly running toward a cliff, the loving thing to do is to yell, "Stop!" We do not love people if we do not warn about the dangers of all sexual sin. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 6:18), "Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body." We dishonor God's institution of marriage and we do not practice biblical love if we do not proclaim His standards of sexual purity.

(3) By following our culture's no-fault divorce practices.

I realize that many Christians have been divorced, and that if you could, you would turn back the clock and do many things differently. I do not want to add to your grief and pain. But I must set the biblical standard back where it belongs. As God's people, we must reverse the trend of the past 40 years. People should be able to look at Christian marriages and marvel that we have stayed together and worked through difficulties because of the covenant that we entered into before God.

(4) By marrying an unbeliever.

Many Christians do not even consider it a sin to marry an unbeliever, and yet God calls it an abomination (Mal. 2:11). Paul makes it clear that we are not to be bound together with unbelievers and that we are only free to marry in the Lord (2 Cor. 6:14; 1 Cor. 7:39). Since marriage is to be a picture of Christ and the church, it destroys that picture to enter into marriage with an unbeliever. I've had professing Christian young women tell me that they've prayed about marrying an unbeliever, and "feel a peace" about doing so. But it is *never* peace from God, because He does not give His peace when we sin. You and your children will suffer the consequences if you enter into such a marriage.

If you are already married to an unbeliever, Paul instructs you to remain in that marriage, if possible (1 Cor. 7:12-16). Perhaps God will be gracious in converting your mate. But stories of how God worked to convert an unbelieving mate never justify sinning by entering such a mixed marriage in the first place (Rom. 6:1-2).

- (5) By having sexual relations outside of the marriage covenant.

This is the main point of our text. Note that the two parts of the second half of the verse correspond to the two parts of the first half of the verse. "Fornicators" (single people who have sex) dishonor the institution of marriage. "Adulterers" (married people who have sex with someone other than their spouse) defile the marriage bed. (For some strange reason, the NIV reverses the commands at the end of the verse and adds the word "all" before "sexually immoral." This confuses the symmetrical structure of the verse.) The Greek text omits the verb, which must be supplied from the context. Some versions take it as indicative ("Marriage is honorable..."). But in light of the commands in the context, it should probably be understood as exhortation, as in the NASB.

We've seen that we should honor marriage because God ordained it at creation. We dishonor marriage by saying that celibacy is more spiritual; by saying that homosexual "marriage" is valid; by following our culture's no-fault divorce practices; by marrying an unbeliever; and, by having sexual relations outside of marriage.

- C. We honor marriage:

Here, we could go through the same list as in the previous point and state the opposite. We honor and affirm marriage by viewing it as just as spiritually fulfilling as celibacy, depending on one's spiritual gift. We honor it by holding firmly to heterosexual marriage as God's only option. We honor it by staying committed to our mate and working through difficulties, rather than bailing out. We honor marriage by entering into it only with a committed believer, so that we can raise our children in the Lord. And, we honor marriage by abstaining from sexual immorality. But I want to focus on two things:

(1) By guarding ourselves from sexual sin.

No Christian deliberately jumps into sexual sin, but as *Leadership* (*ibid.*, p. 12) reported (in 1988), among subscribers of *Christianity Today* magazine who are *not* pastors, "45 percent indicated having done something they considered sexually inappropriate, 23 percent said they had had extramarital intercourse, and 28 percent said they had engaged in other forms of extramarital sexual contact." Clearly, this is a *major* area where Satan hits believers! It is not enough to sit here and agree with God's standards for sexual purity. We must have a strategy to guard ourselves from falling.

The major element in this strategy is to *maintain a close daily walk with Christ and a close relationship with your mate*. If we drift from the Lord and are not spending consistent time in the Word and prayer, we become vulnerable to temptation. If we grow distant from our mate, we are more open to temptation. In the *Leadership* survey, 78 percent of the pastors who failed morally said that the main factor was physical and emotional attraction. Forty-one percent listed marital dissatisfaction.

As I've repeatedly emphasized, all sin begins in the mind. This means that to guard ourselves from sexual sin, *we must judge it and turn from it the moment it enters our minds*. Jesus made this point graphically when He said (Matt. 5:27-30):

You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one

of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus did not mean literally to maim yourself, but He did mean to underscore the serious nature of mental lust. If you do not cut it off, Jesus says that you're going to hell! To obey Jesus' words, you need to avoid watching TV programs, movies, or videos that tempt you to lust. Devise ways to block pornography from the internet. Be accountable to another brother in Christ.

Also, to guard yourself from sexual sin, *memorize Scripture, which transforms your mind*. Psalm 119:9, 11 states, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. . . . Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You."

Another piece of the strategy is to *put a fence around your marriage*. If you go to the Grand Canyon and don't want to fall over the edge, either stay behind the railing or don't go near an edge where there is no railing. Putting a fence around your marriage means that you do not enter into a close friendship with a member of the opposite sex. These relationships often start innocently enough. "We are able to talk as brother and sister." Beware! If you find yourself as a married person attracted to a member of the opposite sex, cut off any contact and avoid any situation that could lead to temptation. Don't go near the edge!

Let me add one other way to honor marriage that is implied by our text:

- (2) By enjoying the totality of the marriage relationship, including the physical relationship.

"Marriage bed" refers to sex in marriage, and it is not dirty. D. H. Field writes (*The New Dictionary of Theology* [IVP], ed. by Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J. I. Packer, p. 638), "The history of the church betrays a far less positive attitude to sexuality than the Bible's." He goes on to talk about the early influence of ascetic idealism. Then he says, "With very few exceptions, patristic and medieval writers condemned the sensual pleasure of intercourse as sinful. Their attitude to marriage, too, was at best ambivalent."

But the Bible affirms the pleasure of the sexual relationship in marriage, both for men and women. Solomon instructs his son to let his wife's breasts satisfy him at all times, and to be exhilarated with her love (Prov. 5:19). The Song of Solomon extols the joys of sex in marriage for both partners. Paul tells both husbands and wives that they do not have authority over their own bodies, but their spouse does, and that they have a responsibility to meet the sexual needs of their mate as a preventative to immorality (1 Cor. 7:2-5). Sarah refers to sexual relations with her husband as having pleasure with him (Gen. 18:12).

Sex in marriage is directly related to the interpersonal relationship. God designed it that way. There must be mutual sensitivity, caring, and respect in the relationship between husband and wife as the foundation for the enjoyment of the sexual aspect. But I am emphasizing what Paul states, that it is a God-given preventative against sexual sin (1 Cor. 7:2). I once counseled a couple where the husband had fallen into adultery. He and his wife had not had sexual relations in over ten years and she assumed that everything was just fine! He was really angry about this, but he hadn't said anything. When a neighbor woman became friendly, he fell. Sadly, the couple eventually divorced. It all could have been avoided if they had followed the clear teaching of Scripture: "Stop depriving one another" (1 Cor. 7:5).

Our text issues a strong warning:

2. God will judge those who practice sexual immorality.

Many Scriptures hammer home this warning:

1 Cor. 6:9-10: Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

Eph. 5:5-6: For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Rev. 21:8: But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Many other Scriptures give the same warning (Matt. 5:27-30; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:4-7; Rev. 22:15). While believers do not need to fear God's eternal judgment, Scripture is clear that if you *habitually practice* sexual immorality, you may not be a genuine Christian (1 John 3:7-10). If you are a genuine Christian, God will discipline you severely if you engage in sexual sin (Heb. 12:5-11).

While He forgives us when we repent, He does not necessarily remove the consequences of our sin (see the life of David, 2 Sam. 12:10-14). He may forgive your sin, but you contracted a sexual disease that could be untreatable or fatal. Some will protest, "But we're under grace!" But the book that was written to explain God's grace also warns (Gal. 6:7-8), "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." But I want to end with this good news:

3. God will forgive those who repent of their sin and trust in the blood of Christ.

Immediately following Paul's warning against God's judgment on sexual immorality, he adds these wonderful words, "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). Neither homosexuality, adultery, nor any kind of sexual perversion are beyond God's forgiveness. First John 1:9 graciously promises, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Paul calls himself the chief of sinners, and yet he found mercy at the cross (1 Tim. 1:15-16). You can experience God's forgiveness and gift of eternal life if you will turn from your sin and trust in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The late comedian, George Burns, used to say that he could remember the time when the air was clean and sex was dirty. Bibli-

cally speaking, sex has never been dirty in the context that God ordained for it: in lifelong covenant marriage between a man and a woman. That's the right place for sex. The wrong place is outside of such covenant marriage, where it incurs God's judgment.

If God's Word is true, our culture is in moral darkness. But when the darkness is greatest, the light shines the brightest. If we will maintain God's standards of moral purity, He will use us to shine in this dark world with the good news of God's forgiveness and with the news that sex is clean in God-ordained marriages.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we demonstrate God's love for homosexuals and yet His wrath against their sin? Do you start with love or wrath?
2. What are some other ways (than those in the message) that Christians can plan *not* to fall into sexual sin?
3. Can a true believer be "addicted" (*enslaved* is the biblical word) to sexual sin? (Matt. 5:27-30; Rom. 6:17-18; 1 John 3:7-10.)
4. How would you counsel a single person who wants to be married, but cannot find a suitable mate?

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