



Ministry Papers.

Sexual Ethics.

Biblical clarity for the culturally confused

SEX AND THE ECLIPSE OF JESUS

Everyone thinks it obvious that the 1950's were a period of sexual conformity and suffocating conservatism. We have seen it on TV. Everyone thinks it obvious that the 2010's are a flexible and free festival of sexuality. We have seen it on the internet. Christians are often confused about what to make of this two-to-three generational cultural revolution. The wider culture now says 'no rules', and the church culture seems to say 'rules'. However, even when the church says 'rules', no-one is then sure what 'rules' they are! Who cares! All rules, clear or not, are now under question anyway.

But what is more astounding and more important in contemporary Christian sexual ethics is not a lack of clarity about rules but a lack of *Jesus*. Forget the 1950's and let the 2010's also fade into the next whatever-fad of history. We don't care that much for culture, whether it is old or new. What of *Jesus*? What if Jesus was running the sex ed. class? What would he say?

We don't have to wonder. Jesus was really clear about this. Let's not be fooled into thinking otherwise.

ONE MAJOR STORY

Jesus takes a different approach to us. We tend to approach sex as a list of many topics: what about sex outside of marriage? What about gay sexuality? What about sexual practice? What about dating? What about living together? There are too many topics, frankly. And if we approach them one by one it will feel bitsy and unsatisfying.

Instead, Jesus begins by confirming one major story. It is the old-school story of Adam and Eve. He just can't believe people don't know it, and that they don't assume it has final authority. He says,

"Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female? For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no-one separate."

Matthew 19:4-6

The bit not in bold is straight from Genesis 2, and the rest in bold is Jesus' comment on it. Read both again. It is super-clear that Jesus' takes the major story of sexual ethics from the oldest story in the bible and confirms it. If anything, his comment deepens it.

One major story, therefore, sets the sexual expectations for God's people and the rest of the bible confirms it. Marriage is a deep union (including sexual) between a man and a woman, and it establishes a new family, which is not merely private, but understood by others for the good of the wider community. This has been denied by others, refuted, mocked and criticized to within an inch of its life. We will seek to re-confirm it as we begin to address a few of the many topics, and also point out why the million revisions of it are wrong.

...SO MANY TOPICS

Sex outside of marriage?

As is very clear in what Jesus says, sex is for marriage. This is not a thin rule, but a deep understanding that when you give yourself to someone sexually, you unite yourself with them in such a deep way that the bible calls it 'one flesh'. This is not just the literal and obvious flesh. It is a real knitting together of whole persons. Therefore, if you break up with someone you sleep with (except for some meaningless passing sexual encounter, but is there really such a thing?), you can expect it will hurt like hell and feel like someone is tearing chunks of your flesh out. That *is* exactly how it feels, and it hurts us in many, many ways. We should expect this given what Jesus says about 'one flesh'. Jesus loves us enough to tell us this.

Jesus also loves us enough to call it 'sexual immorality' and to remind us that it is not what God desires and is, in fact, 'sin'. (Matt 15:19) 'Sexual immorality', by the way, is the new translation for 'fornication' – sex outside of marriage. The rest of the New Testament agrees with Jesus and also calls it sin (1 Cor 5:9-11; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5; 2 Cor 12:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:3-6; Rev. 2:20; 9:21). It is true that it is no worse than any other sin before God, and that Jesus talks more about some other sins, but it still remains a sin. Ignoring this sin will almost certainly mean we ignore other sins too.

What is more, while sexual immorality is just one of many sins before God, it is a sin that wreaks more havoc than most between people. We can often forgive without great pain someone slandering us, or being rude, or lying. But sleep with me and then dispense with me and I will have to work much harder to forgive. It simply cuts us very deeply. This just isn't all as great and easy as our culture makes it seem.

“When you arrive at Jesus a bit broken by sexual experience, it is great relief to find him explain better than anyone why things so grand have also been so rubbish. As hard as faithfulness to Jesus can be after experience, the depth of his explanation of life and sexuality is a strong indication we are right to go forward with him.”

- Jim.

How far is too far?

If there is no sex outside of marriage, then what is 'sex'? As they used to ask, 'how far is too far'? Amazingly, Jesus never answered this question. It could be either because you can indulge all you want, or because Jesus never thought his disciples would ask such a rule-based and rule-dodging question. It is the second, of course. He expected us to get the heart of things, not to the edge of a law. Let's put it negatively and positively. Negatively, the heart of our sin here is 'lust' (which Jesus equates with adultery in Matthew 5:28). Positively, Jesus expects us to get that our beloved is precious, and worth marrying, and worth being gentle and modest with and respectful towards on the way there.

If you want a rule, Jesus doesn't give you one. What he does do is tell you what sex is all about. The better question is not 'how far?' – but 'what will help me love this person in Christ whom God has made and blessed me with relationship?'

“Growing up in the church, I’ve read and heard many rules around sexuality and probably made up even more in my head. Too easily I forget God is a holy God and I’m tempted to water down his requirement for my whole life to be set apart from my culture for him (ie holy). As I battle temptation, particularly in my thoughts, I think of the rules and whether I’m keeping/breaking/bending. Ephesians 5:3 is the sharp rebuke I need to keep hearing as God says there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality. There is no blending sin and purity by our holy God. Oh so thankful for his Spirit who whispers (sometimes shouts) ‘not even a hint’ and for his grace to forgive in this ongoing battle.”

- Laura.

What if you are engaged?

What if I am engaged?

Let me answer that questions with a question: 'what if being engaged is not yet being married?' Then you have your answer. Sex outside of marriage is sex outside of marriage. God designed sex as a grand part of the grand design we call marriage. Engagement doesn't rate a big mention in the bible. It's an OK invention, but the bible is really on about marriage.

At this point, by the way, I want to mention that long engagements (as has become common) really puts couples in some distress. I understand that marriages now demand three helicopters and it takes a while to book them, but at what cost? I don't mean cost in money. Marriage was never meant to be so hard.

“Engagement was hard. The easy thing would have been to give in to immorality and say ‘It doesn’t matter, we’re almost married’. The better thing was to acknowledge that transgression was still sin (which it plainly was) and be humbled by grace and stay in the fight for obedience. If you don’t feel like you are in a spiritual battle in this, it is not likely that your peace reveals that you that you have won. More likely you have lost, and your peace is a false peace. You don’t have to have peace all the time in life, and you should expect a battle for holiness to be a bare-knuckle fist-fight.”

- Jim.

Marriage...do you know how hard it is to just get to a wedding day?

Marriage has suffered in our culture a death of a thousand cuts. It has been reduced to a contract of goods, and at the same time exalted to a mythical state of human well-being. It has been commercialized and filled with material fantasies and celebrity burdens. It has been the shackle of a conservative past and the prize of a progressive future. Our confusion about marriage mirrors a confusion about many other things in our society and relationships.

Marriage is very simple according to Jesus. One man. One woman. It is a new relationship of life-long commitment which includes sexual expression. It is a community which is helped to clearly understand this new relationship for its own clarity and for their support. Such marriage is to be 'honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure', according to Hebrews 13:5.

In our culture, one thing marriage has become is a high logistical bar to get over (finances, fashions, seating plans, globe-trotting honeymoons). Nice if you can afford it, but a difficult & slow torture if you can't. Such a culture breeds frustration, stress and sin. What a shame for a reality that is meant to bring great health to all. There is a simpler way.

Honestly, I can get you married for under \$5000 if you are willing to be genuinely Christian-counter-cultural. I might even be able to help you do it cheaper than that. Just be prepared to dash some dreams on a greater vision.

“My friend Ruth is a good example of another, simpler way. They did their wedding for about \$8k in about 4-5 months. She kept her priorities right in the big and small. I called her BrideChilla. Coastal wedding, simple breakfast reception, a few photos taken by a friend, prayed for a dress around the \$800 mark (got one) and cut out a lot of the extra bits (kitchen tea, crazy hens, table decorations, no hipster engagement photo shoot). She and her fiancé focused a lot on marriage counseling and mentoring from another couple at college and prepared solidly for marriage.”

- Niki.

What if you are in an active sexual relationship and come to Christ?

Amen. All of us come to Christ from an un-Christ-like culture. Jesus says angels skip for joy in heaven. None of us had half a foot in his door. So we all have made a massive cross-cultural, life-altering leap in following him! I think of it as like jumping trains mid-journey. Not much wonder we sometimes feel we are being torn between two very different directions and it is all happening fast. What to do?

Jesus is clear - when we come to him we 'deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him' (Matthew 16:24). Jesus paid the high cost of making us a disciple by his blood, but there is a cost in following Him. In truth, following Him is greatest gain, but there is a cost. When I came to Christ I had to re-order many things. So does everyone.

There are two obvious things to do – if it is wise, and you have most of the reality of marriage already present in your relationship – why not bring it all before God and ask for his blessing? Why not complete your joy with marriage?

Alternatively, if you recognize there are really persistent anti-Christian elements in your relationship, why not end the relationship? Painful as this is (and I don't under-estimate the pain of this for a second!), many have done so wisely (Matthew 19:29).

If you have committed yourself to that person very deeply, we may want to talk much more about this, because God does not love people breaking trust with each other lightly. This is complex.

Co-habitation is often an issue here. In short, if you aren't co-habiting and you are Christian, don't start. Jesus is clear that setting up a new family/household is part of marriage. It is wise not to do marriage-stuff until you are married. If you are co-habiting and become Christian, then we have a whole lot of stuff to talk about to cut a path in holiness.

But whatever happens, let's recognize a very understandable moment of very necessary crisis. Jesus called you from afar, and you change your track to get there. Don't let this moment of crisis drive you from him. Jesus is both urgent and patient, so you can change with him now (and you should) but you will also probably have to work it through with him over time (and you can). He is, after all, a sympathetic Lord, who knows what our struggles are like (Hebrews 4:15).

What about gay marriage?

Marriage according to Jesus is one man, one woman. A new relationship of life-long commitment which includes sexual expression. While the bible rejoices in gay people coming to Christ (1 Cor 6:9-11), it does not affirm either homosexual practice or marriage.

Care of same-sex attracted Christians is very important to us. We are not prescribing a pattern of life for gay people who are not Christian any more than we are recommending things to your friends who don't believe. But for our friends, gay or otherwise, who believe in Jesus, we call them with us to let him have the say. As for single Christians, we believe for gay Christians this means celibacy.

It means so much more – it means things like investing in family (both biological and faith family), investing in spiritual friendships, having friends who pray loyally, knowing people who can both rejoice and grieve with you.

But one thing I do know is that for our same-sex attracted brothers and sisters committed to celibacy (as for other single Christians), it is very, very hard to see their friends in Christ being so lax in their sexual ethics.

"As with so many things in life, it is sometimes hard to let Jesus have the ultimate say. Naturally, we want things to be easy and frustration-free, but I've come to see that that isn't always how life pans out. Being same-sex attracted, I know this all too well. The question I keep asking myself is 'is Jesus worth it?' and the overwhelming truth is that he is. I may struggle to see the full extent of his plans, but I trust that he is sufficient and will supply all of my needs- physically, spiritually and relationally. This journey becomes so much easier when there are people in my life who have my back and who are committed to walking alongside me, no matter the cost."

- Joel.

Are you really asking celibacy of me?

Not me. Jesus. I'm not wearing responsibility for anyone's choices but my own. But Jesus is happy to bear the responsibility of such a call in your life. Jesus *never* looked down on celibacy. In fact, he talked it up!

Our culture has idolized marriage and sex. As a result, neither marriage nor sex deliver everything we demand of them. The bible assures us that in the new creation, where there is no need of marriage or sex, we will find our ultimate satisfaction in Jesus, with the church as his bride (Matthew 22:30; Rev 21:2). As a result, the bible actually lifts up another way now and commends it to us. Without putting marriage down (hardly!), the scriptures raise up singleness even more and commend it because it allows people to engage even more freely and devotedly in Christ and his people. Jesus speaks of this in very non-politically correct terms in Matthew 19:12. Paul echoes him in 1 Corinthians 7:34. Most Christians have a long way to go to stick an eye in the marriage idol of our culture and more fully affirm this path.

"Celibacy and singleness, even though by default more than choice, is teaching me that great and meaningful relationships are not just found in marriage. While there are some lonely times or those events I fear rocking up to on my own, I'm thankful for the abundance of Christian brothers and sisters I've already accumulated thus far in life (perhaps I have the capacity to build more being

unmarried).

Among these friends, Sarah & Tim share their home and children with me, and Phill & Janine both chat on the phone and invite me to holiday with them - I'm so thankful that they and others welcome me and don't just stick to nuclear families with a wife, husband and a couple of kids. I think we actually all need each other to keep sharpening our growth in love and godliness and to share the joys and struggles as we each serve appropriately to the circumstances God has put us in.

These friendships with couples and families are a reality check - I'm not as lonely as I'm led to believe by culture; I see the struggles of marriage and parenting and learn it's not easy; I see the joys, and grieve what I don't have. But on the whole, sharing life like this takes that potential loneliness away and I have safe, trusting relationships without being married to any of them."

- Laura.

"What I've noticed at weddings, lately, is that people's real theology comes out. If there's a single person close to 30 or beyond that gets married, it's like Christians all breathe a sigh of relief. So while people affirm singleness is good, people don't really believe it to be the better way.

We all ascribe to a prosperity doctrine in different ways, and it's only when God withholds something we want, or allows us to suffer, that he reveals the real state of our hearts. That's the case with me anyway!

I can be hesitant to find contentment in singleness, not because it's difficult to have, but because I think God will hold a partner back from me if I am reasonably content. But God is good, and if he's able to send down Manna from heaven against all odds, he's able to provide someone in a flash! For me, a lack of contentment is a result of not trusting God that he is good. When I surrender that fear, contentment is quite achievable (not in the sense that desires disappear, but that it's not something that rocks me, and I have joy in God amidst it)."

- Niki.

If I am no good at celibacy and have not found a Christian partner, maybe dating a non-Christian is a lesser evil?

1 Corinthians 7:39 is key. There are two options for the category of single Christians - marry a believer or remain single. So if it's best we don't marry unbelievers, why date one?

"But he / she's supportive and open!"

Great. We'd encourage you not to date them until they become a believer. Link them up with someone to read the bible with and explore Christianity. Put some serious brakes on the relationship while this happens. In fact, put a break in the relationship. It's not your work to convert them because emotions are too difficult to separate if you're invested. If you date them, though they are open, it is most likely you'll experience a slow drift away from Jesus or at the very last, be setting yourself up for a difficult time living for the Lord fully.

"There's no available Christian singles in the church! The only option is to date a non-believer!"

We still haven't faced the reality of celibacy many of us may experience. The choice is not a Christian partner or a partner who is not Christian. The choice is a Christian partner or celibacy. Not many people choose it or want it...the cost seems too great to bear and it's a weird option against

culture both in or out of church. But we should remember that Jesus was fully human and was utterly celibate.

“There was a guy I liked who was not a Christian. He was interested and supportive but I knew that I only wanted to be with someone who loved Jesus like I do. I told him this and encouraged him to meet with the campus bible study worker at his uni. He asked me out and I turned him down. I knew that being with him would imply to him that his faith in God was not important to me. I am so glad I did this. By God’s grace he became a Christian. He asked me out again and I said yes. I am so glad I am now married to someone who encourages me to grow in my love of God and his people. We do ministry and life together and I love it! I am so thankful to God for what he has given me.”

- Katie.

The sadness of shame and judgment

Much of the sadness of sexual sin is fear of shame and judgment. As much as our society has tried to throw off any shame associated with any kind of sexual life, people feel ashamed of sexual sin around church. They feel judged. They sense they are ‘in trouble’. They are angry that this brings trouble but sins like gossip or selfishness don’t. This is a fair and understandable anger. We should come out against gossip and selfishness. Let’s do it. You can start that now.

But sexual sin *does* bring trouble, because God’s assembly does still know somewhere in the back of its biblical brain that it is not right. Proverbs 5:12-14 describes this very well,

“How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teacher’s instruction or turn my ear to my instructors. And I was soon in serious trouble in the assembly of God’s people.”

In my experience, nothing drives people from church more than a significant difference in sexual ethics from their Christian family. It spells all kinds of trouble.

So let’s get rid of guilt and shame! But not how most people think. The best hope for a rejection of shame and judgment is not by redefining sexual ethics for a new age, but by repentance and gentle restoration from gracious people (Galatians 6:1-2). We all sin, and we are all tempted to sin. We all know what it is like. You are not alone.

In our church life, this challenge and restoration is likely to happen in our small groups or when people meet 1:1 to read the bible and pray. It may happen over dinner, or we may break down on the footpath outside, but usually it happens in the deepened relationships of closer disciples. It is here face-to-face that we share most deeply about each other’s lives, and here where we will not want to dodge holding each other to account. What a privilege to have brothers and sisters who love you who will care!

Sex and Leadership

Leaders in Jesus’ church – whether they are preachers, or small group pastors, or Sunday School teachers or youth or song leaders – are subject to a stricter judgment. (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 5:19-20) This is important, because they not only direct themselves but lead others. Others can be lead towards or away from Jesus by them.

For this reason, we love to relieve the burden of leadership from ourselves, or from our brothers and sisters who are leading, when unrepentant sin is present. We do not do it just around sexual sin. We

have done it for love of money, for anger, for divisiveness, but yes, sexual sin is the most common reason.

If you are a leader, you must know that you will be held to account on this. If you are a disciple, you will be held to account too, but if you are a leader, it will likely be very swift and clear.

JESUS IS WORTH IT!

So let's not let sex eclipse Jesus. Jesus is simply more central to the universe and our lives than sexual expression. The fact that this statement takes a minute to accept shows just how deeply our culture has bought sexual expression as the key to life. But it is not – Jesus is! And as one of our testimonies declares - he is worth it!

Jesus asks for all of us when we follow him (Romans 12:1-2). We don't get to pick and choose what parts of life we give him. We trust him to do better with all of it than we would do ourselves.

We have to let Jesus not only be Lord in all the earth, but also of our sexual lives.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Getting this in paper form from a pastor up front may not communicate this well. That is why we have filled it with testimonies of your brothers and sisters who you can reach out too and question. You can question me too as the pastor!

We write this for mutual support. We really do have to support each other in these things. Jesus gives us His Spirit as an advocate, a helper (John 14:26-27) and he gives us each other.

We are well-equipped to do this. Whether we are single, married or divorced - whether we are gay or straight – we are all sexually broken and all sexually redeemed by Jesus. We have listening ears, and much heart to give each other. We are able to uphold each other to God in prayer.

We are ready to share with you in this.

----- share with us -----

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