

God's Good Gift of Sex and Gender

Lesson 1: Foundations from Bible and Culture

What words do non-Christians most associate with Christian sexual morals?

Part I: Our Culture Moment and How We Got Here

Modern Problems

1. Inverted Morality

A huge shift has occurred in our culture in the last decade. Not too long ago, traditional Christian views on sex were regarded as simply old-fashioned. Today, these views are thought of as dangerous to society and harmful to individuals.

The root of this shift goes beyond any Supreme Court decision; it precedes the sexual revolution that started in the 1960s. It is simply one manifestation of the larger revolution of in understanding the self that goes back centuries to the Enlightenment.

Christian prohibitions about marriage, homosexuality, and transgenderism make no sense to most people because of their belief that sexuality is crucial for the expression of identity. And behind that belief is the very concept of the modern self.

Identity is now found in one's desires, while in the past it was found in one's duties and relationships with God, family, and community. Your sexual desires are considered a key part of becoming an authentic person.

The Christian claim that sex is only legitimate within marriage, which is defined as a bond between one man and one woman, is naturally thought of as repressive, even bigoted. Once sexual choice became a supreme human right, labeling any sexual behavior as deviant or sinful poses an existential threat.

Does it match your experience that Christian views on sex and gender are perceived as not just old-fashioned but harmful? Where do you see it?

How might recognizing this shift change our dialogue with friends/neighbors on this topic?

2. Disillusioned moderns

The recent #MeToo movement began to expose the serious problems about the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Rarely has the fruit of the sexual revolution been questioned or critiqued. Now some are experiencing a disillusionment with consequences of it.

Consider the NY Times Op-Ed from this Wednesday. The author identifies a widespread dissatisfaction with current sexual behaviors and the struggle of modern relationships. The statistics back up this disillusionment. Rates of sexual activity, partnership, and marriage have reached a 30-year low.¹

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/nearly-half-of-u-s-adults-say-dating-has-gotten-harder-for-most-people-in-the-last-10-years/>

She suggests that the problem might come from a lack of universal rules in sexual relationship.

“This pessimism comes at a moment when we might expect the opposite. After all, one could say that we’re living in a golden age of sexual freedom. The average age of first marriage is rising; it’s more acceptable than ever to remain single or pursue a wide variety of relationship styles. A majority of the public finds premarital sex acceptable; birth control for women is widely available and, with health insurance, often free. Sex positivity is celebrated in progressive circles, with sexual adventurousness championed and inhibition often looked down on. We have breached the ramparts of repression, and the wall of silence that prevented us from expressing our sexuality has, for the most part, fallen.

Getting rid of the old rules and replacing them with the norm of consent was supposed to make us happy. Instead, many people today feel a bit ... lost.”²

What stands out to you about that quote? What are the cultural changes that she believes were positive?

Her concluding reflection is telling: *“Maybe we do have a duty to others, not just to our own desire. We need norms more robust than “anything between two consenting adults goes.”*

The Christian Sexual Revolution

How and why did Christianity’s view on sex ever become popular?

The common “history of sex” describes a story of repression. Ancient Rome, prior to Christianization, we are told, was a place of sexual freedom and diversity. Homosexuality was not stigmatized. Sex outside of marriage was commonplace. Christianity then gained political power and imposed laws that were sexually restrictive.

The argument goes that if we could just go back to a time before Christians transformed our view of sex, society would be a lot better off. Recent historical scholarship has now challenged that narrative.³

The Greco-Roman world *was* permissive, but only to men with power. Women still had to be virgins at marriage and could have sex with no one but their spouses. Husbands could have sex with servants, slaves, prostitutes, poor women, and young boys.

Christianity came on the scene and established humanitarian values like consent and the protection of vulnerable members of society. It promoted individual human dignity and worth that was not dependent upon a hierarchy of power. Millions voluntarily adopted Christianity’s standards long before any Roman emperor became a professing Christian.

² “Straight People Need Better Rules for Sex,” Christine Emba, New York Times, April 7, 2022.

³ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*.

Part II: Biblical Sex and Marriage

1. Image of God, Reflection of the Gospel

Genesis 1:27-28 *“So God created man **in his own image**, in the image of God he created him; **male and female** he created them.” [28] And God blessed them. And God said to them, “**Be fruitful and multiply** and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*

Marriage is between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:18-25; Matt 19.4-6; WCF 24.1)

Marriage is a union between two different yet complementary people.

- Different individuals
- Different families
- Different genders

God joins together to become One

Genesis 2:24 *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

There is something fundamental to marriage about overcoming difference to create a new entity. In this way, marriage becomes a reflection of the gospel (God and Man reconciled in Christ).

Ephesians 5:31–32 *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*

Marriage is open to people of all faiths and none, but marriage itself reflects the good news of the Christian message.

This structure of two different, complementary individuals becoming one is the constant theme in scripture when describing marriage. It is why homosexuality, polygamy, and incest were rejected. They were out of place in the design of marriage.

Marriage, of course, has many purposes. It was instituted by God for mutual help and blessing of husband and wife, for procreation and the raising together of godly children, and to prevent sexual immorality (Gen. 1:28; 2:18; Mal. 2:14-15; 1 Cor. 7:2, 9; WCF 24.2)

2. The Covenant of Marriage

Marriage is a covenant relationship, where a man and a woman make vows before God of fidelity and obligation toward each other.

Hebrews 13:4 *“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, For God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”*

The binding covenant is essential. Only with your partner’s sworn loyalty can the couple transcend a performance-based relationship. Without a covenant, one must constantly earn

acceptability and worth to the other or be discarded. The need to perform will be a roadblock to trust and true intimacy will be impossible.

It is the vow that enables relational intimacy. Sex is a reflection of that intimate trust because it puts us in our most vulnerable position. It invites the other to truly know and be known.

1 Corinthians 7:3-4 *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.*

Without the vow, sex will remain in the tension of performance or self-gratification. We'll feel compelled to "take" from our partner because we won't trust them to give. And, yet, we will feel compelled to perform to the expectations of our partner or be rejected.

"In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love dry up. And when that happens you must remember that ***the essence of marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love.*** So what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions you must BE tender, understanding, forgiving and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love." (emphasis added) -Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

How has the modern acceptance of divorce reshaped marriage? Why is sex important for the health of the marriage?

3. Sex is powerful

God has made it powerful. It is one of the strongest desires a human experiences. Some find it so strong, they cannot control it. It has the power to bring life into the world.

Sex has the Power to Unite: It can hold a marriage together.

Sex has the Power to Destroy: The act itself can abolish a marriage.

Topics for Course

April 24: Gender roles in family and church

May 1: Sin, Temptation, and the Gospel

May 8: Homosexuality

May 15: Gender

May 22: Charge for Christians Today

What else would you like to see discussed?