

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Hebrews #41

Marriage: Precious and Pure
Hebrews 13:1-4

I read the other day that Amazon.com currently lists for sale 151,000 books on marriage, 27,000 books on dating, 12,000 books on attraction, and more than 190,000 books on sex. One would think that with this massive focus on sex and marriage and the plethora of books from which people might draw more information than they could ever hope to process that we, as a society, would have grown up and matured by now and that marriage as the foundation of the family would be strong and held in high regard by all thinking people. But such is so very, very far from reality.

This is largely due, in my opinion, to the fact that the vast majority of these 380,000 books on various aspects of sex and marriage are trash. Although I've only read a handful of them, I feel fairly confident in my conclusion that the advice being doled out in these books and from counselors and on TV and elsewhere is ultimately *contrary to the Bible and destructive of what God had in mind when he created marriage for the human race.*

Of course, I wouldn't want you to get the idea that I'm suggesting it is only now, in our generation, that marriage has fallen on hard times. Sexual immorality has been rampant among humans wherever humans may be found. That is why we come across biblical exhortations like the one before us today in Hebrews 13:4 –

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

Needless to say, this is only one of *four exhortations* found in this portion of Hebrews 13, but my focus today will be on the fourth one and what our author says about sex and marriage. But let me take just a couple of minutes to briefly explain the other three.

Brotherly Love (v. 1)

There is no reason to conclude from this exhortation that these people in the first century were suffering from a lack of love for one another. The way this is framed in the original text indicates that love was already operative among them and that they should be diligent to insure its continuation. It's almost as if he's saying: "Hey folks, you're doing really well when it comes to loving each other and sacrificing for each other and serving each other. So be extra careful about maintaining this beautiful affection and concern you have for one another."

I have every reason to think that what our author said to the Hebrew Christians in the first century God would say to Bridgeway Church today: "Well done! Keep it up! Your love for one another is obvious!"

Hospitality (v. 2)

Our author then turns his attention away from their responsibility toward one another and calls on them to be hospitable toward outsiders and strangers.

This exhortation carried a lot more force back in the first century than it does for us today. In the first century world there weren't dozens if not hundreds of hotels scattered throughout their large cities. People then were far more dependent on the generosity and hospitality of others than they are now. So he's not really talking about whether or not in our day we should consistently invite people over for dinner. That is still an important issue, but it would more likely fall under the heading of the exhortation regarding brotherly love in v. 1.

What's of real interest, though, is the *reason* given why you should be hospitable, when you can, to strangers who might cross your path. He mentions that in times past certain people opened their homes and were generous with their food and never knew that the so-called "people" whom they served were in fact *angels*.

He is probably referring to the incident in **Genesis 18** where Abraham received three strangers into his tent and gave them water and bread and washed their feet. He had no idea that two of them were angels in human form and the third was probably a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God. The two angels later visited the city of Sodom and were received by Lot. You may recall that the homosexual community in Sodom found out about these two visitors and demanded that Lot turn them over so that they could have sexual relations with them! These two angels, posing as men, in turn afflicted the homosexual mob with blindness and later led Lot and his family out of the city just before God destroyed it with fire and brimstone.

Many try to dismiss the possibility that this might occur in our day. They argue that the point of the passage is simply to say that you can never know how important and far-reaching an act of kindness might be. In other words, they insist that the point of the text is that we should exercise hospitality because those whom we receive and bless may well turn out to be men and women of such honor and spiritual stature that they will more than compensate for their external accommodations by the spiritual blessings that they confer upon us.

I see no reason for embracing this sort of evasive interpretation. The fact of the matter is, we see angels appearing among humans as humans all through Scripture. They talk and can be seen and engage in normal human activities to such a degree that people are unable to discern the fact that they are angels. This doesn't mean that angels become incarnate, as God the Son did when he became the man Christ Jesus. ***Somehow God empowers angels with temporary bodies so that they might interact with humans.***

If you ask me why God would do this, I can only answer by pointing to the many biblical texts which speak of angels being sent to communicate God's will to his people or being sent to protect and guard the elect (see Hebrews 1:14) or being sent to accomplish some other aspect of God's purposes on the earth. We may never know for certain why they appear, but I see no reason to dismiss the possibility that they can. So be hospitable!

By the way, if you are wondering why people would interpret a passage such as this in a way that rules out the possibility that angels might still visit us today, it usually goes hand in hand with the doctrine of cessationism. That is to say, some who deny that the more supernatural spiritual gifts are valid today are equally uncomfortable with the idea that angels might actually interact with humans. They typically are people who ***minimize the miraculous*** and always seem to have a natural or material explanation for much of what occurs in the life of God's people.

Sacrificial compassion (v. 3)

Here in v. 3 he exhorts us all to be compassionate and sacrificial in reaching out to help both those who are "in prison" because of their faith (see Hebrews 10:34) and others who may not have been persecuted by being thrown in jail but in other ways have suffered greatly because of their faith in Christ.

When he exhorts us to ***"remember"*** them he doesn't mean that all we should do is sit around and think about them or mention them during announcements on Sunday morning or even merely pray for them. He means to ***visit and serve and encourage and provide food and clothing and other comforts*** (see 2 Tim. 1:16-18 where Paul himself was served in this way by Onesiphorus). This is what we saw earlier in Hebrews 10:33-34.

The phrase, “as though in prison with them,” is likely his way of saying: “If you were in prison, how would you want to be treated by the rest of the Christian community? Envision yourself suffering in this way and everything you would need and hope for, and then go and do likewise for those who really are in prison.”

But it’s not only those who are in jail because of their Christian faith, but also those who are suffering in countless other ways. They may have been beaten or stoned, as Paul was. They may have lost their jobs and are barely finding enough money to buy food. They may have lost their homes. They may be the object of slander and injustice in the court system. So never forget that you too are a physical being who could as easily be on the receiving end of precisely the same mistreatment.

Marital Purity (v. 4)

We now come to the primary focus of our time today: the call for sexual purity and marital fidelity in v. 4. I would like to address this issue by articulating six fundamental principles drawn from God’s Word. But before I do let me say that evidently there was **a two-fold error** present in the thinking of some people.

On the one hand, there were a few people who advocated an extreme form of **asceticism** which regarded **marriage itself as defiling and corrupting**. These folks insisted on **absolute celibacy** by everyone. If you want to achieve a high level of spiritual perfection, you must refrain from marriage and all sexual intimacy that is a part of it.

We know that the Apostle Paul had to deal with people like this because he explicitly mentions it in two places. In 1 Corinthians 7 he addresses some in the church at Corinth who believed that sexual relations in marriage were spiritually defiling and that husbands and wives, though married, should refrain from all sexual contact with each other. Paul sternly rebukes them for this. Then again in 1 Timothy 4 Paul issues this warning:

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, **who forbid marriage** and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:1-5; emphasis mine).

On the other hand, there was yet another group who gravitated to the opposite end of the spectrum. Not only was marriage permissible, to their way of thinking, but ***they also advocated free sex***. Once you've entered into the covenant of marriage you are free to indulge your sexual desires with anyone you please. Sexual fidelity, to these people, was ridiculous.

So our author addresses both groups. To the one he says: "Marriage is good. Marriage is not to be forbidden or avoided. Hold marriage in high regard. Honor it as the divine provision of our heavenly Father." To the other group he says: "And when you get married, be faithful to your spouse. Don't defile your marriage covenant or the marriage bed by committing sexual immorality or adultery."

So, as we keep this in mind, let me articulate six foundational truths that are especially relevant for life in our world today.

(1) A good place to begin is with ***the meaning of marriage***. I would define marriage as ***the enjoyment of spiritual and physical unity between one man and one woman based on a life-long, covenant commitment, the ultimate aim of which is to display the covenant relationship between Jesus Christ and his Bride, the Church.***

Marriage is a unity of both *flesh* and *spirit*. It is a mutual commitment in which husband and wife share their bodies, their spirits, their possessions, their problems, their insights and ideas, their goals and gripes, their sadness and happiness. Ideally, nothing should stand in the way of this mutual experience.

This definition is clearly justified on the basis of several biblical passages.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'" (Gen. 1:27-28a).

Following the creation of woman from the side of the man, Adam declares: "'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:23-24).

These first two passages clearly indicate that God's purpose in creating male and female was so that they might enter into and enjoy a one-flesh sexual union and a loving covenantal cleaving one with another. God's design in this was that they would be "fruitful" and "multiply" the human race.

Jesus in turn picks up on the Genesis narrative and says in Matthew 19:4-6,

"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:4-6).

To these texts we finally add what the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:

"Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:24-25, 31-32).

There is no other concept of marriage in the Bible. God's clear and unmistakable revealed will is that marriage is a life-long covenant between one man and one woman that illustrates or displays the covenant love between Christ and his Church.

Before we leave this first point let me say one more thing about the word translated "***honor***" (v. 4). This very word is used in a number of other texts such as 1 Corinthians 3:12 and 1 Peter 1:19 and 2 Peter 1:4 and is typically translated with the English word "precious". Our author here in Hebrews is telling us that marriage is not simply an institution or arrangement or even merely a covenant. ***It is something of immeasurable value: it is precious in the sight of God and must be treated accordingly. Treasure it. Respect it. Esteem it. Prize it. And therefore protect it.***

(2) This biblical definition of marriage leads inevitably to my second point: ***There is no such thing as same-sex marriage.*** I'm not saying that our government and the people of this country do not ***say*** there is such a thing as same-sex marriage. But their ***saying*** it does not make it so. Same-sex marriage, by definition, simply does not exist. When people ask me where I stand on the subject of same-sex marriage, I respond by saying: ***"My position on the existence of same-sex marriage is identical to my position on the existence of square circles: neither one exists."***

When our state or our President or our Congress and perhaps eventually even our Supreme Court declares that same-sex marriage is legal, they are saying something that is at fundamental odds with God's Word. ***On God's terms, only a man and a woman can enter into a marriage.*** When a man and another man or a woman and another woman commit themselves to each other and repeat vows and obtain a license from the state, there are any number of terms we might apply to what has just occurred, but marriage is simply not one of them.

In other words, I'm not simply saying that same-sex marriage ***shouldn't*** exist or even that it ***doesn't*** exist. I'm saying that it ***cannot*** exist. God created marriage. God defined marriage. And any relationship that does not conform to God's definitive revelation on what constitutes marriage may be called many things, but it cannot be called marriage. Call it a relationship. Call it a civil union. Call it two people committed to each other. Call it what you will, but don't call it marriage.

(3) The Bible is unmistakably clear that unrepentant sexual immorality excludes one from the kingdom of God. We see this most clearly in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11,

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

The word translated “sexually immoral” both here and in Hebrews 13:4 is the same: ***pornos***. In both places it refers to anyone, male or female, who engages in any form of illicit sexual behavior outside of marriage, whether heterosexual or homosexual. You can be single and guilty of sexual immorality: it's called fornication or pre-marital sex. You can be married and guilty of sexual immorality: it's called adultery or extra-marital sex. The phrase ***“men who practice homosexuality”*** in v. 9 is actually two terms in Greek. ***One refers to the active or more aggressive and masculine partner in a same-sex relationship and the other refers to the passive or less aggressive and overly-feminized partner in a same-sex relationship. The point is that all same-sex intercourse is forbidden.***

Paul isn't saying that if you ***ever*** commit a homosexual act you are ***forever*** excluded from the kingdom of God. He isn't saying that if you were ever guilty of idolatry or ever committed adultery or ever swindled someone or ever got drunk, ***even if only one time***, that you are excluded from the kingdom of God. Quite clearly many of these Corinthians had lived for lengthy periods of time in such behavior. “But,” says Paul in v. 11, “you were washed, you were

sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” In other words, he has in mind *unrepentant* immorality and drunkenness and idolatry. He’s not talking about people who sin, but of *people who relish their sin and are proud of it and have given themselves over to it and refuse to repent and turn away from it.*

Men and women who sin, and all do, but are broken and grieved by it and seek God’s help to forsake it are not in view in this passage. Both Paul and the author of Hebrews are talking about those who sin *defiantly, persistently, as a matter of course, as an uninterrupted habit for which they feel no remorse or regret or pain of conscience.* And these, whether they be homosexual or heterosexual, will come under God’s judgment.

So let me be perfectly clear about this. Men and women who *struggle* with same-sex *attraction* are not excluded from the kingdom of God. Rather, Paul and the author of Hebrews have in mind men and women who *persistently and unrepentantly indulge in same-sex activity.*

(4) *All of us are broken and disordered because of the fall of the human race into sin. All of us are born with a sinful orientation. We are conceived in unbelief and rebellion against God. But the mere fact that we are by nature sinners does not mean that we are absolved of guilt for the acts of sin we commit.*

The question of whether or not people are *born gay* is irrelevant to the question of whether or not same-sex intercourse is immoral. I was born with a disposition to lie. It comes quite naturally to me. No one had to teach me how to lie. I was born with an orientation to steal what doesn’t belong to me. I was born with an inclination to lust after women. I was born with a nature that hates God. But that doesn’t mean I can lie and steal and lust and hate God and not be held morally responsible for my actions.

The primary issue when it comes to homosexuality isn’t attraction but action. It isn’t primarily about the *bent* of your *soul* but the *behavior* of your *will*. Men and women who are attracted to members of the same sex are not for that reason excluded from the kingdom of God. Men and women who repeatedly act on that attraction and engage in unrepentant same-sex behavior are.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that one should simply resign himself or herself to this struggle with same-sex attraction. I do believe the Bible affirms what I call *redemptive transformation*. By this I mean the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification by which he changes and transforms and renews and heals the sinful bent of our souls.

That being said, we must not forget that *same-sex intercourse, not same-sex inclination*, is the focus of Paul's condemnation when he threatens exclusion from the kingdom of God as well as the focus of the author of Hebrews when he says that God will judge the sexually immoral and all adulterers.

(5) To stand resolutely in opposition to same-sex intercourse and so-called same-sex marriage and to clearly denounce heterosexual immoral behavior such as pre-marital sex and adultery, as well as drunkenness and idolatry and a host of other sins is the "second" most loving, kind, compassionate, and merciful thing you could ever do.

I'll explain in a moment why it is only the "second" most loving thing you can do. But for now, recall that in Hebrews 13:1 we were told to "let brotherly love continue." Whether someone is our Christian brother or not, we are called to love them. ***And one of the most loving things you can do for a man or woman is to warn them about the certainty of divine judgment against unrepentant sexual immorality. There is not to be found the slightest tinge of genuine love when you encourage a person to engage in behavior that puts their soul in eternal jeopardy.***

The author of Hebrews, together with every other biblical author, is calling us to stand firmly in opposition to the world when it comes to matters of sexual morality. The world now celebrates pre-marital sex. The world now rejoices in adultery. The world now embraces so-called same-sex marriage. And the world insists that if you don't celebrate and rejoice and embrace such sexual behavior, but rather insist that it will most assuredly bring eternal judgment, ***you are hateful and bigoted and blind and on the wrong side of history.***

I'm appealing to all of you today that you ***take your cues on marriage and sexual morality from the Bible***, not from TV, no matter how funny or entertaining the show may be, or from the Internet, no matter how commonplace this new morality is, or from Facebook, no matter how many of your "friends" may think otherwise, or from Oprah or Rob Bell or our President or any Hollywood celebrity, no matter how influential and powerful he or she may be.

(6) So what is the "first" most loving, kind, compassionate, and merciful thing we could ever do? It is to introduce people to the Savior, Jesus Christ, in whom there is forgiveness for all sin, whether homosexual or heterosexual.

Look closely again at 1 Corinthians 6:11 - *"And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."* This is the hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ provides for any and every form of sin, whether racism or same-sex intercourse or idolatry or drunkenness or theft or fornication or hatred or adultery.

God offers to us in Christ the hope of being “justified” or declared righteous by faith in Jesus! No matter how defiled you may have become because of whatever sin you indulged, you can be “washed” clean and entirely forgiven for every sin, past, present, and future, through faith in Jesus! No matter to what or to whom you have previously given yourself, you can be “sanctified” or set apart unto God as his precious son or daughter, through faith in Jesus!

Just think of it: through faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin God can release into your life the power of the Holy Spirit that can swallow up your disordered desires in something greater and more beautiful and more desirable so that you can live each day in a way pleasing to God, even in the midst of on-going struggles and brokenness.

To introduce a man or woman to this gloriously great news of freedom and forgiveness is the single most loving thing you can ever do for another person.

Conclusion

I will conclude with two statements, the first from John Piper and the second my own. First,

“God's judgment on homosexual and lesbian relationships is not because he is a killjoy, but because he is opposed to what kills joy. And our opposition to such partnerships is not because of some knee-jerk homophobia, as they say again and again, but because of a settled and reasonable conviction that God knows better than anybody what is good for us and for society” (Piper).

Second, we at Bridgeway Church are here to love you and to help you and to make every resource available to enable you to walk in sexual purity. This applies to those who struggle with fornication and adultery with someone of the opposite sex as well as those who struggle with attraction to those of the same sex.

So let us never forget what God says about marriage: ***it is precious and it must remain pure.*** And the God who calls on us to maintain this standard of sexual conduct has more than abundantly provided the necessary power through faith in Jesus and the indwelling Spirit to make possible our obedience.