

Dethroning Aphrodite

Well, good to see you guys. Today we kick off a new series that we've been planning for a while called *The God of Sex*. And we've tried to clarify is that this series isn't some sort of effort to be controversial or push the envelope in order to grow our church. We didn't rent out any godofsex.com billboards around town, we didn't film any aggressively suggestive ads to show on local channels promote this series—none of that stuff. I know there are churches that do that sort of thing with a sex and relationship series and that's their prerogative—but to me that always comes off a little gimmicky. So that's not really our heart in doing this series at all.

Rather, **our heart is to spend some time talking openly and bluntly about what the bible teaches about sex.** I think one *mistake* the church has made throughout the years is that we often have shied away from talking about sex and sexuality much for fear of offending people. I don't know how much you guys pay attention to the news, but the bible's teaching on sex doesn't exactly make most people's top ten list of favorite ways to think about it. And I think for that reason, a lot of churches just don't talk much about it. But the problem is that there is perhaps *no stronger narrative* in our culture right now than the one surrounding sex and sexual expression. So we figured, **if everybody's talking about this stuff already, we might as well introduce what Jesus has to say into the conversation.** So that's our plan during this series.

So on your seats when you came in, we've given you a handout that tells you a little bit about what we'll be covering each week of the series—I think we've got more of those at the info table if you didn't get one or want extras. But I figured I'd just put it up on the screen for you today as well so you know what's coming. This week we'll sort of just set up the whole series. Next week we'll be doing a survey through the bible of how the bible talks about sex, what it's like, and what it's for. After that, we'll talk a little about the idea of sexual *identity* which is something getting a lot of press these days. Next, I've got a friend of mine coming to talk about singleness and what all the bible has to say about singleness as an intentional vocation for the sake of the kingdom—really excited about that week. After that, we'll talk about sex in marriage. Then, we'll talk about sex as it relates to the *dating* scene—and yes, that week will be a little more nuanced than just “don't have it.” Then we'll spend a week talking about porn as it relates to our sexuality, and then close out the series by talking a little about how to heal from things like sexual sin, as well as sexual abuse and assault. So really, for the next eight weeks, we're just going for it. Not really holding anything back, gonna try to approach this topic as holistically as we possibly can.

And on that note, let me just give a quick disclaimer that I mentioned last week, but want to mention again: if you're planning on being here for this series and you have young children, this series is going to be a great time to let your kids enjoy our wonderful City Kids ministry during the Gathering. Obviously, with most of these topics, there's really no way to talk about them helpfully without saying some things that you probably wouldn't want your elementary school son or daughter to hear. We're not going to be crass or inappropriate, but we are going to be blunt. We're going to talk as openly about the sex as the bible does, which we're gonna see next week, may surprise you a bit. So if your kid is fifth grade or younger, they are welcome in City Kids during the Gathering as always. If you've got a kid *middle school* age or older, it's your call whether or not to bring them to the Gathering. *My* suggestion would be *to* bring them, because I doubt we're gonna be talking about anything that their friends aren't already talking to

them about. But if you want to leave them at home for this series or stay at home with them, that's obviously your call as a parent. Just wanted you to have a fair warning about what to expect.

One last thing before we get into today's teaching. **We really want this series to be as helpful to our church family as possible.** And we know that when it comes to topics like these, there are often dozens of practical and pastoral questions swirling around in our heads. And probably as we go through the series, it's gonna raise questions that might not have been there to begin with. So if you have questions—any questions related to these topics at all—you can text them in at any point during the series to (865) 248-5556. Or, if it's something you'd rather ask anonymously, there's a place on the series page on our website where you can send them in that way. We'll see what all questions come in, we might turn those into some blog posts on our website, or maybe even record a podcast or two during the series answering those questions. So feel free to send those questions in as we go.

Okay, I think that's everything on the series. With all that said, let's dive into today's topic. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to Romans 1. So I know you guys came expecting a sermon about sex, and you're gonna get one. But before we get there we need to talk a little bit about something the bible calls *idolatry*. When we hear the word "idolatry," probably the picture in many of our heads is something like a primitive culture in another part of the world, all dancing around a carved wooden totem pole or statue of some sort. And that's certainly idolatry. But I also want to suggest to you today is that idolatry is sometimes deeper and more subtle than that as well.

Maybe the simplest definition of idolatry I can think of would be something like putting anything that *isn't* God, in God's place." We might call idolatry a *worship disorder*. It's demoting God to a lower place, and elevating something other than God *to his place*. And in that way, **idolatry is not just an issue for more primitive, less enlightened cultures. It's a problem for every single human being who has ever lived.**

There's a quote from the late novelist David Foster Wallace, where I think he articulated this idea very well. Wallace was not a follower of Jesus by any means—but we've used this quote at least once before on Sundays because it describes idolatry so very well:

...in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

Everybody, he says, *worships*. Regardless of whether we would consider yourself a Christian or not, religious or not, spiritual or not—we *all worship something*. We all have something we are more passionate about than everything else in life. We all have something we are willing to give our lives over to. And if that thing isn't God, it's gonna be something else. **Whenever God isn't occupying that place in our lives, it creates a vacuum: something else will take his place, whether we realize it's happening or not.** And the term for that in the bible is *idolatry*.

This is exactly the thing Paul is describing in Romans 1, starting in v. 21:

*[21] For although they **knew God**, they did not **honor him as God** or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise,*

they became fools [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, and birds, and animals, and creeping things.

They *exchanged* the glory of God for other things. Or in other words, for *idols*. **That's the way it works: whenever you take God out of the picture, something else has to fill the void in your life.**

Now, here's why this matters: knowing this about humanity helps you to understand people so much better. This concept allows us to make so much more sense of why people do the things they do. It explains much of why people make the decisions they make. Why they say the things they say. Have you ever had a friend that you just *know* you can't bring up certain subjects around? Maybe it's politics, maybe it's a particular sports team, maybe it's a topic in the news. But whatever it is, you've just learned that you *can not*, under any circumstances, bring that subject up around this person, because they're just gonna lose their mind over it? Chances are that's because that thing is (or is at least *connected to*) their idol. Or, have you ever said something to a friend of yours, and all of a sudden you go from being great friends with them, to things being really awkward with them? Or worse, they just all of a sudden ghost you as a result of it? Chances are that thing you said something that threatened their idol. Or for you personally, what's the one thing that you can't stop talking about? What's the topic, that when somebody brings it up around you, your ears perk up and you just *have* to say something about it? Chances are that behavior has something to do with your idol. Idolatry actually explains so much of why we do the things we do.

Now, there are a handful of ways to identify an idol in your life or someone else's. Just for today's purposes, let me give you what I think are three of the most helpful ones. An idol is...

What we find difficult to talk rationally and calmly about.

What's the thing that, when someone disagrees with you on, your posture towards them immediately becomes antagonistic? What's the thing you argue about the most with people? Since college football started this week—I'll just pick on it for a moment. I have seen grown men become visibly angry while talking about which group of 18-22 year olds are better at playing a game. One time, I literally watched a guy get up and leave a day of watching football with other people because someone in the room spoke negatively about his team. That's not being a committed fan—that's *worship*. An idol is the thing that you cannot remain calm about while talking about with other people that see it differently.

What we refuse to approach differently, regardless of negative consequences.

So it's easy to see this with people who have addictions. A person with an addiction cares almost nothing about the negative effects that thing has on the rest of their life. Maybe they know it's hurting them, but it doesn't matter. They have to get that next fix, they have to have that next drink, no matter how much havoc it is wreaking on the rest of their life. But it doesn't have to be an addiction for us to think this way. Think about the person who keeps buying stuff they don't need, even though they are thousands and thousands of dollars in debt. Think about the person who keeps participating in pointless political debates on Facebook, even though they are losing friendships over it. Idols are the things that we refuse to approach differently, regardless of any negative consequences.

What we can't imagine life without.

Lastly, an idol is the thing that you can't imagine *not* having. What's the thing that you would say, if you lost it, life would not really be worth living? A romantic relationship? Your career? Your status in the community? Success in school? And remember here that **idols aren't generally bad things—in fact, they're usually good things that we've elevated to a place they don't belong.** Good things that we've made into ultimate things.

So, I think those are three helpful diagnostics to identify idols in our lives. Now, here's what's interesting about idolatry. And pay attention because this is where it starts to connect to our series about sex. **There are personal idols—things that we individually worship instead of God. But there are also cultural idols—things that entire societies or people groups tend to worship instead of God.** For example, an individual can have a *personal* idol of power—where they highly value influence and control over other people. But then there are entire societies with a *cultural* idol of power—a country like North Korea with military power would be a good example. Some people have a *personal* idol of their body, their physique, their physical fitness. But you can also have a *cultural idol* of fitness. We call that culture *Crossfit*. (I apologize—if you're in the room and you do Crossfit, we love you. We'd love for some of you to find *other things to talk about*, but we do love you). But does that make sense? There are personal idols—things we worship individually. But there are also *cultural* idols—things that entire groups of people or societies tend to worship together.

Here's the reason I tell you that, and here's how it connects to our series. **I believe we could make a strong case that we as 21st century Americans, have a cultural idol of sex.** It's hard to argue that we haven't made sex *ultimate* in our society. To some of you, maybe that's a no-brainer. But just to prove it, let's quickly run it quickly through the three diagnostics we just mentioned:

(Sex) What we find difficult to talk rationally and calmly about.

When people in a public setting start talking about human sexuality and how it should be expressed, can you not just feel the tension rising? On both sides of the political aisle, people who are religious and not religious—to me it's difficult to find a single rational, calm conversation about sexuality. When people simply see things differently than than we do, we jump immediately to calling them words like “pervert” or “hateful” or “bigot” or “regressive.” That is not the language of a rational, thoughtful, open-minded society. That is the language of a society whose idol has been threatened.

(Sex) What we refuse to approach differently, regardless of negative consequences.

Nearly every stat out there will tell you that the further we get into the sexual revolution, the *less* sex people are having.¹ **The movement meant to create more sexual freedom is actually decreasing the frequency of sex.** That's the *very definition* of a failed movement. And yet, I'm not aware of a single person out in culture at large going “hey guys: maybe we should rethink this whole sexual revolution thing, walk it back a bit.” Because we refuse to approach it differently, regardless of the consequences.

The sexual revolution has caused another number to *rise*: the number of people living with their partner before marriage. One study showed that the number of people doing this has increased by nearly 900%

¹ For just one example, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/us/americans-less-sex-study.html>

over the past fifty years.² Now, most people say the reason for doing this is that it enables you to “test out” if that person is right for you to marry.³ The problem is that the stats don’t support that theory, really at all. In nearly every study, living together *before* marriage increases the rates of *divorce once you’re married*. Living together apparently makes you *less* compatible. Other studies have also shown that rates of anxiety and depression also increase when you live with your partner. And yet, there’s no real indication that we’re letting the evidence change our approach to it all.

So here’s my point: maybe our culture really is *rejecting* an overly puritanical, restrictive version of sexuality from our history—but the problem is that *we’re not providing a better solution*. In some ways, we’re creating *more problems* instead. And yet—here’s the insanity of it all—we *refuse to admit* it’s not working. I could go on with stats for days about how the sexual revolution has generated as many problems as it has claimed to solve. But I won’t and here’s why—because by and large, our society *doesn’t care* about the stats. We don’t. We continue buying the hype of the so-called sexual revolution regardless of whether the facts support the hype or not. **Objective measures are telling us that our new vision of sexuality is not accomplishing what it set out to accomplish, and we still refuse to critique it or try something different.** I don’t know about you, but to me that looks an awful lot like the behavior of an addict: a complete disregard for negative consequences and a refusal to see things with 20/20 vision. That’s not logical, and it’s not scientific. That’s the *worship* of the cruel, demanding *god of sex*.

(Sex) What we can’t imagine life without.

I think underneath a lot of the rhetoric about sexuality happening out in our culture, **there is an underlying assumption being made. The assumption is that life without sex is not a life worth living.** And in some cases, people will go even farther with that, to the belief that a life without *completely unhindered sexual expression* is not worth living. Many of us legitimately cannot imagine the possibility of life without sex.

There’s a story about a missionary here in the states who visited a third-world country. In the village where he went to visit, this missionary started noticing that every single song the people in the village sang was about rain. Calling for rain, celebrating rain, they even had dances they would do to ask the gods to send rain—it felt like everything in their village was built around the desire for rain. Completely weirded out by it, one day he finally asked the village leader about it. He said “okay, why are all your songs about rain—why are you so obsessed with it?” The village leader responded by explaining that rain was the very basis of life for people in that village. He said, “rain for us is what life *depends on*—it gives us water to drink, it makes our crops grow so we have food—it quite literally is what keeps us alive. That’s why all our songs are about rain.” And then, without skipping a beat, he turned to the missionary from America and said “why are all *your* songs about sex?” That’s revealing, isn’t it?

It’s a great question. And I would argue it’s because in our culture, sex has become a defacto god. I think **most all the data makes a pretty strong case for the fact that we have replaced the worship of God with the worship of sex.** I mean let’s just think about this objectively: what types of things would

² *The Science of Cohabitation*, The Atlantic.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/the-science-of-cohabitation-a-step-toward-marriage-not-a-rebellion/284512/>

³ Of those who agree cohabitation is a good idea, 84% say it is primarily to “test compatibility.”

<https://www.barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/>

you expect to see in a culture that worships sex? Well, you would expect to see an economy based on it: maybe an online dating industry worth \$3 billion. Maybe a porn industry worth somewhere between \$5 billion and \$14 billion—that we can't pin down the value of only because of how expansive it is and how fast it's growing. You would expect to see a novel & film built around sexual power differentials and BDSM to gross over \$1 billion in mainstream theaters. You would expect marketing companies to rely on sex to *sell literally every single consumer product under the sun*. I could go on—but I think the evidence is clear: we have a worship problem.

But here's what I want you to see: **this shouldn't be surprising to us as followers of Jesus. Paul actually said in his letter to the Romans that when we remove God from his rightful place, sex would be one of the first choices for his replacement.** Look back with me at Romans 1:

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

This language, the “lusts of their hearts,” the “dishonoring of their bodies”—that's all language describing sexual sin. We all replace God with *something*, and sex is often the first thing that many of us try. I heard an author say one time that “when you take God out of the picture, sex is the only transcendent experience you have left.”

Now, in Paul's day, the worship of sex was obvious and overt. Many of the people in cities where Paul started churches worshiped the Greek goddess *Aphrodite*. Her image is actually what's on the bulletin you got on your way in. She was quite literally the god, or goddess, of sex. People would travel from all over the ancient world to visit her temple. And there, as an act of worship, they would have sex with their pick of over 1,000 temple prostitutes. In other words, your act of “worship” was to have sex with someone you barely knew. To appease the god of sex, you would have to give your bodies, your sexuality, your money, and your innocence, over to her. You would, in many ways, become a *slave* to Aphrodite—you would do absolutely anything it took to appease her. In that way, **Aphrodite is alive and well in 21st century America—she's just dropped her proper name.** Today, she requires just as much of your body, just as much of your attention, just as much of your blind devotion, and just as much of your worship. She *demand*s you make sacrifices. You still have to give up your bodies, your sexuality, your money and your innocence over to her. **But somewhere along the line, Aphrodite made a brilliant decision: to start convincing everyone that her type of slavery is actually freedom.**⁴

C.S. Lewis, who believe it or not, wrote plenty of good books *other than* of the Chronicles of Narnia—he describes an interesting scenario in one of his books. He says to imagine you traveled to a foreign country you had never been to before. And one night while you were there, you got an invitation to some sort of late-night club. When you showed up, the place is filled to the brim with people. Everyone grabs their drinks and sits down at their table around a stage. At some point, the lights go down and a single spotlight shoots onto the stage. On the stage, there is something like a table, covered with a black cloth. Music starts to play, and a person on stage lifts up just one edge of the cloth to reveal that there is a cheeseburger underneath, and then quickly covers it back up. Next time, a little more of the burger is revealed. As this happens, people in the club are going absolutely crazy. People are throwing money at

⁴ I owe a lot of the ideas in this paragraph to John Mark Comer in his book *Loveology*.

the stage, begging for the person on stage to show just a little more of the burger than before. If you found yourself in that type of scenario, you would probably think a few things. First, you might think “well maybe people in this country are starving.” But then you find out that everyone there is actually well fed. You might think “well maybe they’ve never seen a cheeseburger before?” But then you find out they eat cheeseburgers all the time. Eventually, you would then be forced to conclude that **something has gone deeply, horribly wrong with this society’s relationship to food. You wouldn’t conclude that food is bad—you would conclude that they have elevated food to a place it doesn’t belong.** And with that, C.S. Lewis just asks us, *could you not say the same about our culture’s relationship to sex?*

See, my fear with this series is that in all of this, you would think I’m saying that sex is *bad*. That you would end up hearing what the Church and Christians have accidentally communicated for hundreds of years. That sex is bad and dirty and not to be talked about. Next Sunday, we’re gonna spend the entire time showing you just how much that *isn’t* what the bible teaches about sex. So we’re not saying this week that sex is *bad*. I’m not implying that sex is *bad* anymore than C.S. Lewis in that story is trying to say that *cheeseburgers* are bad. **I’m simply trying to expose that we have taken a good thing and put it in a place it does not belong. That we’ve taken a good gift from God, and fashioned it into a god itself.** And listen—in order for us to enjoy and appreciate what sex was *designed to be*, we have to stop believing it’s something that it’s not. **We need to dethrone the god of sex, and replace it with the God who created sex.**

And here’s why we *must* do that. Even if you’re here and you’re not a follower of Jesus, you don’t ascribe to the whole one man, one woman for life thing—let me tell you why even you should think twice before worshiping sex. I’ll give it to you in one sentence: **idolatry doesn’t work. The problem with making things in our life into idols is that they simply cannot hold the weight of worship we put on them.** When we place the weight of worship, the weight of all-of-life satisfaction, on something that wasn’t meant to bear that weight, that thing will eventually fail us. It might go well in the beginning, it might even go well for a while. But it can’t sustain that weight forever.

I’ve seen this firsthand in my own life. When I started college, I had put the weight of worship on two things: the career I was working towards in school, and a romantic relationship with my girlfriend at the time. And I’ll be really honest with you, for a couple years, it was *great*. I’m not gonna pretend it wasn’t. Idolatry was treating me really *well* for those two years. But then all of a sudden my grades dropped—I couldn’t keep up in class—and my girlfriend broke up with me. So the two things I worshiped were gone. And once they were gone, life was *awful*. I experienced levels of depression in my life that I hadn’t experienced before and haven’t ever since. Because my idols failed me.

And you have to look closely, but this is exactly what’s happening in our culture right now regarding sex. We have put the weight of worship on sex and sexual expression for long enough and often enough, that the cracks in the pavement are starting to show. We are seeing the effects of worshiping sex on a dramatic scale. We’re having *less sex* than anytime we have on record. Millions of people have a clinically diagnosed addiction to porn. Reports of sexual assault are through the roof. Human trafficking is happening all around the world. **Our so-called sexual “freedom” has come at a hefty price.** That’s the bad news.

The good news is that *that* might wake some of us up. Sometimes the only way we’ll see that something was poorly built is to watch it crumble to the ground. As you read through the Scriptures, and specifically

the Old Testament, you start to pick up on a pattern. Often, the Israelites wouldn't acknowledge idolatry in their life until their idols started completely failing them. Only once they were becoming *disenchanted* with their idols would they acknowledge that those things might actually have been idols all along.

And on that note, **you've gotta wonder if in the midst of our culture's sexual dysfunction, God is trying to bring us to our senses.** I believe, with everything in me, that God wants to draw out something better, something truer, something more beautiful *and* functional when it comes to how we think about sex. He wants to take what's broken and make it whole. He wants to take what's distorted and make it right. He wants to take what's lost and find it again. He wants to restore us to the biblical vision of sexuality and sexual flourishing.

And that's what *next* Sunday, and the rest of this series is all about. But for this week, we're going to leave it somewhat open-ended. As we close this morning, there are two very important questions I want you to ask yourself:

- As you think about relationships and sex and and sexual expression in your own life, *is there any dysfunction?* And dysfunction is a big category. It could be disappointment in your sex life, disappointment in your dating life, disappointment from a *lack of* a sex life, brokenness from past sexual experiences—could be most anything. *Is there dysfunction of some sort?* My guess is that there's at least some dysfunction like that for all of us.
- And so then, if there *is* dysfunction, is it possible that that dysfunction is caused—or at least *worsened*—by the fact that you are expecting sex to be something it can't be? Is it possible that you're perpetually dissatisfied with sexual experiences because you're trying to get something out of it that it wasn't set up to give you? Is it possible that you are looking for a boyfriend, girlfriend, hook-up, a sexual encounter to provide you with something that it actually *can't* provide?

Part of what we're going to do for the rest of our series is help pinpoint the problems that worshiping sex creates in all these different avenues of our lives, and start to reassemble a helpful picture of human sexuality. But today I just want us to sit with those questions and ask yourselves *are we expecting sex to be something it wasn't meant to be?* **Because maybe, just maybe, if we can admit that our current god *isn't* satisfying, we've got a shot at meeting and knowing the God who is.** And that's exactly what we all need.

Let's pray.