

Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to [Genesis 1](#). Should be relatively easy to find. We're going to look at a [couple different passages](#) this morning, but we'll start there. If you're new around here, we're in week 3 of a series called *Question Everything*, where we're asking some of the more pressing questions people tend to have about faith in Jesus. And a lot of these questions have been *major factors* in people deciding to *deconstruct* or *leave* their faith. So we're taking some time to try and *speak* to those questions as helpfully as we can.

And again this week, the topic we're addressing [comes straight out of experiences and conversations](#) I've had with those who are deconstructing. [Several years ago, I was invited to a group discussion here](#) in Knoxville, consisting of people at various stages of their deconstruction journey. And getting to be there was incredibly helpful as a pastor. Because it gave me one more window into the types of experiences people have had with the church—the types of experiences that make them want to walk away from it all. It was so helpful to meet those people and hear their stories.

But [as we went around the room](#) and people shared some of their experiences, I began to notice a trend. Of the people that spoke (which was all but one), [every person cited their sexuality](#) or *sexual expression* as one of the primary reasons they were deconstructing. For *some* of them, it was that they were something *other* than straight and cisgender. For one woman in the room, it was that her and her wife weren't *monogamous*, and they couldn't find a church that was comfortable with that. Others of them were straight, but just had a bad experience with the church regarding some aspect of their sexuality. Every person mentioned sex as a significant point in their story.

And as we went around the room, and people shared these stories, [some of them seemed frustrated](#), and some of them just disappointed and sad—effectively concluding that they'd never be a part of a community of faith because of all of this. One of the women in the room, after sharing her experience, and embodying much of the mood of the room, just said, from what felt like a very genuine place, “I just don't get why God *cares* who I sleep with.” And based on *my* conversations with others who have walked away from the church (or just never walked *towards* it), that's a pretty common sentiment: for whatever reason, people have a hard time understanding why sexuality is something God has an *opinion* about in the first place.

Now I think there are [plenty of reasons for that](#). But I want to spend some time today on this one. Part of the reason for this confusion and even frustration is that **the Church**

has **often failed to teach a holistic sexual ethic.** Now notice I didn't say that the Church hasn't *talked enough about sex*. *God knows* that's not true. We tend to *talk* about it plenty. In fact, that's probably one of the reasons people are walking away from church over this issue so often, because we sometimes make it seem like it's the *only* thing God cares about. But at the same time, I don't know that we've done the best job unpacking all of it *holistically*. **I don't know that we've done the best job unpacking the bible's complete perspective on what sex is, what it's for, and how all of that contributes to how we approach it.**

A lot of the Church's teaching around sex and sexual expression has been **truncated down by some people** to just one word: **don't**. Don't *have* sex, don't *think about* sex, and don't *think about having* sex. Or to be a little more detailed, maybe down to one *rule*: namely "no sex outside of marriage." Now that's technically *true*: the bible does indeed teach no sex outside of marriage. **But boiling the bible's teaching on sex down to that is kind of describing the Grand Canyon by saying "well, they really discourage you from jumping into the canyon."** Technically *true*, and even *important*, but not all that complete or helpful, as a description. I think that's often how the Church has come across when we've taught about sex.

And I think it is precisely that focus that has **created so-called "purity culture."** That's the label given to the Church's sometimes one-dimensional teaching on sex. And specifically, to its hyper-focus on *abstinence*. Now again, to be clear: it isn't incorrect for the church to teach abstinence, or purity, outside of marriage, as God's design for sexuality. That *is* God's design. As far as I'm concerned, nobody needs to *apologize* for that. But I think the problem is when the Church's teaching on sex *starts* and *stops* there. When that's as far as it goes. Because once again, it's narrowing a complete theology and worldview around sex to a singular, negative command. And that's not reflective of what we find in the bible at all.

So today, I want to see if we can do a little *more* than that. What I want to do this morning is try to unpack a holistic sexual ethic from the Scriptures. And then I want to spend some time comparing and contrasting that ethic with the one our *society* has set forward. But we're going to start off with **Genesis 1**. Look with me there, starting in **v. 27**:

[27] So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. [28] God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Okay, so notice that quite literally **the first instruction** God gives to humanity once he creates them is to “be *fruitful* and *increase* in *number*.” The English Standard Version of the bible actually puts it a little more *directly*; it says “be fruitful and *multiply*.” Now, you all seem like smart, educated people—I’m **assuming you all already know how** humans multiply. I’m not going to explain it in detail. If you’re *not* familiar, I would normally say “Google it,” but maybe don’t do *that*. **But suffice it to say, humans don’t multiply by praying about it. And they don’t multiply by abstinence either.** In fact, quite the opposite of abstinence.

It’s **easy to miss because** the language in the passage connects sex directly to *reproduction*, which maybe isn’t exactly how we tend to *think* about it. But still, don’t miss the *direct* implication right here in this passage: **God wants people to have sex.** And you can *quote* me on that. Maybe encourage people to listen to the whole teaching for *context*, but still: you can quote me. God *wants* people to have sex.

For all the talk there is about the bible’s *restrictions* around sex, the **first command** around sex in the bible (on the *first page* of the bible, no less) is **actually a positive command: *participate in it***. It’s a part of who we *are* as human beings. **Our sexuality and sexual desire as human beings are not dirty little secrets that God prefers we not talk about. They are core to our humanity.** Now, they can be corrupted and distorted just like any *other* part of our humanity. But they’re not *bad* things in their original design.

In fact, **they are good things**, according to the bible. Right here in Genesis 1, it says “God *blessed* them” as he said to them, “be fruitful and multiply.” If you skip down just a few verses to the end of chapter 1, you’ll find *this* statement, which is even *clearer*:

*God saw **all that he had made** (he saw *how much* of what he had made? *All* of it. Every bit of it), **and it was very good.***

God **surveyed everything** he made so far on earth, *including* sex, and concluded that all of it was *very good*. That assessment *included* the male and female body, which at this point in the story are *unclothed*, on *full* display. **He creates human beings, he gives them instructions that very clearly include sexual interaction with one another, and he calls all of that very good.**

At **risk of sounding crass**: it didn’t catch God off guard when certain body parts worked the way they did that make sex, *sexual*. He wasn’t up in the heavens thinking “oh my gosh—I had no idea they would use *that* to do *that*.” He *designed* those body

parts to work in that way. Sex was *God's idea*. That is how God feels about sex. Have I made my point? ~~Are you all uncomfortable and just want me to move on?~~ Okay.

Well, the **next development in the story** continues on that trajectory. It happens in **Genesis 2**, if you want to flip over with me there. **If you're unfamiliar** with the book of **Genesis**, basically what we get in chapters 1 & 2 are two different *tellings* of the human origin story. Chapter 1 kind of takes a big-picture, 30,000ft view of it all, and then chapter 2 comes back and fills in some of the specifics. So in what we're about to read, **we're getting a little more detail about the marriage between Adam and Eve, and about their subsequent sexual relationship with each other**. Look with me at **v. 24** of chapter 2:

[24] That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Okay. It would be **hard to overstate** the importance of this verse to the Christian sexual ethic. This is absolutely ground zero for how we understand it all. Such that the biblical authors, especially in the New Testament, circle back to *this verse* time and time again nearly anytime they want to talk about marriage and/or sex. **The idea behind marriage according to the bible, is a husband and a wife becoming "one flesh."**

The word there for "one" is the **Hebrew word *echad***. And it can mean "one" as in "singular," or it can mean "one" as in "*together as one*." Here in Genesis 2, it seems to actually mean *both*. **Marriage is when two separate people, come together as one unit**. One biblical scholar describes that phrase "one flesh" as two people being "*fused together at the deepest levels of their being*." I think that captures it really well. That's what *marriage* is at least *intended* to be: two *people* becoming *one* flesh.

And **if that's what marriage is** in the bible, **then sex** is a physical representation of that reality. **If marriage is when two lives become one, sex is when two bodies become one**. So notice: **the reason that the bible teaches "no sex outside of marriage" isn't because sex is fun and God prefers for only married people to have fun. That's not the point at all. The point is that you shouldn't do something with your body that you aren't doing with the rest of your life. It's a matter of consistency and integrity with your sexuality: if you aren't ready to join your life with another person, you shouldn't join your body with them either.**

You see, **the bible insists that human beings are integrated beings**. We are mind and body and heart and everything else, all wrapped up into one. And if that's *true*, it would follow that it's actually *unhealthy* to try to chop up those different parts of us and

place them at *odds* with one another. It's unhealthy to do something with your body that you aren't ready to do with your mind and your heart. That's actually a deeply *harmful* way to carry your *humanity*. **God cares who you sleep with because he cares about your *humanity*.** And *because* of that, he suggests that we not do things with our *bodies* that we aren't prepared to do with the rest of our lives. That is why the bible teaches "no sex outside of marriage."

Now, **even if you *disagree*** with that ethic, I think you'll find if you were to take this concept outside the realm of sexuality for a second, it actually **makes a lot of practical sense**. Let's just say you just started *dating* someone, and you come to *me* for some dating advice. And I look at you with complete seriousness and say "okay, you've been dating for a few weeks. What you need to do now is go ahead and combine *bank accounts* with the person you're dating." Just throw everybody's money in one big pot, and that way, each person can spend and withdraw as they see fit. That'll be a great next step for you to take with the person you're dating. Thoughts?

I think **most of you would laugh** in my face. And never ask me for dating advice ever again. Right? Because most all of us would say that is *terrible* advice. And it *is* terrible advice. But *why* is it terrible advice? Well, I think we would argue that sharing bank accounts is far too *intimate* of a thing to do for that early stage in the relationship. It's too much *oneness* for where the relationship currently *is*. **For most people, it doesn't make sense to be *financially* one before you know if you're ready to be *relationally* one.** Okay, but couldn't you make the exact same argument about sex? Why is sharing our *money* too personal and intimate for us, but sharing our *bodies* isn't?

Now maybe you hear that and *you* think, "okay, but me and my boyfriend or girlfriend *didn't* just start dating. **We've been dating for a year**, two years, three years. We practically *are one already*. Surely we don't need to be *married* just to say that we're fully committed to one another." To which *I* would simply say if you really *are* fully committed to one another, why would you be *opposed to proving* that by getting married? It sounds to me like *you're* not completely sure. Listen, for at least the past two thousand years or so, in *most human societies*, the way to *communicate* that you are fully committed to someone has been *marriage*. So if you or the other person aren't confident enough in your commitment to do *that*, I think that's probably something you should be honest about.

But *all* of that said, **the Scriptures simply make the point that sex has a *purpose***: it's two people becoming "one flesh." And that when we approach sex from *within* that purpose, it is good and beautiful and even *helpful* to participate in. We see this in the

very next verse of Genesis 2. Look with me there. It says one result of them “becoming one flesh” was this, v. 25:

[25] Adam and his wife were both **naked**, and they **felt no shame**.

Adam and Eve **were naked**, and they felt no shame. Now, obviously, that line first meant they were *literally* naked—as in they had no clothes on and didn’t feel ashamed by it. But I also think it goes *beyond* that. Remember: biblically, the *physical* is a representation of the rest of the relationship. So **“naked and unashamed” is actually describing the experience of two people who had nothing to hide from one another**. Two people who were completely known by the other person, and still completely *accepted by* that person. **No reservations, no partial commitments, no “keeping their options open in case someone better comes along.” Complete oneness and openness and intimacy with one another**. And because that was the *dynamic*, there was no *shame* to speak of in the relationship.

So I always think it’s **interesting when people accuse Christianity** of making sex seem “shameful.” Because according to this passage, God’s *intention* for sex was actually that shame would be completely *absent* from it. **Shame is what we added** somewhere along the way. Now, like I said earlier, I think it’s completely fair to say that the Church has often done that by communicating a “negative” version of the Christian sexual ethic. And I think that *needs* to change.

But I also think we have to acknowledge: **our society’s approach to sex isn’t innocent** either. **Sure, there has sometimes been harm done by people claiming to represent God. But there’s also been tremendous harm done by those claiming to present a “progressive” sexual ethic**. I wonder if by pinning all the blame on the Church, our society hasn’t pinned *some* blame where it doesn’t belong. Writer **Ronald Rotheiser** puts it this way:

The church has always struggled with sex, but so has everyone else. There aren’t any cultures, religious or secular, pre-modern or modern, post-modern or post-religious, that exhibit a truly healthy sexual ethos. Every church and every culture struggles with integrating sexual energy, if not in its creed about sex, at least in the living out of that creed. Secular culture looks at the church and accuses it of being uptight and anti-erotic. Partly this is true, but the church might well protest that much of its sexual reticence is rooted in the fact that it is one of the few voices still remaining who are challenging anyone towards sexual responsibility. As well, the church might also challenge any culture that claims to

have found the key to healthy sexuality to step forward and show the evidence. No culture will take up that claim. Everyone is struggling.

Now, there's so much we could unpack in there. For starters, I really love **the term "sexual responsibility."** I would argue that's one of the things sorely lacking in our society right now: **the willingness by anyone to take responsibility for how they live out their sexuality and for the effects that it may have on other people.** And I wonder if that's not underneath a lot of our society's problems around sex.

But I also resonate with **what he said at the end.** He said any culture that claims to have found the key to healthy sexuality should "step forward and **show the evidence.**" And I'll just tell you: when it comes to whether or not *our* society has a healthy sexual ethic, the evidence out there is not *great*. *Nearly every stat you'll find shows that the further we get into the Sexual Revolution, the less sex people are actually having.*¹ *Pornography is now considered even by secular researchers to be a public health crisis because of its direct contribution to rape culture and objectification.*² And we'll talk more about this in a second, but hookup culture is wreaking tremendous harm everywhere, especially on *college campuses.*³ The evidence is not great.

But more importantly, **behind all of those statistics** and trendlines are stories of *real people*. There's the college woman who can't even stand to talk to the guy she's hooking up with without alcohol in her system.⁴ There's the high school girl who feels like she can't hold a boyfriend for more than a couple weeks unless she's willing to perform every sex act in the porn he's watching, and then *outperform* the next girl he's interested in. There's the guy who has so emotionally disconnected from sex that a long-term meaningful relationship in the future isn't even *possible* for him, much less *desirable*. And we could go on.

But if you take a **raw look at the evidence,** it turns out that much of the argument for "sexual freedom" might be more of an *emotional* argument, than it is a *rational* one. So maybe our society has correctly critiqued some of the Church's approach to sexuality, but they haven't exactly offered up something better. We don't talk about it much, largely because we are so nervous about "shaming" people over their sexual choices. But the Sexual Revolution has pushed a lot of vulnerable men and women to the front lines of the battlefield, and then left them there for dead ~~(or at least for complete~~

¹ More [here](#).

² Gail Dines, "Is Porn Immoral? That Doesn't Matter: It's a Public Health Crisis" *Washington Post*, April 2016.

³ Alice Owens, "My Rape Convinced Me That Campus Hookup Culture is Really Messed Up," *Verily*, August 2016.

⁴ Like the woman interviewed in Kate Taylor, "Sex on Campus: She Can Play That Game Too," *New York Times*, July 2013.

relational bankruptcy). Maybe the movement has had some success, depending on how you *define* success. But it's also had a *lot* of casualties.

So a question for us: **why aren't our society's solutions working?** Why aren't our culture's attempts at sexual freedom having their intended effects? Well, I would argue the reason is precisely what we said earlier. **In much of our culture's approach to sex, we have tried to rip the act of sex away from its intended design.** Remember: in the bible, human beings are mind, body, heart. So **sex is meant to be an enjoyable experience, precisely because it is an integrated experience. Sex is meant to be a beautiful, physical way of expressing of what is true of the rest of our humanity.**

But when we operate as if that's not *true*—when we try and insist that sex is only physical, like it's just an *appetite* that can be satisfied by anyone, anytime, in any context—**what we are doing is attempting to tear the physical away from the psychological and the emotional.** We're attempting to do something with our bodies that is decidedly *untrue* of the rest of us. And that takes a tremendous psychological toll on us.

One woman interviewed on the subject, a college student named Alicia, put it this way:

*Hookups are very scripted... You learn to turn everything off except your body and make yourself emotionally invulnerable.*⁵

A therapist would tell you that what is being described there is essentially **disassociation:** the process of psychologically disconnecting from core parts of ourselves in order to cope with a traumatic experience. Now disassociation isn't always *bad*; sometimes it's simply *necessary* to cope. But at the same time, most psychologists would tell you that you shouldn't intentionally *pursue* disassociation as a regular *habit*, especially when it comes to consensual sexual experiences. When you do, you are actually training yourself to be emotionally detached from sex, which is extremely unhealthy to do.

One UCLA psychiatrist actually quit her job because she had students coming to her for therapy who had severe psychological issues largely resulting from their sexual choices. But the university wouldn't let her counsel students in terms of right and wrong—or even discourage sexual behavior that had harmful effects. So she was trying to offer helpful therapy, but couldn't *address* the thing at the center of the problem.⁶ All of this led another psychiatrist to note, “it is no coincidence that the *top two* prescribed drugs at our

⁵ Quoted in Laura Sessions Stepp, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 243.

⁶ Miriam Grossman, as documented in her book, *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student*.

state university's health center are anti-depressants and the birth-control pill."⁷ Our society's approach to sexuality is taking a tremendous toll on us, whether we realize it or not. Whether we *want* to recognize it or not.

And that's just **the effect it has on us**. Engaging in sex in this way **also** has concerning impacts on how we view sexual *partners*. One author articulates it this way:

*If the purpose of sexuality is mere pleasure, sooner or later the other person, with all of their personality and their own, separate desires, is going to become burdensome.*⁸

So we can **dress it up with whatever "sexual freedom" language** we want to, but at the end of the day, society's sexual ethic is just that: *using another person's body for your gratification*. Even if each party "consents" to do it: that just means it's *two* people using each other for their own gratification. And that ethic has *profound negative impacts* on our ability to have and maintain meaningful human relationships. **You can't have a meaningful relationship with a *body*—you'll need a *person* for that.** Or if you prefer, Miley Cyrus put it this way. I've cleaned up the language just a little for our setting, but she says:

~~*[Sex] is easy. You can find someone to [have sex with] in five seconds. We want to find someone we can talk to. And be ourselves with. That's fairly slim pickings.*~~

~~Ladies and gentlemen, when the bible and Miley Cyrus agree on something, maybe we should listen up.~~ But the reason none of this is working is that it was **never designed to work**. This, to me, is what makes the biblical sexual ethic so *compelling*: it's one of the few worldviews that acknowledge that we are *integrated* human beings. So when we feel connected to the person we have sex with, that's not just a shortcoming in our genetic make-up—it's because we were *designed to connect*. When we "catch feelings" for someone we have sex with, it's not because we're not talented enough at *disassociating*—it's because sex was intended to be an integrated experience. **Sex is meant to coincide with *intimacy*, and *intimacy* is meant to be embodied in an actual, committed relationship.**

So here's my point: **I would submit to you that **even if you disagree** with the biblical sexual ethic, the *logic* behind it is sound.** *Maybe you're here and you're like "oh yeah, it makes sense; I just still don't want to do it."* And that's fair. I can respect the honesty *there*. But that's kind of the thing with following Jesus. Anybody can obey Jesus when

⁷ Anne Maloney, "What the Hook-up Culture Has Done to Women," *Crisis*, June 2016.

⁸ Melinda Selmys, *Sexual Authenticity*, p. 83.

they *feel* like it. Only followers of Jesus can obey Jesus because he's worth following, whether or not we always feel like it. At some point you have to decide "is Jesus king, or is he not? Does he get to tell me how to live every part of my life? Or do I get to dictate which parts of my life he does and doesn't get access to?" That's the decision we're *all* faced with.

But maybe this means that **the problem isn't so much** with the Christian sexual *ethic* being wrong, as it is that the *way we have presented* that ethic is wrong. **Maybe the problem isn't the ethic, but rather the moral superiority with which we've presented that ethic to the world. Maybe the problem isn't in how we handle our sexuality, but the way we've related to those who don't handle their sexuality in the same way.** And I think it's really important that we *nuance* those two things out.

Jesus, for example, set the bar *extremely high* when it came to sexual morality, saying in the sermon on the mount, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already *committed adultery* with her in his heart." That's about as stringent as it gets. But that same Jesus said to a woman *caught in the act of adultery*, "neither do I condemn you." The same Jesus who said "if your right hand causes you to sin (sexually), cut it off and throw it away," also was known as a *regular acquaintance and friend* to tax collectors and prostitutes.

Which tells me that no matter how "correct" your sexual ethic is, if it doesn't include grace and compassion to those who don't live up to it, it isn't the ethic of Jesus. Jesus didn't think you had to *update* your sexual ethics in order to show *compassion* to those who didn't live up to them. *And* he didn't feel like you had to treat those people with *disdain* in order to hold to the ethic. Jesus *knew* that sex had a *purpose*; he made no apologies for that. But **he also knew that God was capable of taking those who had lived outside of that purpose, and making them completely new people. Jesus knew that true righteousness doesn't come from obeying God's rules, but by becoming God's kid.**

And **that can only happen via the cross** and resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul details a long list of sins, some of which are sexual in nature. He is very clear in saying that anyone who participates in those types of behaviors "will not inherit the kingdom of God." But then, in one of the most glorious turns of phrase, speaking to followers of Jesus, says "and such *were* some of you." Notice the tense: *were*. "But," he says, the *difference*, is that "*you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

You know, I wonder if sometimes, **the reason our Christ-inspired sexual ethic** seems so *un-Christ-like*, **is because we forget** that we were once *on* that list. **I wonder if we forget sometimes that we were those people, until Jesus did something about it.** Every single one of us has disqualified ourselves from the kingdom of God. Maybe because of our sexuality. Maybe because of our sexual expression. But if not that, by how we treated people *based on their* approach to those things. Or any number of other reasons. One way or another, we were *all* disqualified. But we are now *qualified* for the kingdom of God because Jesus brought us *into* it. Because he made sure that his life and death and resurrection stood in *our* place. *That's* why we're in.

If you're here this morning and you **feel burdened** by sexual shame—the religious kind or the irreligious kind. If you are one of that long list of people that feel like casualties in the Sexual Revolution. If you feel like a relationship or an experience or hookup culture has chewed you up and spit you out. If that's you, and any of that has left a stain, hear Jesus say that there's no stain that can't be washed. There's no harm that can't be healed. There *is* such a thing as shame. It's real, as so many of us know. But there's also such a thing as redemption. And it's found freely and fully in the cross of Jesus.

And **if we can be helpful to you** in finding that healing and redemption, please come talk to us. The community of Jesus is made up of people who have walked through sexual brokenness, and are in various stages of walking out the other side of it. And because of that, we'd love few things more than to help you with what we've learned.

And lastly, **if you're a part of our community here** at City Church, I want to just end by asking this: **when people come around** us who *do* have that type of story, do they encounter something resembling the acceptance and compassion of Jesus? Do they experience people ready to welcome them *in*, instead of shutting them out? Because *that's the work of the Spirit* in our midst. **Any Pharisee can articulate a Christian sexual ethic—only gospel people can welcome sinners like Jesus did.**

May we be exactly those gospel people. Let's pray.