

Sex: It's About More Than You Think

Romans 1:18-32

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Romans isn't primarily a book about sex, but it unblushingly addresses sexual idolatry and sexual immorality as evidence of man's rebellion against God.

This is our fifth message from Romans 1:18-32. We are wringing everything we can from this important passage, and this week we are dealing with one very practical implication of this teaching regarding sexuality and gender. First a quick review....

The whole universe tells of God's glory and goodness

"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:19-20 ESV)

While this certainly includes the galaxies and atoms and mountains, it also includes human sexuality, gender, and sexual intimacy. These also tell us what God is like. Think of that—sexuality hints at the divine nature.

Man trades God-worship for thing-worship and self-worship

"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." (Romans 1:25)

We were made for worship. We were made to worship God. The human race rejected God as the object of ultimate allegiance and love. We cannot exist without something for which we are living. We replace God with created things; man-made things. This is a horrible trade and the despair and brokenness of our world, relationships, and hearts manifest how destructive living for a pretend god is.

Man's idolatry races toward immorality

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." (Romans 1:24)

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions..." (Romans 1:26)

There is an inescapable connection between our view of God and our view of ourselves. When God is honored and worshiped, we understand who we are rightly. When God is dishonored, we dishonor ourselves and the first place that brokenness is felt is our sexuality.

The Greek word in Romans 1:26 for "dishonorable passions" is a strong sexual word. The NIV goes ahead and translates it "sexual immorality," but it really implies freedom—freedom to have what is forbidden. God responds to man's rebellion by cutting the tether to sexual identity. Lose God and you lose your grip on your sexuality, masculinity, and femininity.

Paul highlights homosexuality in 1:26-27 as one manifestation of losing God, but it can include any sexual expression or identity that goes against God's created purpose for us. *"The history of the world confirms that idolatry tends to immorality. A false image of God leads to a false understanding of sex."*¹ (John Stott)

What Sex is About

Every generation thinks they discovered sex or somehow improved it. Ironically, it is the oldest thing about us. Despite all these centuries, if you were to ask the average person on the street, what is sex about? I doubt they would have much more than a, "Dude, come on. It's sex. Soooo, you know. Wild thing. Come on, bro." "Sir, you haven't really answered the question." We are not the most sex-crazed society ever, but we're close. In spite of the billions of sexual encounters happening every week, most are done ignorant of what it's actually about. Do you know?

I had more than one parent ask me, *should I have my teenager here for the message?* Yes. Why? Because gone are the days when you have the luxury of waiting very long to teach them. If parents and the church don't teach them, the culture is more than happy to promote their "pornified" and deified doctrine of sex. So teenagers, listen up. Make sure your parents are listening too.

Picture - It's about God/plurality in unity

"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." (Genesis 1:27-28)

Romans 1 tells us that everything in creation as God made it speaks of God's nature. But of all the things God made, human beings most closely reflect what God is like. Specifically, our image bearing, our gender, and our sexuality. God made us in his image. We are self-aware and moral and spiritual in ways no other animal or plant is. But the verse goes on to specify this reflection of God as both male and female. Both genders uniquely express God's character. Masculinity in its strength and leadership. Femininity in its complementary strength of beauty and gentleness. God is neither male nor female. But human maleness and femaleness together show what God is like.

How? God is a tri-unity. Three in one. We call this the Trinity. God is a plurality of persons in unity of being. This plurality is so separate that three distinct persons make up the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit. Their distinctiveness is such that the Son could incarnate as a human and not compromise the integrity of the Trinity. Every day Jesus lived in a human body, the Trinity was still a tri-unity even though Jesus was a human and living in time and space. Divine separateness, but also absolute unity. So unified that Deuteronomy 6:4 famously declares, *"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one."* Plurality in total unity.

God could have made humans asexual, like worms. But he wanted to bestow on us the highest glory in all creation by making us more like him than anything else.

Can you imagine God's creative thoughts on this? *How can we make these humans reflect our plurality in unity? Hmm.... I know. Let's make them similar, but different and make their bodies fit together physically. Let's make them have a strong urge to merge. But how will that reflect our absolute commitment to each other? Let's make their bodies fit and let's*

¹ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 76.

create a relationship of covenantal love where they can freely enjoy that unity. What should we call that? Let's call it marriage!

Let's talk about nakedness. Nakedness is a remnant of the story that argues for the Bible's account of sexuality. I want to do this appropriately, but if I may speak the obvious, we all know what "naked" feels like. The feelings of nakedness are more pronounced if we happen to be naked in someone's presence. Back in the Stone Age when I went to school we were required to shower after gym class. Group showers. Everyone naked together. Awesome. Well, not your favorite part of the day. Why? We are incredibly self-conscious about our bodies and especially our sexual places. We are the only animals on the planet that wear clothes. Is that an evolutionary coincidence? *"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."* (Genesis 3:7)

So, why do we feel self-conscious about our sexual parts in a way that we don't about our elbows and ears? Because when we sinned against God, those sexual places were intended to reflect the highest glory. They were for expressing plurality in unity. But after sin they feel the greatest shame. Shame in our nakedness is a lasting testimony that our sexuality is about way more than body parts; it was and is deeply spiritual.

If I may press this one step further, as you know, I was married later in life. By God's grace, I was a virgin when I got married. I was surprised at how quickly, nearly immediately, I felt completely comfortable being naked in the presence of my wife. That also is a remnant of creation. Marriage and the marital bed is a safe place.

Or it should be. We have recently had a rash of married couples come out with the fact that they are considering divorce. Besides being heartbreaking, what is the problem with divorce? Why does God say in Malachi 2 that he hates divorce? One clear reason is that it distorts the purpose of marriage. Marriage is to reflect God's diversity in covenantal unity. The Father would never reject the Son or the Spirit. Further, as marriage also reflects Christ and the church (Ephesians 5), Jesus will never leave the church or forsake the church. Our marriages are to tell the truth about God and Christ. Divorce is a lie about God and Jesus. While there are many stories and reasons things happen, a divorce should break all our hearts.

Sex is about way more than most think. Behind it lie ancient purposes and divine pictures.

People

"And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

I won't spend a lot of time on this, but sex is God's plan for filling the earth with people. Reproduction. Children are part of sex in that they are God's normal result. Not always. But a biblical view of sex will have a very high view of children. They are not the unfortunate result. They are the blessed result. This has implications for how we view birth control, abortion, adoption, and a host of other matters I'm not getting into today.

If sex wasn't pleasurable or desirable, but you got children from it, just this would make it special.

Protection

“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Corinthians 7:2–5)

This alone could be a whole message and I would explain these “rights” in the context of love, not demand. But see that God’s design for sex is hetero-sex and only-within-marriage sex. Paul emphasizes that sexual intimacy within marriage helps fight against sex outside of marriage. One critical reason married couples should take their sexual relationship very seriously is because it protects the fidelity of their marriage.

Some years ago, I did a message like this and I received an anonymous letter from a man who talked about his sexless marriage. It was sad. It is also incredibly dangerous. Wives and husbands, is it wise to send your spouse into the sexualized world we live in every day without them being sexually satisfied? If your husband is going to a celibacy conference, OK. But most places in the world don’t celebrate marital fidelity. They celebrate *infidelity*. Christian couples, we have to love God enough to want to protect his glory in your marriage, and one way is to be very active sexually in marriage.

This is also a protection for single people. How? It motivates single people to get married. When sex is reserved for marriage, it’s amazing how motivated single people are to get married. Pastor John MacArthur tells the story of when the Gulf War started in the 90s there was a lot of speculation that this might lead to prophecy fulfilled about the Middle East. The Master’s College, where MacArthur is president, never had more marriages than when the students thought Jesus might be coming back.

If I could talk straight, dating and engaged couples who don’t seem to be in a hurry to get married, often don’t because they are already sleeping together. Sex in marriage is a protection, especially for women who want to get married. Ideally, you don’t want to marry a man who wants sex outside marriage, but one good way to end up married is to make him wait. If he won’t wait, dump him. If he will wait he will also keep moving up the wedding date. I was 44 when I got married. By then I was ready to get married pronto.

Christian marriages should have the best sex lives because we take sex and marriage more seriously. We do so for God’s sake and for the sake of our spouse. I wish we could earn that reputation—Christian sex is the best sex. Let’s all work on that, perhaps this afternoon.

Pleasure

¹⁷ *“Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for strangers with you.*

¹⁸ *Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,*

¹⁹ *a lovely deer, a graceful doe.*

*Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;
be intoxicated always in her love.” (Proverbs 5:17–19)*

For the sake of time, I'm just going to direct you to the Song of Solomon. It is an entire book of the Bible which celebrates erotic love within marriage.

Who made sex pleasurable? God did. Who made the body parts to work the way they do and provide the pleasure it does? God did. It's a gift. The ancients believed that orgasm was a spiritual connection with their gods. Hence, the temple prostitutes and immorality present in their worship. They made the created thing their god. Sex was their god. Not unlike the men who go to the strip clubs or women who read fantasy sexual fiction. I forget who, but some theologian said even a man entering a brothel is looking for god.

Sex isn't God. God isn't sex. But God gifted sex to us and all its pleasures.

The fact that it is a created thing is why it has incredible limitations. As a single virgin man, I wondered what it was like. Our culture worships it by displaying it as an ultimate thing, the ultimate human experience; the effervescent one thing that brings meaning to life. But here sex fails miserably.

If I may say it discreetly, I am very happy to have a sexual life with my wife. However, and young people listen to me, sex is like many other things you dream about. It is what you expect and it isn't what you expect. As an example, I have been surprised at how quickly after sexual intimacy, Jennifer and I can have a disagreement or even a bit of an argument. Any other married couples relate? I thought this would be such a transcendent experience that it created marital utopia, for at least an hour or so. Sometimes yes and longer. But sometimes life and challenges show up pretty quickly. My encouragement is to hold sex high, but not too high. No created thing replaces God for lasting joy.

Sex in the New Covenant

Christ redeems it

Where do the sexually broken go? In society they just wallow in their addictions and regrets. What answer is there out there?

If hearing this message about unity and purity and pleasure and marriage only highlights your guilt, I'm here to tell you Jesus offers real forgiveness and healing from sexual shame. In John 4 Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. She's been divorced five times and was currently sleeping with a man in town. Jesus doesn't shun her. He offers her living water through a faith relationship with him. Her life was transformed. Jesus met others like the prostitute in town and the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Again, he offers to the sexually broken a new life and a fresh start.

Sex outside of marriage and other deviations of God's plan are all sins Jesus died for. He was willing to bear your sexual shame on the cross and to say to all who have sexually sinned like the Samaritan woman, *Go, and sin no more.* (John 8:11)

Christ replaces it

Not now, but in the future, there will be no marriage and there will be no sexual unions. For some, that hardly sounds like heaven. Heaven would be freedom to have sex with anyone you want whenever you want. That's how some view it. So why no sex in eternity? Let's go back through the purpose of sex. No more people needed. No more protection needed as there is no sin or temptation. Here's the big one. The pleasure of sex is no longer needed. Why?

*"You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* (Psalm 16:11)

We think no sex means less pleasure in heaven. It is the opposite. What God intends to do is make eternity so pleasurable that sex isn't missed. *Are you saying that eternity will be so filled with pleasure that we won't have sex because we won't crave the pleasure of sex?* That's what God says. The fullness and completeness and joyfulness of the new heaven and earth will be far better than the best pleasure sex can provide. We won't miss it all.

C.S. Lewis compares it to a boy being told about sex who wonders if you eat chocolate during sexual intimacy. When he is told no because lovers have better things in mind, he can't conceive of it because chocolate is the best pleasure he has ever had.²

If sex is this world's chocolate, God plans to make the pleasures of eternity with him so wonderful that sex and chocolate and everything else is not nearly pleasurable enough when compared to every moment forever with Him. You won't miss it.

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² C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, p. 444.