

“The Honor of Chastity”
Hebrews 13:4
December 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue in our series on marriage, we’re looking today at the topic of sexuality. We live in a culture that gives great attention to this topic, and in that regard our culture is similar to the Bible, which is full of talk about sex. Our verse this morning is an example of that. I like the old word used to summarize the Christian view of sex, the word *chastity*. In the medieval era, Christians commonly summarized morality by use of the seven deadly sins, each of which had a contrasting virtue. Lust was the first of the deadly sins, and its counterpart was the virtue called chastity. It’s a word that means purity, or *undefiled* in our text, as the author commands his readers, **“let the marriage bed be undefiled.”** The Christian view of chastity is quite clear. We are called to be sexually faithful in a heterosexual marriage or to abstain totally from sexual relations if single.

From New Testament days right through our own time, sexual impurity has come in two different forms: asceticism and sexual license. These are the two ways in which we fail to honor marriage. Sexual asceticism dishonors marriage by viewing sexuality as inherently evil. Paul had some very harsh words for such an attitude. **“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... who forbid marriage** (1 Tim. 4:1,3). There were also those in this day who believed that everything material was completely disconnected from one’s spiritual life. So it didn’t matter what you did with your body, including as much sexual sin as you wanted to pursue. Both of these views were present in the decades when the New Testament was written. Both are still present today. The Catholic novelist Walker Percy summarized these two errors well in saying that we either live as angels, as though we don’t have bodies (asceticism), or we live as beasts, as if bodies are all there is.

The author of Hebrews calls us to chaste living, avoiding both asceticism and sexual license because they defile what is honorable about marriage. Note three truths we learn here about chastity or sexual purity.

I. Chastity’s Motive

The typical way we seek to motivate people to chaste living is to point out how destructive it is to live in a sexually promiscuous way. For example, the typical teenage abstinence program has an exercise that runs something like this. The teens stand in a circle, and all of them are given a cup of water. Some of the teens are also given Cheetos to munch. After the Cheeto-munching teens eat their

snack, everyone takes a swig of water from their cup. But instead of swallowing the water, they swish it around in their mouths and then spit it back into their cup. Then everyone pours some from their own cup into their neighbor's cup. The dirty water of those who had been eating Cheetos is intended to represent the body engaging in premarital sex, contaminated by sexually transmitted diseases and the general taint of premarital sex. The message is clear—illicit sexual relations bring harm into your life.

How should we as Christians evaluate this message? Is it biblical to say to people, "Avoid sexual sin because it will hurt you?" I think the clear answer of the Bible is that such motivation is proper, but incomplete. The book of Proverbs reasons in the same manner as the Cheetos exercise, telling the young man to avoid the path leading to the house of the prostitute. The passage concludes with a warning. **"Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths, for many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death"** (Pro. 7:25-27). So it is appropriate to warn people of the dangers accompanying sexual impurity because the Bible itself does so. But that is only half the picture, and it is probably not enough for most people. As a matter of fact, the data on the effectiveness of teenage sexual abstinence programs shows that they are effective in delaying sexual promiscuity, but not in eliminating it. A 2001 study of True Love Waits, a popular abstinence program, showed that it was effective in delaying sexual activity for about 18 months. But over the long term, 61 percent of students who signed sexual-abstinence commitment cards broke their pledges (Winner, *Real Sex*, p. 17).

The Bible offers here in Hebrews 13:4 a much grander motive for sexual purity. We are told to honor the institution of marriage. We Americans are accustomed to thinking only in individual terms of how things affect us as individuals. But here we are told that our individual behavior can affect the entire institution of marriage, bringing honor or dishonor depending upon how we behave ourselves. In other words, there is more at stake in the area of sexual purity than your own prospering or suffering. Marriage itself is on the line, and we are called here to pursue sexual purity, which our author describes as keeping the marriage bed undefiled, in order to bring honor to the institution of marriage.

There are two big reasons why we should honor marriage. First, in the Bible it is the fundamental institution of human society, created before any of the others. God created marriage in Genesis 2, before both the church and the state.

Second, we honor marriage because God honors it. God the Father created it and was a kind of father of the bride at the first wedding. God the Son honored it by his miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. I like what one commentator said about this. By this miracle at Cana, we are taught that "if Christ be present at your wedding your life shall be a joyous or blessed one" (Pink, p. 1126). God the Spirit honors marriage as he inspires the Scriptures, in

which marriage is made to be a picture of Jesus' love for his people. God has always sought to protect those things intended by him to portray everything about Jesus' love. For example, have you ever wondered why God was so severe in insisting that everything about the Old Testament tabernacle be done precisely as he directed? He even threatens with death any who ignore his commands about this. There was a man in the Old Testament named Uzzah who once reached out his hand to touch the ark of God as it was being transported back to Israel. He did so innocently enough, simply because the oxen stumbled who were pulling the cart upon which the ark rested. But then we read, **“And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God”** (2 Sam. 6:7). Why such harsh treatment for something that must have been an instinctive act, as Uzzah reached out his hand to keep the ark from falling? Because God had declared that the ark should not be touched, and that it should be carried by inserting long poles through four rings that were designed into its corners. And God was protecting the tabernacle and its portrayal of Jesus as the final tabernacle, the place where God comes to dwell with his people through blood sacrifice. We are to honor marriage because it is also a portrayal of Jesus' love, and God says in our text that he will continue to uphold it by judging all who bring defilement to it. **“God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”**

II. Chastity's Enemy for Singles

The author specifies two areas where marriage is commonly defiled, or where chastity fails. The first one, translated sexual immorality in our text, applies to singles, and the second one, adultery, applies to those who are married. Let's look first at sexual immorality. The word used here is the general word for sexual sin, and it encompasses everything that is outside the biblical boundary for sexuality. In light of the fact that it appears right next to the category of adultery, which more specifically applies to sexual sin among the married, I think it is intended to speak of sexual sin by those who are not married. It speaks primarily of premarital sex. One of the ways in which marriage is not held in honor is when two single people engage in premarital sex.

One of the clearest passages on this is 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul points out that the sexual act forms a union. **“Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh’”** (v. 16). There was a movie starring Tom Cruise several years ago in which his character had a fling with a beautiful blonde he was never serious about. So he breaks up with her, even though she doesn't want to break up with him. She finally corners him one day and says something that is very similar to what the apostle Paul said. “Don't you know that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not?” I remember an analogy I heard several years ago of the ability of a Band-Aid to stick. The first time it's used, it adheres to the skin really well. But what happens when the same

Band-Aid is used repeatedly is that it loses its ability to stick each time, until finally it has no ability to adhere at all. Premarital sex reduces our ability to stick to the one we end up marrying.

God has designed sexual intimacy to take place within the boundary of a lifelong, committed, covenantal marriage. Real sex flourishes within those boundaries. When someone says, “I want a sexual relationship with you, but I’m not ready to make a total “til death do us part” kind of marriage commitment, they are acting in a selfish manner. So when someone says to you, “If you loved me, you would be willing to have sex with me,” that person has stated something that could not be further from the truth. You can count on the fact that the person saying such a thing knows very little of real love, but rather only wants to use and manipulate in a completely self-centered way. God designed our sexuality to be expressed only within a committed relationship. In her book, *Real Sex*, Lauren Winner says it like this:

Indeed, one can say that in Christianity’s vocabulary the only real sex is the sex that happens in a marriage; the faux sex that goes on outside marriage is not really sex at all. The physical coming together that happens between two people who are not married is only a distorted imitation of sex, as Walt Disney’s Wilderness Lodge Resort is only a simulation of real wilderness. The danger is that when we spend too much time in the simulations, we lose the capacity to distinguish between the ersatz and the real (p. 38).

III. Chastity’s Enemy for the Married

Adultery is the word used in our passage and throughout the Bible to describe sexual impurity for those who are married. Adultery is a violation of the exclusive nature of the marital, sexual union. While premarital sex seeks intimacy outside a lifelong commitment, adultery makes the commitment and then reneges on it. Both are self-centered, saying that I want the pleasure of a sexual relationship without the life commitment.

Adultery has some cousins that, while I wouldn’t want to say that these are the same as adultery, are sins that are related to it and often lead to it. Pornography, for example, seeks the thrill of sexual excitement without the messiness that always goes with a committed relationship. It is a way to be in control and completely self-centered in seeking one’s sexual excitement. Also, sharing secrets with a member of the opposite sex, without sharing those same secrets with one’s spouse, is a violation of marital intimacy and a big step toward the act of adultery.

The sexual act is designed of God to be one of the protections against adultery. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul tells husbands and wives, **“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” (v. 5). A Texas pastor made the national news a few weeks ago when he challenged the married couples in his church to have sexual relations for seven consecutive days. While I don’t think that was a wise thing for a pastor to do, for quite a few different reasons, there is some truth to what he was saying. Such intimacy is designed of God to protect a marriage from adultery. One quick qualification is needed, and that is to remind you that love never forces such intimacy upon another person.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a specific application related to sexual purity. The greatest resource available to us in maintaining purity is often overlooked. It’s the grace of God to us through Jesus. Paul told Titus that it is the grace of God that trains **“us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age”** (2:12). Let’s review God’s grace as it relates to this area of sexual sin. Is there any among us who is innocent in this area? Remember that Jesus said that sexual lust is a sin, even if there has never been a physical act. If your thought life could be recorded and then shown on a screen for all in church to see, would you feel shame? And don’t forget that word in our verse. **“God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”** So let me remind you of the grace of God through Jesus. For all who seek refuge in Jesus, no matter the sexual sin you have committed, there is cleansing and forgiveness. He removes the shame by covering you with the righteousness of Christ. Lauren Winner makes reference to the Cheetos exercise I mentioned earlier to help us grasp God’s grace.

I thought of this abstinence program a few Sundays ago when I was serving at my church as a chalice bearer, one of the lay people who offers the cup to the body of believers during the service of Holy Communion.... For the first time since I began serving communion, I noticed, as Mrs. J. handed the silver chalice back to me, that there was a giant rivulet of saliva running down into the cup. I did not have a holy, sanctified thought. Instead, I thought ‘Gross! I am going to have to drink that saliva,’ because—in order not to waste the consecrated wine, the blood of Christ—the chalice bearer always consumes any wine that might remain in the chalice once everyone else has been served.

Back at home, as I was still shivering at the thought of the saliva I’d swigged, I found myself juxtaposing the two cups—the teenagers’ cups of spit, signifying the body defiled by misordered sex, and the silver chalice of spit-laced communion wine, signifying the Body of Christ.

It is easy to misread Paul’s words to the Corinthians about joining your body with a prostitute. His point is not that Christians should not join their bodies to prostitutes—to the contrary, we are called to do that very thing. The point for Paul is the manner of joining. *We are not to join our bodies to prostitutes through sex; we are, rather, to join our bodies with prostitutes—and with all other repentant sinners—in the Body of Christ, in the sometimes germmy communion cup* (p. 154-55).