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Sex Before Marriage

How Far Is Too Far?

Timothy S. Lane



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““We love each other and are faithful to each other, so I don’t think there’s anything wrong with having sex before we get married.”

“Isn’t it a good idea to see if we’re sexually compatible before we get married?”

“Don’t make sex before marriage into such a big deal—everyone does it.”

“I’m not going to let other people make me feel guilty just because I don’t buy into their value system.”

Have you ever thought or said things like this? If your answer is yes, you have a lot of company. Most people, at least in some circumstances, think premarital sex is okay. What was once frowned upon is now an accepted part of Western culture, and sex education usually means learning about “safe sex,” and how to take steps to avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. But you have probably noticed that education about “safe sex” hasn’t protected those around you from experiencing hurt and broken relationships as they have experimented sexually. Since God made you and also created sex, why not take the time to look at what he has to say about your

sexuality and how it should be expressed? You may be surprised at what you learn.

Christians haven't always done a very good job talking about sex. Some avoid the topic all together, and others give the impression that sex is somehow inherently degrading and tainted. But God, in the Bible, doesn't avoid the topic of sex or say that it is bad. Instead, God has a positive view of sex and also specific guidelines about how to express your sexuality. God is not a kill-joy—his guidelines for your sexuality are for your help, protection, and good.

What God Thinks About Sex

While the church has not always addressed the issue of sex in helpful ways, the Bible does. The most realistic, hopeful, and wise handling of sex is found there. You can always count on the Bible's realism and directness. Biblical writers never shy away from controversial topics. They teach that the physical world is good and give guidance on how to rightfully enjoy it. This is true of sex as well.

Many people think that God, in the Bible, says that sex is inherently bad and sinful, but nothing could be further from the truth. At the very beginning, God looked at everything he created and said it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Even after sin entered into the world, the Bible never speaks of the physical world as inherently sinful. People do use physical things in wrong ways, but that doesn’t make physical activities like eating or sex wrong.

If you have any doubts that sex is part of the goodness of God’s creation, look at the Song of Solomon, a small book in the Old Testament section of the Bible. It’s a series of joyful poems written by a bride and a groom about the physical expression of love in marriage. When you read this, you will know that the Bible is not squeamish about sex. Here’s one of many passages that celebrates marital sexual intimacy:

The bridegroom begins by saying,

“You have stolen my heart, my sister, my
bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance
of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.

How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your perfume than any
spice! Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb,
my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of
Lebanon. You are a garden locked up, my sister,
my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed
fountain.” (Song of Solomon 4:9–12)

And his bride responds,

“My lover has gone down to his garden, to
the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and
to gather lilies. I am my lover’s and my lover is
mine; he browses among the lilies.” (Song of
Solomon 6:2–3)

These love poems brim with a positive view of sex in marriage. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul also affirms the goodness of the physical world. Paul says that your body “is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised

the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 6:13–15, ESV). Paul is reminding us that Jesus’ physical body was raised from the dead, so all those who believe in him will also be raised from the dead. Our physical bodies are one with Christ himself! This is a resounding affirmation of physical bodies. Paul goes on to say that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Because the body is good, sex and other physical activities can be enjoyed to the glory of God with no sense of shame. God intends married couples to celebrate and enjoy sex.

Sex Is Not a Casual Activity

Paul also says that our bodies were not meant for sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:13). The word Paul uses for sexual immorality is the Greek word “porneia.” This is a very comprehensive word used in the Bible to describe any and all kinds of sexual behavior outside the context of marriage between a man and a woman. Paul takes sexual sin very seriously and includes it in a long list of

sins (both sexual and nonsexual) that have temporal and eternal consequences (1 Corinthians 6:9). His attitude towards sexual sin comes from God. God places a high value on sex—after all he invented it (Genesis 1:28; 2:18–25)! He also bases it upon the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:27–30 and 19:4–6. The Bible celebrates sex within marriage, but never talks about it as something that is casual because it is not a casual activity.

The Right Way to Enjoy Sex

Paul says that sex is good, but there is a proper context for enjoying our sexuality. Sex is rightfully enjoyed within the context of an exclusive, heterosexual marriage. Paul does not say it's okay to have sex if you really, really like one another and plan to be in a highly committed dating relationship. No, Paul says that intimate sexual relations should be reserved exclusively for two people who have entered into a commitment with one another in a religious or civil ceremony. A marriage is created when a man and a woman go on record in a public and legal context to acknowledge their commitment to one another.

What makes a marriage is a covenant or legal commitment, so until you make that commitment with someone, you aren't married. Certainly marriage is much more than the beginning commitment or promise, but it is never less than that.

Why does it seem like the Bible is so narrow in how you practice and enjoy sex? The answer is that God knows how powerful sex is. When sex is practiced outside of marriage, you are misusing it and there are personal and interpersonal consequences. Sex outside of marriage is incomplete, because it doesn't have a binding union as its basis. So when you have sex outside of marriage, what you are really saying is, "I want to have physical union with you, but not the entanglements of any other kind of binding union." Most people don't consciously think like that when they are having sex before marriage, yet, that is what they are doing and communicating—no matter how much they say they care for their partner.

Married sex is very powerful. It communicates the intense, personal nature of the marriage bond. The Hebrew word for sex is *yada*, which literally means to