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John Piper, Pastor
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SEX AND THE SINGLE PERSON

If the Bible addresses an issue with unrelenting frequency and urgency, and if that issue is one of the strongest natural forces in the world today, then ministers of the Word of God are obligated sooner or later to declare God's will on that issue. The sexual life of the unmarried person (we will talk about married people next week) is of great concern to God. Even those of you who have not entrusted yourselves to Christ for salvation and do not love God, even you are obligated to obey what God has to say about your sexual desires. Though you rebel against his ownership you are God's. He made you and has an absolute right to tell you what is good for you. He sent Jesus Christ into the world to overcome your rebellion and to make peace by the blood of His cross. And my prayer at the very outset is that you might turn from your rebellion and unbelief and disobedience, and that you might trust Christ for forgiveness and live for the glory of God.

Then I would be able to say to everyone in this room,

Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).

O, what an offensive word to our rebel human nature. The body in which you dwell is not yours to do with simply as you please. God bought your body from the curse of sin by the payment of His own son, and now your body should serve one all-encompassing purpose: "Glorify, God in your body." As Paul said in Romans 6:12-14,

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies to make you obey their passions. Do not yield yourselves to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as people who have been brought from death to life, and your bodily parts to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you for you are not under law but under grace.

God is concerned about what you do with your body. He created them, He bought them, He owns them, He indwells them, and what we do with them demonstrates to the world who our Lord is. If I were to stop here with this general admonition, our consciences would give us some guidance in specific cases, say, of whether we should smoke or drink or use drugs or overeat or never exercise, or get too little sleep or engage in sexual relations outside marriage or masturbate or wear enticing clothing or other things that misuse or abuse the body. But what our consciences approve and disapprove of is not always an accurate guide to what God approves of. Therefore, the Bible goes beyond the general admonition, "Glorify God in your body," to the more specific guidance, especially in the matter of sexual desires. So I aim to be more specific, too.

The question I want to start with is this: Why did God invent sexual desire? Before I try to answer that question from Scripture, let me define sexual desire. First of all, I am not including homosexual desires. Until I have a chance to preach on homosexuality I'll just say three things about it: 1) If you are here and homosexual, I pray that you will not feel driven away, but will stay and seek help. 2) The practice of homosexuality is sin; it is contrary to God's revealed will. 3) Homosexual desires, like many other kinds of desires, are abnormal and those who have them should seek through prayer, fellowship and Christian counseling to be changed. It is not easy but it is possible.

When I ask the question why God created sexual desire, I have in mind that normal craving for sexual stimulation and intimacy that begins with early adolescence and continues, for some it seems, indefinitely, but for many mellows out into a less visceral craving but nevertheless real desire for personal and bodily intimacy. I acknowledge that in these years of sexual desire there are many people with very vigorous, and people with very mild, sexual desires. I don't mean to treat anyone along this continuum as better or worse than another. When I speak of those with sexual desires I refer to the vast majority of people who from their early adolescence have to deal one way or another with God-given sexual appetite.

Now, why did He create it? Let me give one brief answer and one expanded answer. The brief answer comes from Genesis 1:27, 28, "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 and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.'" Since sexual desire aims finally at consummation in sexual intercourse, and sexual intercourse is the means that man and woman have of multiplying and filling the earth, therefore, I infer that one of the reasons God created us with sexual desire is to see to it that mankind would indeed fill the earth with people. And for some people procreation of children is the only justification for seeking gratification of sexual desires. But we will see in more detail next week, when we talk about sexual relations in marriage, that the apostle Paul has quite a different view.

A second answer to the question why God created sexual desire is found I believe, in 1 Timothy 4:1-5,

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

In this text Paul is trying to help Timothy know what to say when false teachers arise (and there were some already at Ephesus) who teach that gratification of sexual appetite in marriage and the gratification of appetite for food should be cut back as far as possible. That means abstinence from marriage altogether and avoid unnecessary foods. It is no accident that Paul mentions marriage and eating together here and then treats them as one problem. Because the issue is really bodily pleasure, unnecessary bodily pleasure, whether through sexual stimulation or

through eating food. The false teachers said, "Cut bodily pleasure to the minimum that will allow you to live."

Paul's response to this ascetic teaching is very plain in verses 4 and 5:

Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Why did God create sexual desire and sexual intercourse to satisfy it, why did God create hunger and food to satisfy it? Verse 3 gives a very straightforward answer: "God created (these things) to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." All the unnecessary, innocent pleasures of life (and there are thousands of them) were created by God to be occasions for thanksgiving to God by those who believe and know the truth. The reason God created sexual desire and the event of sexual intercourse to satisfy it is not merely to fill the earth with people, but also to give another unique and exquisite occasion for the ascent of thanks from two hearts full of gratitude for God's gift of sexuality.

And let us not be deceived by the world. This gift was designed for believers and no one else. Look at verse 3, "God created these things to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe." By its very design it can only be for believers, because it is designed as an occasion for thanksgiving. But those who do not "know the truth" - the truth, namely, that God is the giver of all good gifts and worthy to be glorified and thanked -- those who hold down this truth (Romans 1:18, 25) and do not trust in God cannot satisfy their sexual desires according to the design of God. All their sexual behavior is sin because it does not spring from faith in God (Romans 14:23) and does not result in thanks to God. Sexual pleasure belongs rightfully only to believers. All others are thieves and robbers. Don't ever let the world deceive you into thinking that we Christians are trying to borrow and purify a limited amount of the world's pleasure. God created sexual pleasure for His subjects alone and the world has rebelled against Him and stolen His gifts and corrupted them and debased them and turned them into weapons of destruction and laughed at those who remain faithful to the King and use His gifts according to His word. But we will not be deceived. The gift is ours and we will consecrate it, that is, we will keep it pure, as Paul says in verse five, "by the word of God and prayer."

Since we believe that God designed sexual desire and that He gave it to us for our good (otherwise we wouldn't give thanks), we infer something that is completely reasonable, namely, that God knows how each of His creatures can make the most of this desire and that, therefore, His word is an infallible guide to maximum sexual fulfillment. I said this is a reasonable inference. Only so if you really trust God. The world will laugh its head off at the thought that Biblical restraints make for maximum sex. But if we believe that God is good and that in Christ He has forgiven all our sins, then we must believe that His words of guidance on sexual matters will bring us the greatest possible fulfillment, even if it means total abstinence.

Now, what are His words of guidance to those who are not married? The Greek word from which we get "pornography" is porneia. In the New Testament porneia is translated as "fornication," "unchastity" or "immorality." Generally (though not always) it refers to sexual promiscuity of unmarried people. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus says, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder,

adultery, fornication, etc." Here it stands side by side with adultery, adultery being the specific sin of sexual unfaithfulness in marriage and fornication being the more general word covering illicit sexual relations for person who are not married.

The New Testament as well as the Old condemns fornication, or sexual intercourse outside marriage, as sin. In Galatians 5:19, Paul lists it with the works of the flesh. In 2 Corinthians 12:21 he is ready to weep over those who have not repented of this sin. In Ephesians 5:3 he says fornication should never have to be named among Christians. In Colossians 3:5 fornication is first on Paul's list of things we should put to death in ourselves. And in Revelation 9:21 it is listed with murder, sorcery and theft as things a hardened people would not repent of.

In 1 Corinthians 7:2 Paul says,

Because of temptation to immorality (i.e., fornication) each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Then he goes on in verses 8 and 9:

To the unmarried (men and women) and to the widows I say it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

The point I want to take from these verses is that, according to Scripture, all sexual intercourse before marriage is immoral. There are many man-centered moralists today who admit that indiscriminate sexual relations are wrong but who argue that, when a couple is engaged or has a deep friendship, then things are different and sexual relations are a legitimate expression of love. But the Biblical view cannot be stretched to cover that concession. Paul considers the possibility that a couple may be aflame with passion for each other and his one and only release from continence is marriage: "If they cannot exercise self-control they should marry!" God not only created sexual desire but He also created the perfect sphere for its gratification, marriage. And any attempt to alter His design is not only immoral before God but destructive of personal relations and individual fulfillment.

This raises the next question: Why did God command that we find gratification for our sexual desires only in marriage? To the best of my knowledge God does not give us a direct answer to this question in His word, nor is He obligated to. Sometimes God leaves the wisdom of His commands for us to discover by experience. Those who disobey Him discover it through tragedy. Those who obey discover it through patience and joy.

The way I have tried to understand God's wisdom and love in limiting sexual intercourse to marriage is by asking, "What is it that distinguishes marriage from all other heterosexual relations?" The Biblical answer to that question is that marriage is distinguished from other chosen relationships by its permanence. Marriage is a commitment made for a lifetime, till death do us part. 1 Corinthians 7:39,

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

There is no other relationship between a man and a woman requiring that kind of permanent commitment. Therefore, in marriage God has designed a unique and stable and lasting relation for our most intimate expression of love. I believe experience confirms that something good and beautiful is lost from our sexual intimacy in marriage if we gave ourselves away outside that union. God can forgive that sin, but the scar He does not remove. The act will never be the same again. There is an inexpressible deepening of the union of marriage, which God intended, when a husband and wife can lie beside each other in perfect peace and freedom and say, "What I have just given you I have never given to another." I speak to those for whom it is not too late: Do not throw that away.

I find it helpful to use the analogy of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:6, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." It is possible to debase the truth by dispensing it willy-nilly. There are some truths that are too precious to be discussed in hostile, worldly settings. That's the way it is with our bodies, too. Nobody dispenses his bodily affections indiscriminately. You don't shake hands with all the people you nod to. You don't hug all the people you shake hands with. You don't kiss all the people you hug. And I would argue that there is a pearl of great value, a pearl of emotional, spiritual, physical intimacy which can only be placed in one container without being debased and ruined, and that is the strong, permanent velvet-lined case of marriage. The unique, personal, sexual fulfillment in the permanence of marriage for those who have kept themselves pure is one of the best explanations for why God limited the gratification of sexual desires to marriage.

The implication of all this for the single person with average sexual desires is not easy. Even if a person gets married in his early twenties he is confronted with a preceding decade of sexual stress. And for those who remain single, whether by choice or not, the problem of handling sexual desires continues much longer. What help can we give to these people, among whom I include everybody from thirteen years on up who is unmarried and yet feels desires for sexual stimulation and gratification? My main burden for you in this category is that you glorify God in your bodies by keeping yourself free from any enslavement except to God. In Romans 6:16 Paul said,

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

And in 1 Corinthians 6:12 the proud Corinthian libertines said, "All things are lawful for me," but Paul responded, "Yet I will not be enslaved by anything." The meaning of that little interchange is that it is possible to be enslaved in the name of freedom. That is the situation in the world today. In the name of sexual freedom we are a nation enslaved to our sexual cravings. If you want to know what a nation is hooked on, just observe what the media masters use to get and hold our attention. Sex sells everything. It sells movies, cars, furniture, clothes, booze, news, cigarettes, and sporting gear. Sex sells because we are a nation enslaved to the second, third and fourth look at the body in the picture. But it shall not be so among you, because you have been

set free from sin and are now enslaved to God. Therefore, glorify God by keeping yourself free from the enslaving forces of the world.

I have ten words of counsel for persons who are not married but who have to deal with sexual desires. Some of these have a masculine orientation because I know the male temptation firsthand but not the female. Some are do's and some are don'ts but all aim to be positive in that they are intended to help you preserve your freedom from any enslavement but God's.

First, do not seek regular sexual gratification through masturbation, that is, the stimulation of your own self to sexual orgasm or climax. Masturbation does not solve sexual pressure for very long, it tends to become habitual, it produces guilt, and it contradicts the God-given design of sexuality. Our bodies and desires were designed for the sexual union of persons and masturbation contradicts that design. But perhaps worst of all, masturbation is inevitably accompanied and enabled by sexual fantasies in the mind which we would not allow ourselves in reality and so we become like the Pharisees: well scrubbed on the outside but inside full of perversions.

Second, do not seek sexual satisfaction through touching or being touched by another person even if you stop short of sexual intercourse. Everyone knows that intimate touching is the prelude and preparation for sexual intercourse and therefore it belongs where that event belongs, namely, in marriage. Where the permanent commitment that characterizes marriage is missing, caressing becomes depersonalized manipulation; it turns the other's body into a masturbation device to get a private physical thrill. God made us in such a way that if we try to turn that moment of touching into a personal, spiritual expression of love, we are not able to do it without making promises of faithfulness. Implicit in our hearts at that moment is the statement: You may touch me because you have promised never to leave me nor forsake me. You may have me because you are me. We are so made that we cry out for permanence when giving away our most intimate gifts. They belong in marriage.

Third, avoid unnecessary sexual stimulation. It doesn't take any brains to know that there are enough X-rated movie houses and adult bookstores in this city to keep a person livid 24 hours a day. To visit these crummy places is temptation enough. But the real test is what you do with the more legitimate sources of sexual stimulation. PG movies, Time magazine, the newspaper, television, drugstore magazine racks, rock music lyrics. In our society you cannot escape sexual stimulation, but you can refuse to seek it. And you can avoid it often when you see it coming. This is the great test of whether we are enslaved or free -- can we say no to the slave driver in our bodies who wants us to keep on looking and keep on lusting.

Fourth, when the stimulation comes and the desire starts to rise perform a very conscious act of transfer onto Christ. I wish I had learned this much earlier in my life. While riding down the road, if some billboard or marquee puts a desire into my mind for some illegitimate sexual pleasure, I take that desire and say, "Jesus, you are my Lord and my God, and my greatest desire is to know and love and obey you, so this desire is really for you. I take it from your competitor, I purge it and I direct it to you. Thank you for freeing me from the bondage of sin." It is remarkable what control we can gain over the direction our desires take, if we really long to please Christ.

Fifth, pray that God would give you, in ever-increasing strength, a longing to know and love and obey Him above all else. I read a sermon once entitled, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." The point was, there is no better way to overcome a bad desire than to push it out with a new one. It is in prayer that we summon the divine help to produce in us that new desire for God.

Sixth, bathe your mind in God's word. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). There is nothing that renews the mind and enables it to assess things God's way like regular meditation on the word of God. The person who does not arm himself with the Sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) is going to lose in the battle for his or her body.

Seventh, keep yourself busy, and when it is time for leisure, choose things that are pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Idleness in a world like ours is asking for trouble. It is much harder for sexual temptation to gain a foothold when we are busy at some productive task. And if you need some fresh air, walk in a park not down Hennepin Avenue.

Eight, don't spend too much time alone. Be with Christian people often. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together but encourage one another, stir each other up to love and good works. Talk of your struggles with trusted friends, pray for each other and hold each other accountable.

Ninth, strive to think of all people, especially people of the opposite sex, in relation to eternity. It is not easy to fantasize about a person if you think about the eternal torment they may shortly be suffering in Hell because of their unbelief. Nor is it easy to disrobe in your imagination a person you know to be an eternal sister or brother in Christ. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "From now on we know no one according to the flesh." We view everybody from God's eternal perspective.

Finally, resolve to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and He will add to you everything you need sexually. It may be a spouse. It may be the grace and freedom to be single and pure and content. That is up to God. Ours is to seek the Kingdom. Or to put it another way, our all-consuming passion must be to glorify God in our bodies by keeping ourselves free from every enslavement but one: the joyful, fulfilling slavery to God.

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