



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

SEXUAL PURITY



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INTRODUCTION: GOD'S "YES"

I've learned more on long flights about teaching Christian sexual morality than I have anywhere else. That may sound strange, so let me explain. By "long flights," I mean more than two hours — just long enough to strike up a real conversation with the passenger beside me. After several of these conversations, I began to notice that they followed a predictable pattern: the passenger next to me would ask what I do for a living, find out I'm a Christian writer and podcaster, and immediately ask me some version of this question: "So, does that mean you're against sex outside marriage? Same-sex marriage? Abortion? Hookups? LGBT people?"

At first, I would try to answer these questions directly — explaining the biblical reasons I'm against sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman, homosexual behavior, the killing of unborn babies, alternative gender identities, and more. But after a few conversations that gave me *déjà vu* and bore little fruit, I began to reconsider my response. I realized that by answering my fellow passengers' "are you against..." questions, I was buying a hidden assumption: that Christianity is a faith defined mainly by its "nos" — by the things it forbids.

I asked myself a question: Is this true? Is my faith nothing more than a laundry list of things God prohibits? Have I dedicated my life to defending and applying the dictates of a cosmic killjoy? Is the Christian understanding of right and wrong really summarized in that one, abrupt bark of a word: "no"? If so, is Christianity worth believing?

It's no coincidence that these high-altitude conversations always seem to come back to sex. Our culture is obsessed with it, treating sexual attractiveness, experiences, and orientation as the pinnacle of a human being's identity and worth. And as long as there's consent, anything goes! Now imagine how Christians look through the eyes of those who consider themselves sexually liberated. Going back to the 1990s, read any Christian book on sex and one

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word looms large: “no.”

During the heyday of what’s often called evangelical “purity culture,” authors, pastors, conferences, and teachers constantly used that little word: “No premarital sex,” “No recreational dating,” “No kissing before the ring,” “No immodest dress,” “No lust,” “No pornography,” “No time alone with the opposite sex.” No. No. No.

Now, I don’t think “purity culture” was nearly as clumsy and counterproductive as critics these days suggest. Some of those “nos” I just listed are, after all, good and godly advice! But somewhere along the way, the idea that Christian morality — especially sexual morality — consists entirely of “nos,” entered the popular imagination, and stuck. I think that has really hurt our image as Christians, and our opportunities to share the gospel.

The very word “purity,” which was so often used by evangelical authors during my teenage years, evokes hygiene, cleanliness, and separation from something “dirty.” We say water is “pure” when it has no contaminants. Sprinkle some dirt in it, and it becomes impure! It’s not hard to see how readers encounter this word and mistakenly conclude that sex itself is the “dirt” Christians want to preserve themselves from, and that Christians are therefore not only obsessed with the word “no,” but are against sex!

The problem isn’t necessarily the word “purity,” of course (it’s in the title of this guide!). Nor is it the word “no,” which happens to be a very useful word. “No” can even save a life! I’m a dad, and there are few quicker or more effective ways to stop my child from running in front of an oncoming car than shouting “no!” I’m certainly not going to give my six-year-old son an extended lecture on Newtonian physics to change his mind about challenging that Dodge Challenger. “No” is a great word. It constantly saves children and adults alike from stupid, dangerous, immoral, and self-destructive behavior. And thankfully it’s short and easy to shout!

God says “no,” too. A lot. At the heart of the Law he gave his chosen people, delivered to Moses amid thunder and storm clouds on Mount Sinai, is a list of Ten Commandments that echo down through history and to this day form the heart of Jewish and Christian ethics. We cannot ignore the fact that these commandments are dominated by “nos” (or to use the King’s English, “thou shalt nots”).

For most of Christian history, the eight negative commandments have been viewed as a summary of God’s moral law, or the eternal principles of right and wrong based on his very character. “Don’t make idols,” “Don’t commit

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adultery,” “Don’t murder,” and the rest are excellent moral rules. Obeying them was a condition for Israel remaining in the Promised Land, and Jesus himself reiterated them (Mark 10:19). They are perfect, “refreshing the soul” (Ps. 19:7). The Bible celebrates God’s “nos.”

Yet when taken in isolation from the rest of Scripture, these commandments can give the impression that biblical morality is mainly about opposing sins without offering a righteous alternative. It sounds like a parent who only ever tells his children, “No!” “Stop it!” and “Don’t do that!” without ever giving them instructions on what they *should* do. How frustrating! Such children would be mentally paralyzed, always terrified to act for fear they’ll run afoul of dad’s rules.

Worse, children who are only ever told “no” might develop the suspicion that their father isn’t really looking out for their best interests. They may begin to believe that what he is withholding from them is good or pleasant, that the fruit he has forbidden is actually sweet, and that their father’s command is a barrier to knowledge and abundant life. They may even suspect that he knows this, and wants to keep it from them.

If this sounds familiar, that’s because it was the lie of the Serpent that Adam and Eve believed in Genesis 3. That snake, whom we know from elsewhere in Scripture was Satan, convinced the first humans that God wasn’t really on their side — that he was deliberately withholding something good and nourishing from them, and that he had lied to them to keep them from partaking of that goodness.

In the end, of course, Adam and Eve discovered that it was the Serpent who had lied. Far from withholding something good from his children, God had given them everything they could possibly want for whole and joyful lives: delicious food, a lush and beautiful home, a dazzling variety of animal companions and natural resources — even a flawless sexual partner with whom to share love and bear children! But amid this gorgeous world of God’s “yesses,” they focused on his one “no” — don’t eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. And they never considered that God’s “no” was there to safeguard all his positive gifts. Ever since that day, we have suffered and died for their failure to understand God’s grand “yes.”

In this field guide, I want to explain how Christian sexual morality — what we often refer to as “sexual purity” — can look like that “no” in Eden. Yes, it forbids things we would sometimes like to do. It’s not always clear to us why God forbids those actions. But it’s vital that we understand (and help unbelievers understand) that the “nos” Christians insist on when it comes to

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sex are actually there to protect a beautiful, profound, life-giving “yes.”

God has a gift he sincerely wants to give us. That gift is abundant life as human beings — as sexual beings! He wants to give us this gift regardless of whether we ever experience sex (I’ll explain). But to understand why he says “no” to so many things our unbelieving neighbors or fellow airline passengers celebrate, we have to study his gift, and discover why our culture has gotten it so tragically wrong.

1

NO GOOD THING DOES HE WITHHOLD

You're Not Missing Out

As in the Garden of Eden, the appeal of disobeying God's "no" always starts with the lie that he is withholding something good from us. That's what the Serpent told Eve. And that's what he still tells every person who wants to engage in behaviors God forbids, especially sexual behaviors.

Think about it: everyone who sleeps with a girlfriend or boyfriend, uses pornography, has a one-night stand, engages in a homosexual relationship, or even terminates an unwanted pregnancy is seeking something he or she thinks is good. It could be pleasure, emotional connection, relief from loneliness, a love he or she never received, a feeling of power or control, or escape from the consequences of a previous bad choice. But each of these people sees what he or she is after as something *good* and *desirable*, just as Eve did when she took the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6).

Christians are no exception. Though we know God's rules, we're still tempted by these and other sins. Looking at the sexual preoccupations of unbelievers, we can get the uneasy feeling that we're missing out on the fun. You know what I'm talking about: that deep-down suspicion that the lifestyle our culture celebrates really is more exciting, liberating, and fulfilling than the lifestyle God has for us.

Before we say more, let's get one thing clear: We don't obey God's rules primarily because we hope for earthly rewards. We obey God because he is God and we belong to him.

He created us, and (if we're Christians) has purchased us anew at the heavy price of Christ's blood. We obey because it's right. But one of the ways we know whether something that looks good really is good is to observe its consequences. When we survey the consequences of the way our culture treats sex, it becomes clear that the promises of excitement, liberation, and fulfillment are lies.

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Take just one example: cohabitation, now the most common way couples in America establish long-term relationships. Does it result in happiness and lasting love (which is still something most people say they want)?¹ Certainly, a lot of people are convinced it will. According to Pew Research, nearly sixty percent of American adults ages 18–44 have lived together with a partner outside of marriage at some point. Only fifty percent have ever been married.² In other words, cohabitation is now more popular than marriage. How has it worked out? Does moving in together lead to happiness and lasting love?

Bradford Wilcox with the Institute for Family Studies reports that only thirty-three percent of couples who move in together end up getting married. Fifty-four percent break up without marrying. Cohabitation, in other words, is much more likely to end in a breakup than a “happily ever after.” But it gets worse. Thirty-four percent of married couples who lived together before getting engaged divorce within the first ten years, compared with just twenty percent of couples who wait until marriage to live together.³

And it’s not just cohabitation. The research is clear that *all* so-called premarital “sexual experience” hurts your chances of getting married, staying married, and living together happily. Jason Carroll and Brian Willoughby at the Institute for Family Studies summarized the findings of many different surveys and found that “the lowest divorce rates in early marriage are found among married couples who have only had sex with each other.”⁴

In particular, they wrote, “...women who wait until they are married to have sex have only a 5% chance of divorce in the first five years of marriage, whereas women who report two or more sex partners prior to marriage have between a 25% to 35% chance of divorce...”⁵

In their latest research, Carroll and Willoughby found that “sexually inexperienced” people enjoy the highest levels of relationship satisfaction, stability, and — *get this* — sexual satisfaction!⁶ In other words, if what you’re after is a lasting, stable, and fulfilling sexual relationship, nothing gives you a better chance at achieving that than waiting until marriage to have sex, which is God’s way. By contrast, nothing gives you a worse chance at achieving that kind of relationship than gaining sexual “experience” with multiple partners before marriage, which is the culture’s way. These findings are no secret. They have been widely reported in secular and mainstream publications like *The Atlantic*.⁷

You’d think a culture as obsessed as ours is with sex would at least be having

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a lot of it. But you'd be wrong. Far from sexually liberated, Americans today are having less sex than ever! The Washington Post reported in 2019 that nearly a quarter of American adults had not had sex in the past year. Twentysomethings, the group you'd expect to be the most sexually active, are having sex dramatically less often than their parents did in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ Despite online dating, increased acceptance of hookups, and access to limitless inspiration in pornography, the result of all this liberation has been a *less* sexually active population.

Which segment of the population has the most sex? This may not surprise you by now, but according to the General Social Survey, it's married couples!⁹

Summing up, many in our culture would like you to believe that purity is a drag. They want you to think of Christian sexual morality as a restrictive, boring, and unfulfilling way to live, and liberation from old-fashioned sexual rules as exciting, fun, and romantic. They want you to view disobedience to God's rules as a shortcut to the good life. But the facts are remarkably clear: if you want a lasting, stable, fulfilling, active sexual relationship, there simply isn't a more reliable path than doing things God's way. The forbidden fruit of sexual freedom simply isn't as sweet as advertised. It's a lie. You're not missing out on anything. The culture's "yes" is a dead end, and God's "no" exists to protect something far better — that beautiful gift he wants to give you and me. We'll look at that "yes" next.

What Is Purity?

When we speak of "sexual purity," it's easy to form a picture in our minds of keeping clean from contamination. Certainly, that's what "purity" often means in our language, and it's a fine analogy in some ways. But it can also lead people who've messed up sexually to view themselves as permanently dirty or stained, as if they've gotten something nasty on them and need a good soap to wash it off. I think of those poor sea creatures that get coated in sludge after an oil spill. Their problem isn't something that's missing. It's a lot of something they need to get rid of!

Strictly speaking, sin isn't like that.

Let's go back to creation. When God made the world as recorded in Genesis 1, he pronounced it "good" six times. The seventh time, after he had created human beings, he pronounced his work "very good" (Gen. 1:31). This divine appraisal forms the ethical background of all of Scripture. God likes the world he made. This includes our sexual bodies.

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The fifth-century church father Augustine of Hippo was the first to clearly express the idea, based on his reading of Scripture, that evil doesn't really exist. Rather, it's a corruption, distortion, or "privation" of the good God created.¹⁰ Evil is less like an oil slick and more like the darkness in the absence of light, or the emptiness when someone digs a hole, or the corpse when someone is killed. We speak of "darkness" and "emptiness" and "dead bodies" because our language forces us to, but these things are really just voids where light and earth and life *should* be. Evil is like this. We can only speak of it existing insofar as it leeches the energy from things that are good. As C. S. Lewis put it, evil is a "parasite."¹¹ It has no life of its own. Everything that exists, in the view of Genesis 1, is "good." If something is *not* good, it doesn't exist in the biblical sense — it's darkness, emptiness, and death.

When we sin, we are choosing to take the good things God created and gouge a hole in them. We're turning off the lights. We're snuffing out life. We're perverting creation's purpose and waging war on that "very good" God pronounced over his work at the beginning. This is nowhere truer than when we sin with our bodies. Let this be very clear in your mind: sexual immorality isn't just getting dirty. It is an act of spiritual self-mutilation. It is a slow and deliberate killing of the person God made you to be (and the person he made your "partner" or victim to be). This is why Proverbs 5:5 says that a sexually immoral person is walking into his or her own grave.

But if sin is an *absence* of something that should be there, rather than a substance you can get on you like dirt or oil, it means that what you need if you've sinned sexually isn't a bottle of spiritual Dawn dish soap. You need *healing*. You need to be made whole, as God intended.

How do we know what healing and wholeness look like? How do we know what God intended for sex? From his commandments in Scripture, of course. But taking what we've learned so far, we can now say that God's negative commandments are actually positive descriptions of how he created us, stated in reverse.

His "thou shalt nots" are actually, in a way, "thou shalt!" When he told Moses, "thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14), what he was really saying was, "thou shalt be sexually whole — according to my good design for your body and relationships." Or put even more simply, "thou shalt be what I made you to be."

Does that strike you as a strange description of sexual purity, or of God's moral commandments? It shouldn't. When Jesus was asked to summarize

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the entire moral law of God — every single commandment — he dropped all of the “nos” and rephrased it in two positive statements: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–40). Both of these positive commandments were already present in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18 and Deut. 6:5). And the Apostle Paul agreed, simplifying it even further with the statement that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:8).

We were made to love. It’s what it means to be human, for we are created in the image of the God who is, himself, love (1 John 4:16). Every sexual sin the fall of Adam introduced into the world is a failure to reflect that perfect love of God. And that means it’s a failure to be fully human — to be fully ourselves.

Who are we? According to Scripture and Christian reflection on human nature (what theologians call “natural law”), we are monogamous sexual beings. We are the kind of creatures that were made to express sexual love only within a permanent and exclusive union with a member of the opposite sex.

Do you believe that? Do you really believe that you were made for sexual purity? Do you believe that God’s rules for sex aren’t arbitrary regulations imposed from outside of you but faithful reflections of your very being and wellbeing? Because, according to the Bible, they are.

Here’s another analogy I’ve found helpful: C. S. Lewis described human beings as machines that God invented, just as a man invents an engine.¹² When the engine’s owner’s manual tells you what type of fuel to put in the tank and how to maintain the engine, these aren’t restrictions on the engine’s freedom. They’re accurate descriptions of how the engine functions, because the person who wrote the manual is the same person who built the engine!

God’s instructions for sex are like that. We are actually monogamous. We were actually designed for marriage or celibate singleness. The corruptions which sin has introduced into our desires and wills are really malfunctions, missing parts, or the wrong fuel. This is why they cause the human engine to break down. We weren’t made to run that way. This also means that God’s “yes” when it comes to sex is the owner’s manual he wrote after designing us. It accurately describes how to repair and run ourselves as sexual beings.

So, what does that look like? What did God make the sexual human being to do? Why does his “very good” creation include this strange, wonderful, and

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exciting form of relationship the Serpent was so eager to corrupt? There are two answers.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What surprised you in the statistics and information of this section? Did your reaction to those reveal some ways you've subtly believed the lies our culture is telling?
2. Are you tempted to resent any of God's commands regarding sexual purity? What might be lying beneath that resentment, and what truth of God's Word might you use to dislodge it?
3. How does this depiction of purity align with the way you've thought about it? Did this correct or fill in your grasp of God's call on our sexual lives?

2

WHAT IS SEX FOR?

Procreation

Here's a question for you: Why do human beings come in two sexes? Why do men and women have such different bodies, crafted with distinct bone structures, musculatures, facial features, height, shape, chest areas, sexual organs both external and internal, and even sex chromosomes in every cell of their bodies? Why do men and women possess key anatomical systems that are functionless on their own, but which fit together like pieces of a puzzle? Why, when NASA sent the Pioneer spacecrafts to fly beyond our solar system in the 1970s, did they include metal plaques engraved with a nude man and woman side-by-side to show hypothetical extraterrestrials what our species looks like?¹³

The answer, of course, is reproduction. We were made to make babies. Every feature I just named is part of the dimorphic wonder that splits our kind into two halves that, when they come back together, can conceive, gestate, birth, and nourish new human beings. Our bodies are built around this capability.

It's easy in a world dominated by consumerism, contraception, and hookups to forget this obvious purpose of our sexual bodies, but no one who has spent any time on a farm or in a biology classroom can miss it. Animals come in male and female varieties, and unite to produce offspring — many of them in a way that's similar to human reproduction. According to Medieval Christian thought, humans are "rational animals," sharing much of our natures with God's other living creations.¹⁴ We're different from them in many ways, of course, but in this important respect, we are like them: we reproduce through sexual union. The sexual differences between men and women, and sex itself, are designed for procreation.

If this statement strikes you as strange, it is only because we have been conditioned to ignore the connection between sex and babies. Everything from TV and music to fitness culture and pornography have trained us to think of sex as something people do for fun, with zero commitment, consequences, or significance. Birth control has played an especially powerful role in concealing the nature of our own bodies from us. For all of

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human history until very recently, having sex has meant likely creating new human life. Biologically, this is its purpose! That reality caused societies to place restrictions around sex. Widespread contraception changed that. It made it possible for the first time ever to imagine sex without procreation — to sever these two tightly linked realities in a reliable way.

In her book, *The Genesis of Gender*, Abigail Favale summarizes how “the pill” changed sex from an essentially reproductive act to a recreational one — something we do merely for fun or to express ourselves:

In our imagination, reproduction has receded into the background. Our procreative capacities are seen as incidental to manhood and womanhood, rather than an integral aspect—indeed, the defining feature—of those very identities. We live and move and have our trysts in a contraceptive society, where the visible sexual markers of our bodies no longer gesture toward new life, but signal the prospect of sterile pleasure.¹⁵

Christians disagree on whether contraception is morally acceptable, and if so, when it should be used. We won't address that question in this guide. The point I wish to make is that on a cultural level, reliable and widely available birth control changed the way we think about sex, turning it from a potentially life-altering, life-making act to a meaningless pastime. This isn't what God intended.

When he created us, God could have caused us to reproduce in any number of ways. We could have divided like microorganisms. We could have produced seeds like plants. We could have cloned ourselves. Instead, God determined that humans would “be fruitful and multiply” through sex. When he gave Eve to Adam as a “suitable helper” in Genesis 2:18, one of the primary ways she was to help her husband was through bearing children. In fact, the prophet Malachi many centuries later says this was the very reason God invented marriage: “Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.” (Mal. 2:15).

For animals, of course, reproduction is merely a matter of keeping the species going and spreading genes. But humans are much more than mere animals. Procreation for us has significance far beyond the need to renew our population. It has social and spiritual meaning, even for those who never have children.

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Think about it: none of us is a self-existent or truly solitary individual. Unlike some animals, which only see each other to mate or fight, humans live together in societies. We know where we came from and who we are in part because of *whose* we are. We are not mere members of the same species passing warily in a forest. We are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, husbands, and wives. We exist in relationships, because of relationships, and were made for relationships. The moment we are born, we fall into the arms of people we didn't choose and receive care from them we didn't earn.

This relational nature of human beings begins with procreation. And in this way, God designed sex to show us who we really are: deeply dependent creatures who have nothing except what we've received, first from other humans, and ultimately from him. This is tough for those raised in an individualistic culture to accept. We like to think of ourselves as autonomous, independent, and self-made. Yet the procreative nature of sex as God designed it testifies to an older, bigger, and more profound picture of humans — not as isolated units, but more like branches on a tree. We rely on the larger branches and trunk for our lives, and we in turn give life to new shoots and twigs that spring from us. This is who we are, whether we choose to live by God's rules or not.

Keeping sex's reproductive purpose at the front of our minds will help us avoid many of our culture's errors. Children are a big part of God's "yes" when it comes to sex, and any vision for sexual morality that ignores them is incomplete. God wrote self-giving love into the very biology of the human race. New people are (in his design) loved into existence, and receive their identities from that love. In the succession of generations as God planned it, each of us comes as a gift to our parents, and has received life as a gift. Those of us who have children will in turn give them the gift of life and receive them as God's gifts from above. None of us, no matter how broken our families, are disconnected from the nourishing sap of the human tree. It's why we exist!

Our culture wants to conceal this truth from you. It wants to convince you that your body is a plaything you own, not a marvelous gift from God, organized around the potential to make life (which is true even if you don't or can't have children). But it's a lie. We don't own our bodies. God does. And sexual purity means living in light of this wonderful fact. For Christians, the call to remember who owns us is doubly important. We were not merely created by God's hand but were "bought with a price" out of sin by the blood of Christ. "Therefore," writes the Apostle Paul, speaking of sexual morality, "honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor. 6:20).

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In God's owner's manual for the human person, sexual relationships always take place with an awareness of procreation, and are ordered toward the wellbeing of any children that result from the union. But this also means, necessarily, that they are based on committed, permanent, self-giving love for one's spouse. And that is the second purpose of sex.

Union

At the heart of creation is a principle: diversity-in-union. Long before Christ was born in Bethlehem, ancient Greek philosophers puzzled over what they saw as the problem of "the one and the many." They wanted to know which was ultimate in the world: the union of all things or their diversity. When Christians came along, they began to answer the question in a surprising way: "yes."

For Christians, both unity *and* diversity find their origin in the being of God himself, who, according to Scripture as interpreted by the Council of Nicaea, is one in essence but three in person — a Trinity. This principle of diversity-in-union, unsurprisingly, is reflected in partial ways throughout creation. As Joshua Butler writes in his book, *Beautiful Union*, it shows up in the meeting of opposites that form the most spellbinding scenery in our world: sky and earth meet in the mountains, sea and land meet at the shore, and day and night meet in sunsets and sunrises.¹⁶ The atom is composed of three particles (protons, neutrons, electrons), time is composed of three moments (past, present, future) and space is composed of three dimensions (height, width, depth). Human persons are, themselves, a union of material and immaterial aspects that together make a single being. And sex is yet another instance of diverse things uniting to create something more wonderful and profound. As Butler writes:

Sex is diversity-in-union, grounded in the structure of creation...God loves taking the two and making them one. This is present in the very structure of our bodies and the world that surrounds us, pointing—so close to us that we can take it for granted—to a larger logic, a larger life given by God. God loves doing this, I believe, because God *is* diversity-in-union.¹⁷

We mustn't press these analogies too far when we're talking about the mystery of the Trinity, but the sexual union between man and wife does reflect the very heart of Christian morality, which Scripture also describes as a core attribute of God: self-giving love (1 John 4:8). Love is the meaning of the universe and the fulfillment of God's law. This is why we are meant to be loved into existence, and why permanent and exclusive marriage is the only context in which sexual love can fulfill its God-given purpose of fully uniting

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two people to become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

Here we come to one of the most fundamental reasons why God’s “yes” for sexuality excludes all forms of sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman. God designed sex to say, in the loudest way possible, “I want you, all of you, forever.” But only in marriage can a couple say these words honestly. In *every other context*, they are spoken with qualifications and conditions. In pornography and hookups, we say to one another “I want only as much of you as it takes to satisfy my fleeting desires, but after that I want nothing more to do with you.” In unmarried sexual relationships and cohabitation, we say to one another, “I want you as long as it’s convenient and you satisfy my needs, or until I find someone better. But I’m not promising to stick around.” And in a culture of contraception and abortion, we say to one another, “I want some of what your body can offer me, but I reject its complete design and ability to make new life.”

The permanent union of marriage is the only place in which two people can fully, completely, and unconditionally embrace one another as sexual partners. It is the only place where lovers say to one another, “I accept you, all of you, in your fullness, as a complete person now and forever — not just what you can give me, but also what you need from me. I accept your capacity for emotions and intimacy, for friendship and procreation. I also accept your need for love when I don’t feel loving, for a place to live, for someone to watch over you when you’re sick or poor, for someone to help you raise children, for someone to walk beside you through old age, and for someone to hold you as you die.”

But the union God brings about in marriage is more than simply the union of a couple. It is a union of lives, households, fortunes, and names. It takes two families and joins them. It is the most basic building block of human society, the beginning of neighborhoods, churches, businesses, friend groups, and hospitable households. All who enter marriage begin a process that will profoundly affect the lives of human beings in addition to the one standing opposite the altar.

Marriage is a public act, and this is why it’s fitting to recognize it in law. God’s “yes” for sex is about much more than personal gratification or companionship. It is about reflecting his own nature — love — at the heart of human civilization.

But it gets even more wonderful and mysterious. In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul tells us that the “one flesh” union between a man and his wife signifies the union between Christ and his church. Butler calls it an “icon”¹⁸ that points to the way Jesus, God incarnate, has given his bride his flesh and blood on

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the cross, gives it to her in the Lord's Supper, and will give it to her perfectly at his return, when he will make the lowly bodies of Christians like his glorious, resurrected body (Phil. 3:21).

In other words, marriage is a living parable in which the physical, spiritual, relational, and lifelong union between a man and a woman symbolically acts out the redeeming love of Christ for his people. That's quite a "yes." But it reinforces again what God's "nos" exist to protect: when we violate his design for the lifelong union of our sexual bodies, whether we're Christians or not, we're lying about God's own love and the very structure of creation. Worse, we are defacing the sacred image he chose to represent salvation, portraying Jesus as an unfaithful husband, and his work in the church as futile and failing. We're not merely breaking God's rules. We're marring his image in us and in our relationships.

Non-Christians will dismiss much of what we've explored here. But for Christians, the union God intended in sex is deeply serious. Paul warns that since our bodies are "members of Christ," when we misuse them, we are misusing Christ (1 Cor. 6:15). Whether we ever marry or not, all Christians are covenant participants in a greater marriage between the Lord Jesus and his bride, the church. We are bound to honor that marriage our whole lives by treating sex with the purity Scripture demands, either through godly marriage or godly celibacy (singleness). But we must always remember that the goal isn't merely to follow a set of rules. It is to place love on the throne of our moral lives — and in doing so to tell the truth about the God who showed his perfect love by creating us and redeeming us from self-destruction.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. In what ways did this section deepen your understanding of God's design for sex? Are there ways that your views of procreation or union were enriched?
2. In what ways does our culture — and the evil one — war against the purposes of procreation and union?

3

WHAT ABOUT?

Can I Be Pure If I've Messed Up?

One of the enduring criticisms of “purity culture” (the name often given to evangelical books, conferences, and sermons on sex from the 1990s), is that it gave young people the impression that if they sinned sexually, they were forever “damaged goods.” In particular, critics cite a nightmarish parable from the opening chapter of Joshua Harris’s bestselling book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, in which a man at the altar on his wedding day is greeted by a procession of young women he previously had sex with, all of whom claim a piece of his heart.¹⁹

In reaction, bloggers and authors critical of “purity culture” have emphasized the grace of God in the gospel, and the fact that Christ’s work atones for our past lives and makes us “new creations” (2 Cor. 5:17). This is, of course, true — gloriously true! And there is nothing that matters more than our standing before God. Through the blood of Christ, received by faith, we are, indeed, washed clean of all our sins and given a righteousness not of our own making (Phil. 1:9).

But I’m not sure that critics understand what earlier “purity culture” authors were getting at, or why those authors warned their readers against sexual immorality in such dramatic terms. I don’t think evangelical parents, pastors, or writers in my youth were questioning the power of the gospel to give us a new start before God or absolve us of our sins, no matter how serious those sins are. Instead, I suspect “purity culture” figures looked around, saw the devastation of the sexual revolution in the wider culture, and wanted to highlight the natural consequences of distorting God’s design for sex and for our bodies — consequences that don’t necessarily disappear when we repent of our sins and place our faith in Jesus.

And such sins do have lasting consequences. Whether it’s the memory of past sexual partners, sexually transmitted diseases, children whose custody is shared between separated parents, trauma from abuse, or even regret from an abortion, sexual sin inflicts lasting wounds, both on those who commit that sin and on innocent parties. The gospel offers forgiveness, absolutely! But it

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doesn't erase all the consequences of our bad choices, at least not on this side of eternity. This is part of the reason sexual sin is so serious, and why those who've violated God's rules and repented are right to regret their past decisions. Because sex is so special and central in God's plan for human beings, and because it connects us so intimately with the lives of others, rebelling against God's design in this area causes lasting pain.

But that doesn't mean those who've left sexual sin behind can't go on to live pure and holy lives. This is where we need to reconsider the way we think about purity, discarding images of sin like that oil spill coating unlucky birds and instead think of wholeness, healing, and restoration to God's design for his human creations. All of us need this healing, not only because we've committed personal sins, but because we are born into Adam's rebellion, broken and inclined to make war against God from the moment we draw our first breath.

It is true that someone who has avoided certain sexual sins will also avoid the consequences that come from those sins. But to be sexually pure, or "chaste" as older Christian thinkers described it, is about much more than avoiding consequences. It's about living our lives, no matter what our pasts, in light of Christ's death for us and in pursuit of righteousness through the power of the Holy Spirit. The worst sinner in the world could repent, receive God's forgiveness, and live a life of resplendent moral purity and holiness. This is, in fact, how the Apostle Paul summarized his own post-conversion life (1 Tim. 1:15).

If you have sinned sexually in the past and brought painful consequences on yourself and others, God wants to forgive you. He will do so, this very moment. If you repent and trust in Christ, he will declare you "not guilty" in his eternal court of justice and welcome you into his family room, calling you "beloved son" or "beloved daughter" and make you an heir of the family fortune along with Jesus (Rom. 8:17).

If you have received God's forgiveness for sexual and all other types of sins, yet still struggle to think of yourself as "pure," consider what we discussed earlier about evil being a distortion of God's good creation, with no existence of its own. You aren't a white sheet of paper marred by black ink blots, or a sea gull coated with petroleum. You are a wonderful but damaged creation that has a purpose, a design, a glorious end, but is terribly wounded and needs its maker to piece it back together. You need to be made whole, and that is exactly what "purity" should mean: living in obedience and agreement with the design of the God who made you, who loves you, and who stands ready to turn your life around.

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As before, it gets better. The God who loves you and promises all this is in the business of turning what was meant for evil into good. These are the words of Joseph to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 after they betrayed him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. God used their terrible sin and murderous hearts to save the nation of Israel from a deadly famine. He can certainly use the consequences of sexual sin to bring about great and mysterious blessings beyond human comprehension. He is a mighty God — so mighty that he turned the most wicked act ever committed, the killing of his Son, into an atonement that brought about the salvation of the world (Acts 4:27). Trust him, and he can use your story for good, no matter what you've done. He can make you pure.

Can I Be Pure If I'm Single?

Finally, we come to a question many in the church are asking, but which few seem to know how to answer: how can those who are not married and have no immediate expectation of getting married embrace God's "yes" for sex? Doesn't "purity," for them, consist entirely of saying "no?"

This is where we need to pay special attention to God's positive plan for human sexuality, not just his negative commandments. It's true that Christianity imposes a stark choice on us: lifelong faithfulness to one spouse, or lifelong celibacy. Those are the options, both pleasing to God. But neither option is an incomplete or unfulfilled way of being human. Rather, both are ways of honoring and *insisting on the fullness* of God's design for sexuality. Both are refusals to compromise the gift of bodily life he has given us, or to degrade others made in his image by loving them halfheartedly. Both marriage and celibacy are deeply natural and in harmony with his design for human beings; both are ways of living in sexual purity.

Part of the reason Christians insisted so sternly on these two choices was that for unbelievers in the first century, exploiting others for sexual pleasure was the norm. Christianity introduced a radical reform of sexual morality to Greco-Roman society, what Kevin DeYoung has called "the first sexual revolution."²⁰ Into a culture in which high-status men were permitted to satiate their sexual urges whenever and with almost whomever they liked, the followers of Jesus demanded faithful marriage or celibacy, and early leaders of Christianity modeled both.²¹

We know that the Apostle Peter, for instance, was married, as were "the Lord's brothers" and other apostles (1 Cor. 9:3–5). So were Aquila and Priscilla, a missionary couple who lived, worked, and traveled with the Apostle Paul (Acts 18:18–28). Many among the apostles and other key figures in the New

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Testament were single. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul even portrays singleness as a better option than marriage in light of his readers' "present distress," since it allows the Christian to focus solely on "how he can please the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:26–32). Jesus himself, humanly speaking, was single for life. He did this not in order to avoid God's blessings, but precisely because remaining single on earth was a means by which he would purchase his eternal bride, the church. In other words, the New Testament consistently models singleness as aimed at something glorious, not aimed away from it.

Toward what will your singleness be aimed? That is one of the most important questions you can ask if you believe God has called you to purity through lifelong celibacy. In biblical terms, being unmarried enables a Christian to serve God's kingdom with undivided focus and dedication. Missionaries in dangerous settings, certain clergy, servants to the poor and sick, and Christians with particularly demanding ministries of any kind should expect God to leverage their singleness to great effect, as Paul describes. Single Christians are not concerned with "the things of this world" like married people are, and can give their full attention to serving God (1 Cor. 7:33). Singleness is not an opportunity to please yourself. It is a high calling from the Lord.

As we saw earlier, being single also doesn't mean marriage and family are irrelevant to you. All of us are products of sexual unions, tied to people around us through bonds of blood, and enmeshed in communities shaped by families. Family is still the basic building block of society, and the future of any church, community, or nation depends ultimately on couples making babies. Every time you interact with, care for, or disciple children, you are participating in the lives of families, and your ministry as a single Christian can influence countless others to use their sexuality according to God's design. You may not be married, but you are deeply connected to marriages all around you.

Finally, consider this: marriage rates in the United States are at an all time low. There are many reasons for this, ranging from loosened sexual morals and the decline of religion, to economics and a culture that prizes autonomy and achievement over family. This means the fact that you're single right now might not be normal, historically speaking, and might not be God's long-term will for your life. Birth rates are falling throughout much of the world, and in many countries they have reached the point where not enough babies are being born to replace the old who die. Obviously, this is unsustainable for long. And it tells us that something has gone wrong.

Writing at the Christian journal *First Things*, Kevin DeYoung diagnoses the problem as a spiritual one:

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The reasons for declining fertility are no doubt many and varied. Surely, some couples want to have more children but are unable to do so. Others struggle with economic pressures or health limitations. But fertility does not plummet worldwide without deeper issues at play, especially when people around the world are objectively richer, healthier, and afforded more conveniences than at any time in human history. Though individuals make their choices for many reasons, as a species we are suffering from a profound spiritual sickness—a metaphysical malaise in which children seem a burden on our time and a drag on our pursuit of happiness. Our malady is a lack of faith, and nowhere is the disbelief more startling than in the countries that once made up Christendom. ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven,’ God promised a delighted Abraham (Gen. 26:4). Today, in the lands of Abraham’s offspring, that blessing strikes most as a curse.²²

In short, a lot of people — millions — who should be marrying and having children, and normally would be at any other time in history, are no longer doing so. This is largely because modern societies have tried to ignore the procreative purpose of sex, and have prioritized other goals in life, and so have come to view babies as a burden to avoid. It’s reasonable to consider this context in which you live, and question whether our society’s increasingly negative attitude toward marriage and children has affected your decision making.

How will you know whether you should be pursuing marriage? Quite simply, if you desire sex and are committed to obeying God’s rules, you should strongly consider marriage. The Bible speaks of lifelong celibacy as a grace that not everyone possesses (Matt. 19:11), and presents marriage in part as a remedy to sexual temptation (1 Cor. 7:2–9). If you don’t feel specially gifted for lifelong celibacy, then you should be preparing yourself for marriage and pursuing a spouse. This is not always easy, of course, and it will look different for men and women and from context to context. But record low marriage rates are a sign that something has gone very wrong with our society. Before you conclude that God is calling you to singleness, consider whether you might, instead, be called to purity with a spouse.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How does your blood-bought status as a “beloved son” or “beloved daughter” change the way you think of your past sins, sexual or otherwise? Perhaps now would be a good time to reflect on the glory of Christ, who’s made all his disciples white as snow.

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2. Do your views of singleness align with what's described in this section?
3. The Bible calls us to "let marriage be held in honor among all" (Heb. 13:4). How can that look in your life, whether you're married or single?



CONCLUSION: GOD IS FOR YOU

In his masterful sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis criticizes the way modern Christians substitute negative attributes like “unselfishness” for positive virtues like love.²³ He sees a problem with this habit of talking in negatives: it sneaks in the suggestion that the main goal of behaving morally isn’t to treat other people well but to treat ourselves badly — not to give them good, but to deny it to ourselves. We seem to think being miserable for its own sake is godly. Lewis disagrees.

He points out how, in the New Testament, self-denial is never an end in itself. Instead, saying “no” to sin and the things that hinder our faith (Heb. 12:1) is about pursuing something more excellent, that is, abundant life in Christ. Scripture constantly describes this abundant life in terms of rewards, pleasures, and delights, both in this world and the next. It promises that by following Christ and obeying his commands, we are ultimately pursuing our highest good — the “eternal weight of glory” Paul says is worth any earthly suffering or self-denial (2 Cor. 4:17–18).

Lewis’s point is that God really and truly wants what’s best for us. He wants to give us ultimate happiness (joy), which is only found through loving him and loving others as he does. He really is for us, not against us. Waking up to this fact means learning to want, fiercely and desperately, what God wants for us, because that alone is what we were designed for, and everything else is a cheap substitute. Lewis writes:

...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far

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too easily pleased.²⁴

God made us for something wonderful, and sexual purity is part of that gift. The reason he says “no” so often to our corrupted sexual desires is that he wants to give us something far better. Our problem is not that we want sex too much. In a very important way, it is that we don’t want it enough! We want a piece of it here and there, a little nibble of God’s gift, turned toward selfish and fleeting desires.

What our culture offers when it comes to sex is the equivalent of mud pies. The various distortions of God’s design for our bodies can never deliver what they promise, because they contradict the design built into us as image-bearers. God’s rules for sexual purity may sound like a denial of pleasure, expression, self-fulfillment, happiness, freedom, companionship, or even romance. In reality, those “nos” exist to protect a “yes” so glorious, this present age can’t fully contain it. If you choose to live in faith and according to God’s rules, you will find it. And when those without faith ask (perhaps on a long flight) what you’re against, you can tell them instead what you’re for, and what *they* were made for.



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