

Sex and the Single Person

by John Piper

God's design for sexuality is to provide a unique, stable, and lasting relationship for the fulfillment of sexual desires, and single people can deal with sexual desires by glorifying God in their bodies and keeping themselves free from enslavement to sin.

Duration: 43:07

Scripture: Matthew 7:6, 2 Corinthians 12:21, Ephesians 5:3, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:5, Hebrews 10:25, Revelation 9:21

Topics: "Sex"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the issue of enslavement to worldly desires and emphasizes the need to be free from such bondage. He highlights the prevalence of sexual temptation in society and offers counsel for those who struggle with it. The speaker encourages individuals to guard their eyes and ears from inappropriate content and to consciously redirect their desires towards Christ. He emphasizes the importance of using our bodies to glorify God and not to yield to sinful passions.

Transcript

The sexual life of the unmarried person is a great concern to God. Even though you who are here this morning, who have not entrusted yourselves to God as Savior, nor love Him with your whole heart, you are obligated to obey what God has to say about what is best for you. Though you rebel against His leadership, you are His.

He made you. He has absolute right over everyone to tell them what is good for them. And He sent Jesus Christ into the world to overcome the rebellion that exists between you and Him and to make peace by the blood of His cross.

And my prayer as I begin this morning is that those of you in that category might forsake that rebellion and lay hold on Christ for salvation and live from this day forward for the glory of God. And then I'll be able to say to everyone in this room, do you not know that your bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you? You are not your own. You have been bought with a price.

Therefore, glorify God in your bodies. That is an offensive word to our fallen human nature, isn't it? The body in which you live is not yours to do with merely as you please. God bought your body with an infinite price from the curse of the sin by the payment of His own Son.

And your body should serve one overarching goal, the glory of that God. Paul said in Romans 6, 12, 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 as instruments of righteousness.

For sin will have no dominion over you because you are not under law, but under grace. God is concerned about what you do with your bodies, very concerned. He created them.

He bought them. He owns them. He indwells them.

And what we do with them demonstrates who our Lord is. Now, if I were to stop here with this general admonition, our consciences could pick up and they would and go on and give some pretty good advice in concrete situations. Should I smoke? Should I drink? Should I use drugs? Should I overeat? Should I never exercise? Should I get too little sleep? Should I engage in sexual relations outside marriage? Should I masturbate? Should I wear enticing clothing, et cetera, et cetera? Our consciences could pick up from this general admonition and give us some pretty specific guidance.

But what our consciences approve of and disapprove of is not a very accurate guide for God's approval and disapproval. And therefore, the Bible does not stop with this general admonition, glorify God in your bodies. It goes on and is much more specific.

And therefore, I want to be also this morning. Now, the question I want to start with is this. Why did God invent? Why did God create sexual desire? Now, before I answer it from Scripture or try to answer it as best I can see it in Scripture, let me tell you more specifically what I mean by sexual desire.

First of all, I do not mean homosexual desires. One of these days I'll preach on homosexuality, but until then, let me just say three things. Number one, if you are here and homosexual, my prayer is that you will not be driven away, but that you will stay and seek help.

Second, the practice of homosexuality is sin. It is contrary to the revealed will of God in Scripture. Third, homosexual desires, like many other desires, are abnormal and the person who has them should, through prayer, fellowship with Christians and the seeking of Christian counsel, try to overcome and change those desires.

And I'm fully aware that it is not easy and does not happen overnight, but it is possible. When I ask the question. Why did God create sexual desires? I mean those normal cravings 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, but nevertheless real desire for ongoing bodily and personal intimacy.

I acknowledge that in these years of strong sexual desire or weak, that there are people with greatly varying desires, some very vigorous and strong, some very mild and weak, and in no way am I going to put a value judgment on either one on that continuum. That's not my point at all. When I speak of those sexual desires, therefore, I refer to the desires that the vast majority of people have from their early adolescence on that they have to deal with one way or the other.

It's a God given sexual appetite. But why now, why did he give it since it seems to be so troublesome in our day? Let me give a short answer and an expanded answer. The short answer comes from Genesis 1 verses 27 and 28, where it says, God created man in his own image.

In the image of God created he them, 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. Sexual desire aims at consummation in sexual intercourse.

Sexual intercourse is the means by which man and woman multiply and fill the earth. Therefore, I infer that one of the reasons God put in the human body strong sexual desires is that they might fill the earth according to his commandment. And it has worked quite well.

For some people, procreation is the only justification for seeking sexual gratification. But we're going to see in much more detail next week that the apostle Paul has a radically different view. The second answer to why God created sexual desire is found in the text that we read together in the bulletin.

First, Timothy four, one to five. And I want to look at this in more detail. 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 of 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 received. And nothing is to be rejected if received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. Now, in this text, what Paul is doing is trying to give his partner in the ministry, Timothy, some advice about what to say to false teachers who arise and some of them had already arisen in the church at Ephesus who teach that the gratification of sexual appetite in marriage and the gratification of appetite for food by eating certain foods should be cut back as far as possible, which would mean no marriage and minimum intake of food.

Now, it's no accident that Paul mentions marriage and eating together and then goes ahead to treat them as one problem, because the issue here is really bodily pleasure, unnecessary bodily pleasure, whether through sexual stimulation or through the eating of food. The false teacher said cut back bodily pleasure to the absolute minimum in order to keep yourself alive. That's why food didn't go all together.

Paul's response to this ascetic teaching is very plain in verses four and five. 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 he create hunger and food to satisfy it? Verse three gives the straightforward answer.

God created these things to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. All unnecessary, innocent pleasures, and there are thousands of them, all 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 is to not only enable the world to be filled with people, but also to create another exquisite occasion for the ascent of thanks out of two hearts full of gratitude for the gift of sexuality.

Now, let's not be deceived. The world would deceive us here. This gift was designed for believers and no one else.

Look at verse three. 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 and perfect gifts and worthy to be glorified and thanked, those who hold down that truth in unrighteousness, as Paul says in Romans one, and do not trust God cannot satisfy their sexual desires according to God's design. All of their sexual behavior is sin because it does not spring from faith in God, nor does it issue in thanksgiving to God. It is all wrong.

Sexual pleasure belongs rightfully only to believers and all others are thieves and robbers. And don't ever let the world deceive you into thinking that Christians are somehow trying to borrow a little bit of their pleasure and purify it for themselves. God created sexual pleasure for his subjects alone, and the world has rebelled against him, stolen his gifts, corrupted them, debased them, turned them into weapons of destruction and laughed at those subjects who remain faithful and intend to use God's gift according to God's word.

But we will not be deceived. We will not let the world deceive us into thinking that we are borrowing from them. They have rifled God's gifts to his people.

We will, however, keep it pure. Paul says the gift is ours. Consecrate it.

That is, keep it pure 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, we infer something completely reasonable now, namely that God knows how each of his creatures can make best and most fulfilling use of this gift and that therefore his word is an infallible guide to maximum sexual fulfillment. Now, I said that's a reasonable conclusion, but it's only reasonable 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 Christ has forgiven all our sins, then we must believe that his words of guidance on sexual matters makes for the greatest possible fulfillment, even if it means total abstinence. Now, what words of guidance does God give to those who are not married? Because it is by the word of God and prayer that we sanctify sexual desires.

The Greek word for pornography or from which we get pornography is pornaya, and the New Testament translates pornaya as immorality, unchastity and fornication, depending on the context. Generally, pornaya or fornication refers to sexual promiscuity by unmarried people. In Matthew 15, 19, Jesus says, Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, etc.

Notice fornication occurs side by side with adultery. Adultery being the specific sin of sexual unfaithfulness in marriage, fornication being the more general or broad term covering illicit sexual relations for persons who are not married. Now, the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, uniformly condemns fornication as sin.

I'll give you a few examples. Galatians 5, 19, Paul lists fornication as one of the works of the flesh. Second Corinthians 12, 21.

He is ready to weep over those who will not repent of this sin. Ephesians 5, 3, he says that fornication should never even have to be mentioned among God's people. Colossians 3, 5, fornication is first on Paul's list of things that should be put to death in the heart of the believer.

Revelation 9, verse 21, it is listed along with murder, sorcery and theft as things that an unrepentant people refuse to repent of. In first Corinthians seven, verse two, there's a very important word, I think, for

our day. Paul says because of temptation to immorality or fornication, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Then he goes on in verse eight and nine, says to the unmarried men and women and to 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. Now, there's one point I want to get out of that text.

According to Scripture, all fornication before marriage is wrong, is sin. There are many man centered moralists in the world today who would say, OK, yes, indiscriminate sex is bad, harmful to persons. But where there is a strong friendship and abiding relationship and engagement there, it's different and it's OK.

Paul knew the situation of engaged couples facing that kind of pressure. He faced that possibility and the only out, the only alternative Paul gave to continence was marriage. If they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.

That was the only solution that Paul had to give for a couple with an abiding, firm, friendly relationship who could not control their sexual desires. God not only created sexual desires, but he also created the perfect sphere for its maximum gratification and fulfillment, namely marriage. And any attempt to alter his design is not only immoral before God, but it's going to be destructive of personal relations and individual fulfillment.

Now, that raises the next question and gives a partial answer. Why? Why did God command that we find gratification for our sexual desires only in marriage? It's clear that he did command that, but why? To the best of my knowledge, God does not answer that question for us directly in scripture. Sometimes God leaves the wisdom of his commandments for us to discover by experience.

Those who disobey discover his wisdom through tragedy. Those who obey discover his wisdom through patience and joy. Now, the way I've tried to understand and answer the question why it is that God limited sexual fulfillment to marriage is by asking this question.

What is it that distinguishes marriage in God's design from all other heterosexual relationships? And the biblical answer to that question, I think, is that God intends marriage to be permanent. Marriage is commitment for a lifetime till death do us part. First 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 where that kind of permanent commitment is required and therefore marriage in marriage.

God has designed a unique, stable, lasting relation for our most intimate expression of love. And I believe experience confirms that something beautiful, something good is lost from our sexual intimacy in marriage if we gave ourselves away outside that union. God can forgive that sin and he has for many of you.

But he does not remove the scar and that you have discovered, and I know the scar remains, there is an inexpressible deepening of the union of marriage, which God intended when a husband and a wife can lie beside each other and say to each other in complete freedom and joy and peace, what I have just given you, I never gave to another. I speak to those for whom it is not too late. Do not throw that away.

We'll talk next week about what you can do if you did. I find it very helpful. I find it very helpful to use this analogy from Matthew seven, six.

Jesus said, don't cast your pearls before swine. It is possible to debase truth by dispensing it willy nilly. There are some truths so precious, so holy, we do not discuss them in hostile and worldly contexts.

And isn't it the same with our bodily affections? You don't shake hands with everybody you nod to and you don't hug everybody you shake hands with and you don't kiss everybody you hug. We discriminate. Everybody does.

And I would argue that there is a pearl of great value, a pearl of emotional, spiritual, physical intimacy that if we do not put it in the right container, we'll be debased and ruined. And that container, that strong, permanent, lasting, velvet lined container is marriage. The unique personal fulfillment in sexual relations in marriage where a husband and a wife have kept themselves pure for each other is one of the strongest explanations that I know of for why God limited sexual relations and sexual gratification to marriage.

There are others, but we don't have time to go into them. The implication of all this now for the single person with average sexual desires is not easy. Even if a person gets married in their early twenties, a decade of preceding sexual stress has had to be coped with.

And for those who remain single, whether by choice or not, the problem extends much longer. What help can we give to these people, to you, many of you? And among you, I include everybody from the age 12 or 13 right on who is not married and yet has normal desires for sexual stimulation and gratification. And my main burden for you in that category this morning is that you glorify God in your bodies by keeping yourself free from every enslavement but one, enslavement to God.

Romans 6.16, Paul says, 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 then in first Corinthians 6.12, which Tom read for us earlier, the proud Corinthians libertine, Corinthian libertine say, all things are lawful for me. And Paul shoots back.

But I will not be enslaved by anything. Now, the meaning of that little interchange is this. It is possible to be enslaved in the name of freedom.

That's what Paul is saying, and that's exactly the situation in our land today. In the name of sexual freedom, we are a nation enslaved to sexual cravings. If you want to know what a nation is hooked on, look and see what the masters of media use to get and hold our attention.

Sex sells everything. It sells movies, it sells cars, it sells furniture, clothes, booze, news, cigarettes, sporting gear, you name it. It sells.

And it sells because we are a nation enslaved to the second, the third and the fourth look at that body in the picture. But it shall not be so among you. It shall not be so among you because you have been set free from sin and are now enslaved to God.

Therefore, glorify God in your bodies by keeping yourselves free from all enslavements, but one God. Now, I'm going to close with 10 words of counsel that I want to give to persons who are not married, but who have to deal with sexual desires. And many of these are helpful.

Also, I find still in married life as well. Some of them have a very masculine orientation. I can't help that.

I know that temptation better than I know the female temptation. Some of them are do's and some of them are don'ts, but I intend all of them to be positive in the sense that they are all intended to preserve your freedom from any enslavement, but one slavery to God. Number one, do not seek regular sexual gratification through masturbation.

It is a tragedy that I never heard that word in church, and I can only remember hearing it once in four years of college from every day going to chapel. One time my father mentioned it to me. What in the world is wrong? How was I supposed to do anything right? How are they supposed to know? Masturbation is self-stimulation to orgasm or climax.

And the reason I say don't use it is because it, number one, will not solve the problem in the long run. It does not receive the pleasure that release, relieve the pleasure and the pressure very long. Number two, it becomes habitual.

Number three, it produces guilt. Then more importantly, the last two arguments, it contradicts the God given design for sexuality. Our bodies and our desires are designed for fulfillment through personal union and self-stimulation contradicts that purpose and inevitably produces a sense of wrongness.

But perhaps most importantly of all, masturbation is inevitably accompanied by sexual fantasies, which we would not allow ourselves in reality, and therefore we start to become like the Pharisees, well scrubbed on the outside and inside full of perversions. Therefore, number one, do not seek relief and satisfaction for your sexual desires through masturbation. Second, do not seek sexual gratification through touching and being touched by another person, even if you keep it short of sexual intercourse.

I'm speaking to unmarried people. Everyone knows that intimate touching is the prelude to and preparation for sexual intercourse. You stop it, you'll be frustrated to death and wind up in masturbation.

Therefore, it belongs in marriage. Now, where that permanent commitment of marriage is missing, caressing and touching tends to become manipulation of another person for a cheap, personal, private, physical thrill, and therefore contradicts the law of love. It turns the other person's body into a masturbation device.

It is not the way God intended it to be used. God made us in such a way that if we try to turn that moment of touching into a spiritual, emotional, personal moment of union, our hearts are going to cry out for permanence, for promises of faithfulness. Our hearts say in that moment, you may touch me because you have promised never to leave me or 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 precious gifts, and you all have sensed that. And therefore, that kind of touching belongs 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 those crummy places is temptation enough.

But the real test, the real test comes with what you do with the legitimate sources of sexual stimulation. What do you do with the PG movies? What do you do with Time magazine? What do you do with the newspaper and television and the drugstore counters and the rock music lyrics? That's where the test comes. Most of us Christians would not go down Hennepin Avenue to the wrong places, but oh, where we

will go, what we will listen to, what we will allow our eyes to dwell upon.

This is the great test of whether we are free or whether we are enslaved. To the slave master of our bodily passions, to keep on looking and keep on listening and keep on doing it for when the stimulation comes and the sexual desire rises, perform a very conscious act of transfer onto Christ. I wish somebody had told me about this and shown me this years ago.

I discovered this after I was married. You're riding down the street and a billboard or a marquee sows the seed of sexual desire and sexual desire for sexual gratification in your mind and it moves through your body. What do you do? This is what I find very helpful still.

You take that desire and you very consciously do something like this. You say, Jesus, it's there now and I acknowledge that you are my Lord and my God. My greatest desire in all the world is to love you, obey you, delight in you.

And therefore, Lord, I take this desire that has been sown in my body and I take it away from your competitor. I purge it and I give it to you. And now I desire you with that desire.

And I thank you for liberating me from the bondage of sin. It is remarkable of how much power we can gain over the direction of our desires if we go on to number five, namely pray, pray that God will give you in ever increasing strength that love to him, that desire to know him and obey him above all else. I read a sermon by Thomas Chalmers, an old Scottish preacher, once entitled The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.

The title is just stuck because it's so good. The most effective way to get rid of a desire that you don't want but you have is to recognize that it's there, admit it and push it out with a new one. You can't get rid of it really any other way, not effectively.

Remember, Jesus talked about getting the heart clean of one devil. You sweep it nice and clean. It stays empty and seven more come back.

So it is with sexual desires. You must replace them with something new, a new affection. And prayer is the summoning of divine assistance to produce those new desires in our hearts.

Sixth, bathe your mind in the word of God every day. Jesus prayed for his disciples. Sanctify them in the truth.

Thy word is truth. Truth sanctifies. There is nothing that renews the mind and the heart and enables it to assess things the way God assesses them than regular meditation on the revelation of God in the Bible.

The person who does not take up the sword of the spirit is going to lose in the battle for his body. Seven, keep yourselves busy. Very simple advice.

Keep yourselves busy. And when there is need for leisure, seek your leisure in things that are, to quote Paul, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, worthy of praise. Idleness in a society like ours is asking for trouble.

It is much harder for sexual temptation to get a foothold in our lives when we are busy. Very easy for it to get a foothold when we are dawdling, letting our minds run to and fro. And if you need a break for fresh air, take a walk in the park, not down Hennepin Avenue.

Eighth, don't spend too much time alone. Not an easy word for some singles. Don't spend too much time alone.

We've got to help you in the church with this. We're not doing a very good job of it and we will do better. You must spend time with Christian people.

Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together, not just here on Sunday morning. That text doesn't mean that. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together many times in all kinds of situations, in little groups, twos, threes, fours, dozens.

Get together, encourage one another, stir each other up to love and good works. Talk about your struggles with trusted friends, not everybody, but trusted friends. Pray for each other.

Hold each other accountable for purity. Nine, this is something I've learned more recently, too, probably since seminary. Strive to think of all people, especially people of the opposite sex, if there's a problem, in view of eternity.

It is not easy to fantasize, sexually fantasize about a person if you think about the eternal torment that that person may shortly suffer in hell due to their unbelief. It's not easy. You know yourselves, you've had to bracket, rule out those thoughts.

Jesus, stay out for these few minutes because you'll ruin everything if you get in here with those kinds of thoughts. It ought not to be so. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5, 16, from now on, we know nobody according to the flesh.

That means we know everybody from God's perspective. That'll clean up your mind in a hurry. That'll put a big, strong fence, especially you guys, about abusing the females among whom you function.

It will not allow you to depersonalize them and treat them in your minds in ways you'd never treat them in person. And finally, number 10. Resolve to seek the kingdom first.

And all these things, all the sex that you need will be added to you. That may be a spouse. It may not be.

It may be the grace and the freedom to be single in purity and joy and contentment. That's up to God. Ours is to seek the kingdom first, which means, in other words, our all-consuming passion in life must be to glorify God in our bodies by keeping ourselves free from every enslavement but one, the joyful, fulfilling slavery to God.

May God help us obey him.

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