

# Sexuality: Physical & Spiritual

## *Sexual Ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

1 Corinthians 6:12-20    1 Kings 11:1-4, 9-10  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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You've got to love the lectionary. For those not familiar with the **lectionary** let me explain. Over a three-year cycle, which then repeats itself, four scripture passages are assigned for each and every Sunday, one from the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms, the New Testament Epistles, and the Gospels. Each of the three years focuses on either the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, with the Gospel of John liberally thrown into the mix each year. On the First Sunday of Advent last December, which marked the beginning of a new liturgical church year, we entered what is known as Year B, with its focus this year on the Gospel of Mark.

The way it works is that every three years the same four scripture passages are assigned. By the way, every mainline Christian denomination, including Roman Catholicism, follow lectionary readings, if they so choose. A Presbyterian pastor isn't required to follow the lectionary, but it's advised (and has been a long-time tradition here at College Hill), mainly because within that three-year cycle a majority of themes and stories from the Bible are presented. **The goal is to keep pastors from simply preaching time and time again on their favorite theme.** I most often preach from the assigned Gospel Reading, but also venture into one of the other readings from time to time.

Now, I suspect that most preachers did everything they could to avoid today's Epistle Reading, filled with warnings about fornication and prostitution. But I figured, why not? In fact, I did so three years ago, and three years before that. So, let's take a daring leap into today's passage from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians. Paul had previously founded a new Christian community of faith in Corinth, located in southern Greece.

**A proper interpretation of this passage requires that we remember that Paul wrote within the specific cultural context of that time and place.** Paul wrote this letter to that church as his response in answering their specific questions, and to comment on their specific behavior. So unfortunately, it's like only hearing one side of a conversation. But we can infer some of the questions the Corinthians asked of Paul by his responses in this letter. For instance, can faithful Christians eat meat previously used in pagan rituals? Should women keep their heads covered? Should the rich wait for the poor before they eat their community meals? **And what about sexual behavior? In the surrounding Greek culture where promiscuity and temple prostitution and pedophilia was socially acceptable, how is a Christian to understand the holy demands of sexual behavior?**

**Underlying all these questions is the bigger question about freedom. Specifically, freedom in Christ.** Though our questions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are mostly different, they still deal with this overall issue of freedom. It appears that some believed that freedom from the Jewish laws of the Torah (especially those found in Leviticus) meant freedom to do as they pleased. In response, Paul states what was probably a mantra in his day, 'All

things are lawful for me' (take notice that this phrase is in quotes in the Bible), but he adds, 'not all things are beneficial.' Then Paul repeats the phrase, "'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything." I suppose that also means, by anyone.

**Before we act, therefore, Paul would have us answer the questions: Is it beneficial, is it dominating my life?** Paul lifts up and emphasizes that there is a **moral dimension that is the foundation of Christian freedom**. As Christians, we are free in God and for God and through God. But **we are not free from God**. Hence, though all things may technically be lawful, **not all behaviors are beneficial or freeing in helping us to be who God created us to be**. That, in part, is behind the often-heard mantra, "**All things in moderation**." This guideline applies to most all behaviors, at least for Presbyterians, including: drinking, eating, gambling, watching TV, spending too much time on a smartphone or computer, even over-working. Even the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, said this week that he plans to spend less time this year on Facebook. **Finding a proper balance in life seems to be the best guide to living a healthy and beneficial life – for you, for your loved ones, and for the community.**

Yet, also note that not all things empower and honor others or build up the community or one's own spirit and soul, even when done in moderation. In this case, **there are some things that should be avoided all together**. So, let's talk about sex. Our Presbyterian denomination, as well as many others, spent about 40 years hotly debating human sexuality before discerning that God was *not* against the ordination of sexually active LGBTQ persons of faith in committed, monogamous relationships, or the marriage of same-sex couples. Among the greatest points of contention in the debate about sexual ethics had, and continues to have, to do with **the role of scripture. That is usually the basis of the disagreements within our denomination.**

Specifically, how do the sexual ethics in the Near Middle East and Mesopotamia two to three thousand years ago apply to us today. For you see, and here's the shocker to some, **the Bible does not present one clear sexual ethic throughout all its pages**. For instance, in our Old Testament passage from 1 Kings, we learned that God became angry with King Solomon (David's son) on account of his 700 wives and his 300 concubines. The source of God's anger, however, was not because Solomon was having sexual relations with 1000 women (evidently all at the same time), but rather Solomon allowed them to convince him to worship other gods besides the God of Israel. So, it seems clear to many biblical scholars that perhaps the culture of a particular time and place *does* indeed play a role, to some extent, in determining appropriate sexual ethics – as opposed to one universal standard that should apply to all people in all places for all time.

When it comes to sexual ethics in the New Testament, no one has more to say about it than the apostle Paul. Narrowly interpreted, it seems that Paul takes on a "just say no" attitude when it comes to sex. But that would be a misinterpretation. To help me explain this I want to turn to some wise words in a sermon preached in 2004 at the national Presbyterian Covenant Network gathering, an organization that advocated for the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in church leadership. The sermon, entitled "Eros and Ethics," was preached by the Rev. Susan Andrews, the former Moderator of the 2003 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In that sermon, she reveals Paul's theological position on the matter of sexual ethics with these words:

**Paul proclaims that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit - that sexuality is a sacred gift to be used to glorify and enjoy God. And, Paul makes clear that erotic love becomes destructive if it is not shaped by moral and spiritual love.**

**The apostle is directly confronting the dualism of his day - the thinking that the body and the soul are somehow separate and that therefore, what one does with one's body simply doesn't matter when it comes to the sanctity of the soul.**

Yes, erotic love can be sacred, but only when paired with an ethical imperative. A sacred sexual ethic must include the question of whether it **"heals and enlarges the life of the other"** person, a phrase coined by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. For the other person's body is also a temple of God's Sacred Presence. In that sermon, Susan Andrews continues:

**What such a reciprocal and mutual covenant ethic suggests is that asymmetrical - unbalanced - sexual relationships are simply not part of God's vision.** Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other, sexual behavior that focuses just selfishly on me instead of thee, sexual behavior that hides in the shadows of shame instead of unfolding in the sunshine of God's delight - such behavior does not "heal and enlarge the life of the other".

But even in that statement there is a lot to unpack, like the word *shame*. Is shame something that comes directly from God in scripture, or is it something that society imposes on us – telling us that we should be ashamed? Andrews continues:

I believe we 21st century Christians must proclaim unequivocally that prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, pedophilia, clergy sexual misconduct, patriarchal heterosexual marriage, furtive [secretive] teenage sexual experimentation, "hooking up" just for casual sex - all of this is wrong - not because it breaks some antiquated rule, but because it does not heal and enlarge the life of the other [person] - because it does not honor the faithfulness and fidelity of covenant - because it does not glorify God in the temple of sacred sexuality.

Whether or not you agree with this assessment, the church does not speak out enough about such things. Thankfully, our current culture is now taking the lead, doing so through the **"Me Too"** movement sweeping the country, and the **"Times Up"** movement in Hollywood. **Sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances, and predatory behavior is wrong. Period. Sex must never be about power and control over, or domination of another.** Yet Andrews admits, and I tend to agree,

The context of real people's real sexual lives has led me to a place where I am not always sure about what God forbids. But I know in my body and in my soul what God celebrates.

**Let me reiterate, there is no dualism in Paul's theology. There is no separation of mind from body, or soul from sensation.** As spiritual people, as sexual people, as ethical people, as beloved people – we must come to a deeper understanding that even though Christ has set us free, not all things are beneficial for us; not all things are freeing or enrich the lives of others or the community. We must strive, therefore, to live as the scriptures ask of you and me, **"glorify God in your body," which serves as a "temple of**

**the Holy Spirit within you." And because of that, remember the body is not evil, or something to be ashamed of. On the contrary, it is a gift from God, to be cherished, cared for, and honored as the grounding of God's Sacred Presence within you and me.**

And finally, these words may help. They come from author on spirituality Richard Rohr, posted just this week on his website Center for Action and Contemplation, "**We are not so much human beings trying to become spiritual. We're already inherently spiritual beings and our job is learning how to be good humans!**"

Sexuality is never just about the physical, it also includes the spiritual.

Amen.