

“Are Marriage, Sex and Family Life Religious Issues?”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Mark 10:1-12; John 8:3-11

Occasion: Ask series

Themes: Sex, marriage, grace

Sex. There, I said the word in church. Sex is in the news; it’s used in advertising. Sex is on the TV and the Internet, in our magazines and in our movies. Sex is all around us. But is sex a religious issue? What about marriage and family life? Are they religious issues? Does God really care about what we do in our bedrooms?

Now, in most churches, talking about sex rarely happens. And for many young people, the lack of conversation sends a loud message: “we’re not supposed to talk about this, or maybe even think about it” It’s a taboo topic.

The public perception about churches and sexuality is that religion exists to restrict sexual activity. The impression often left on young people is that no matter what a person’s sexual orientation, the religious community’s response to sex is generally, “Don’t do it.”

Sixty years ago, it was too scandalous for Ricky and Lucy, a married couple to sleep in the same bed on the TV show *I Love Lucy*. Today, television shows regularly show sexual scenes and couples clad in their underwear. When I conduct premarital counseling for couples before their wedding, I would say that almost 99% of them are already living together.

Things have certainly changed a lot in 60 years. Religious groups are often perceived as being behind the times. But they too are not immune from the sexual revolution. In 2013, a Christian dating site did a survey and asked “Would you have sex before marriage?” Eighty six percent of those who responded said yes.

Many people strongly value their religious tradition, claim to be born again Christians, but simply ignore the sexual tradition that says ‘sex should wait till marriage,’ giving rise to a new phrase: “sexual atheists.”

Fundamentally, our culture seems to have decided that whether or not God exists, we don’t want religion imposing on our sex life. So, does God care about our sex life? Are churches missing the point, or has our culture strayed? Does the Bible give any guidelines or values regarding sex? Fortunately it does.

From the first chapter in the Bible, God creates humanity and gives us instructions to “be fertile and multiply; fill the earth.” (Gen. 1:28) Our sexuality is a part of God’s good creation. It is a beautiful gift from God. God has given us this innate desire to mate and to be fruitful.

But sex is for more than simply making babies. It is a very intimate sharing between two persons. It draws them together and binds them together. The Bible talks about a mystical union where the two become one. And so, sex is not merely for procreation, it is also for establishing and maintaining intimacy. Sex is a beautiful gift from God.

But we tend to abuse good gifts. Sex was designed to be a positive force in our lives, but in our world, it has become a form of oppression, a source of regret, and a place of brokenness. People are haunted by sexual pasts they are ashamed of. Marriages are ripped apart by affairs, young people are obsessed by pornography, and lust dominates the media.

If sex is positive, why is it the source of so much pain? Sex is not the primary topic of Scripture, and in fact Jesus had more to say about money than he did about sex. It’s not the main topic of the Bible, but it does mirror the basic story of scripture: we are good but full of brokenness.

When Jesus entered the picture, he did not address most sexual issues. Jesus was never once recorded speaking about homosexuality, for example, or even obvious restrictions such as incest. Sometimes that makes people think Jesus was just as apathetic about sex and values as people are today. This is not so.

In fact, Jesus may have been even stricter about some sexual matters. For example, he taught that not only was adultery wrong, but so was lust. That means probably every person has sinned in that area. But see, Jesus was calling us to a higher standard by saying that it's not just the act but also the thoughts that lead to the actions that are harmful.

In a conversation about divorce, Jesus seems to be even stricter than Moses was, saying that Moses had to accommodate because of the sinfulness of people. The elders said that Moses allowed for divorce in the case of adultery, but Jesus said, that's because people are not living up to the high expectations that God has for us.

Interestingly though, when Jesus encountered people who could not live up to the high standards of Scripture, every time Jesus offered grace. In his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus did not condemn her because of her past. Instead he offered her grace and hope. Another time, a woman was caught in adultery. The Pharisees wanted to stone her. Jesus saved her by saying, "Let the person here who has no sin throw the first stone." Then he said to her, "Go and sin no more."

Jesus has high expectations and high grace. He knows we're not always going to live up to the high ideals that our faith teaches. But when we fall short, we need both high expectations and high grace. Jesus offers us a path that will lead to a full life. He also provides us with grace, so that

when we fall, we can experience redemption from a broken past and have the possibility of full life in the future.

Sex is a beautiful thing, but it can easily become one of God's most abused gifts. The use of pornography is increasing, sometimes beginning before the teenage years. Children who view pornography have a distorted understanding of what relationships are meant to be, the beautiful intimacy that is possible.

The hookup culture seems to promise quick, easy, one-night stands without any hang-ups or commitments. But more and more people are discovering how shallow, how lonely and how shameful these one night stands make them feel.

Divorce is still prevalent, though I understand it is slowing down, possibly because fewer people are choosing to get married. The pain that results in a failed marriage is awful – for the people involved, their children, their extended families and even their friends. The financial burden upon one or both members can be crushing.

Yes, God does care about what happens in our bedrooms, because God cares about the entirety of our lives. We as Christians will not all agree on matters of sexuality, but we do need to read and take seriously the teachings of Scripture. Not always literally, but take it seriously.

And always remember, that along with high standards, God offers abundant grace when we fall short of His high ideals. Jesus always loves us, even when we're falling short of his expectations for us. And he is always there - to pick us up, cleanse our wounds, forgive our sins, and offer us a new start, no matter what we've done.

So, you're in a coffee shop with your non-Christian friend who says, "Okay, I don't want a long and complicated answer, but tell me this:

Why does God care about what people do in their own beds?”

You might answer: “We often make the mistake of thinking we can separate our sex lives from the rest of ourselves, but it’s not true. Who we are in our most intimate moments can bless or ruin marriages and lives. God has a vision for the whole world to be good. That means God has high hopes for our sex lives, but also grace when we mess up.”

May God help us all to live holy lives, offering up all of who we are to the glory of God. Amen? Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, by Scott J. Jones and Arthur D. Jones, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015; pp. 87-98.