

Wonderfully Made | Thinking More About Sex: The Spirituality of Sexuality

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKER

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Hey, Good Morning, Menlo Church. I'm so glad that you have chosen to join us today and for this really important series and a journey through what can be a very challenging topic as we talk about the body, gender and sexuality. And before you ask, no, I'm not doing pictures today, I just want to know that could be a little dangerous. Maybe last week felt better than you expected, and so you're back. You're curious how we're gonna handle the next part of this conversation. I'm so glad that you are. A welcome to our campuses in San Mateo here in Menlo Park, Mountain View and Saratoga, I am so glad that you are here.

Maybe for you, you suspect that last week was some sort of setup, and you want to make sure that we kind of cover your side that is adequately represented in the conversation. No matter why you are here, I'm glad that you are. And I hope that this series is less about sides, and more about hope.

Now, if you missed last week, you really do need to go check it out. This series is a conversation that builds on each week, in a way with shared commitments and the structure that I want to make sure you have throughout the whole thing. Literally, if you're watching online right now, I would encourage you to hit pause and go watch last week. If you're at one of our campuses today, maybe just put your headphones in and watch it on your phone, I really want you to have sort of the framework for how we're thinking about this.

Now, one quick reminder of one of those shared commitments that we talked about last week is that we don't have to agree in order to show respect for one another. And so if I say something today that you feel like you want to verbally support or verbally not support, please don't. This is a sensitive conversation, and I want us to be especially thoughtful to those for whom this is a painful conversation, or the way it's been talked about in the past has been painful, or flippant.



The church in the West, particularly in America has largely avoided conversations around sexuality and what I refer to as strategic ambiguity or the church's version of "don't ask, don't tell", and I don't think that this is a kind or effective approach. Now, maybe you are thinking that we should just continue with that strategy of avoiding the conversation. And my response is twofold. Our culture is forming all of us into its version of sexuality. And I believe that God's vision of sexual wholeness is uniquely life giving.

Secondly, when we can't talk about something, it often insinuates or reveals that that topic itself has power over us. And the power of God is bigger than the power of that fear, and it would make us maybe want to avoid the conversation. Maybe you don't know this, but the phrase "do not be afraid" is the most common command in all of Scripture.

One final disclaimer, we are not going to be explicit in any way that would be inappropriate for our high school or middle school students. But if you're a parent, and you'd rather hear this personally first, and then decide how to broach it with them, we want to verbally acknowledge that choice for you.

We have provided lots of resources and events for parents and students. You can find those resources and sign up for those events at menlo.church/wonderfullymade. It's never too early to start this conversation in an age-appropriate way with your kids culture is not waiting to start having this conversation with them. And no matter how insulated you think you have kept them. We live in a time where this conversation is everywhere.

So before we begin, I'm going to pray for us. I'm praying that no matter what you bring to this conversation, you will hear much less of my words and feel much more of God's love and design in you, and the power available to all of us. In Jesus. Would you pray with me?

God, thank you so much. Thank you for the tremendous gift that you make available to us in your love. Not just about where we end up someday, but actually God the relationship we get to have today. Not as souls with bodies but embodied souls made in your image with infinite dignity, value and worth. Remind us of those things God no matter what we believe, no matter what we think no matter how we live. God you love us. It's in Jesus name. Amen.

So I grew up in an era of church called purity culture. And it was a time where books were popular and speakers were prominent with students and young adults who prioritized sexual purity in a way that brought massive unintended shame to my generation. One of the ways that they did this was by articulating the act of sex as the only expression of sexuality and it was this picture without even necessarily realizing it, of developing these feelings that you go I feel deep shame, I feel like these feelings that I have that are growing in me are dangerous and damaging. And so the things and the feelings and the inclinations that I have towards sex, they become gross, dangerous, sinful, and the message was, "so save it for the one you love."

That was the framework that I grew up understanding sex about. And to be fair, it was a group of people that were trying to help in a culture that seemed to be rapidly changing. But it narrowed sexuality to something that God never narrows it to.

See, sexuality is the act of sex, but it's also much more than that. Add to it the political passions that we brought to the conversation, and usually the way that some political perspectives framed the conversation was "what do you care about what happens in my bedroom anyway?" and it was the same mistake of sexuality with too narrow a lens.



Now, there's a helpful tool that I come back to repeatedly in ministry when I have this conversation, because for some sex is God, it is the most important all encompassing thing about you, period. For others, maybe you grew up like I did in church culture, and sex is this thing that feels gross, and you're not sure how to navigate it, but it feels deeply shameful. You're not sure how to talk about it, you try to just avoid it. And then ultimately, what we see communicated about specifically sexual intimacy is that it's actually a gift. It's a gift from God to be enjoyed in a specific context. But we all sort of come into the room with a different picture of what this means.

We are living in a moment where your sexual identity and experience are seen as simultaneously, the most important things you can be and do as well as completely casual, malleable and insecure, inconsequential. I would say, God disagrees.

Our return to a lifelong relationship to sexuality is complicated for all of us. And so my hope today is that we would widen our understanding of sexuality in this conversation about how God has wonderfully and fearfully made each and every one of you with infinite dignity, value and worth. Not because we're perfect, but because He loves us, anyway.

First, I want to show you how much bigger and better the gift of our sexuality is, then the act of physical intimacy, then I want to show you a timeline of how we got here in our history. And then I want to show you why sexual brokenness is a unique problem, but one that we are all susceptible to, and the gospel holds great hope for.

Now, the reason that we can't avoid this conversation. The reason, it can't just be an agree to disagree subject in the church, and the reason that we're talking about it today is because sexuality is about more than a bedroom. It's humanity's greatest heirloom, it sets us apart. It's a framework of how we care actually, for lots of people in our life.

My mom, she passed away a year ago, and as the executor of her estate, she gave me instructions about what personal items and mementos she wanted to end up with each family member and friend, these mementos, these heirlooms that she wanted from one generation to the next. This is usually the way we think about heirlooms. But humanity's greatest heirloom, the thing that we pass on is the way we love one another, and there is this unique expression of sexuality, that God designed for us in the way we love people in our lives.

There is a group of things when we study the Bible that we should avoid, they're helpful patterns and ways that we can study the Bible. And then there are ways we can study the Bible that leave us in more confused places, they're called exegetical fallacies. And one of those is called the part for the whole. And in it, we take one small subset of an idea, and we make it the whole idea. And I would argue that's what we've done with sex. Actually, sexuality is more than sex. It includes it, but it's also way bigger.

Last week, we spent some time in the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, understanding that we were made on purpose and for a purpose. But very early in the history of humanity we see displayed in Genesis 2, there is a problem that we discover the author of Genesis surfaces the problem this way, "Then the Lord God said, "it is not good, that man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him."

Sometimes we read this, and if you know the story of the Genesis account, you think, well, after Adam names the animals God kind of realizes or discovers that that's not working out that I'm just gonna need some help. But actually, God knew this would be a need not just for Adam, but



for people. The word that we see here for “Adam” is actually a picture of mankind. It's that we need one another God made us to be interdependent with each other.

See the God of the Bible who already exists in a generative relationship through something called the Trinity. one God in three persons God the Father, God, the Son and God, the Holy Spirit made Adam and knew immediately that Adam would need a counterpart. In the story, we see that through the lens of Eve, who he names because she was taken out of man - not the most poetic guy, but he was overwhelmed, we can cut them some slack. See, they would set the model for marriage as a monogamous relationship between one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant.

God longs for us to experience wholeness in the way we experience sexual intimacy as a mingling of souls in this expression of sexual intimacy in marriage. Sexual intimacy requires exclusivity. Accessibility minus exclusivity, erodes intimacy. That's not just a Bible truth, that's like a sociological reality that we know is true.

The biblical boundary of physical sexual intimacy is prescribed in this passage here. And while people, men and women have fallen short of this biblical standard, as we fall short of every biblical standard, it has been consistently taught as the sexual ethic through the leaders of Judaism on the pages of the Old Testament, by Jesus himself, the writers of the New Testament, and the overwhelming majority of church history.

Now, before you think about making noise, one way or another, I want to make it very clear that there is way more heterosexual sin in our church than any other kind of sexual sin. And I want to apologize to the LGBTQI+ community for the way that you have been scapegoated in this conversation by church for a long time; that we talk about you as uniquely sinful because we haven't wanted to deal with our sexual sin. It's wrong and sinful, all by itself. I'm sorry. We're all sexually broken. We all need Jesus. I'm not trying to clobber anyone. I just want to be kind. I want to be clear. But part of the good news of Jesus starts with the bad news that we are all fallen, we all fall short and need Jesus. And the first couple of gives us a bigger vision than just the sexual act inside of marriage. They also give us a picture of humanity, that we exist in a generative community as well, life giving community where we are seeking to care for one another, from the deepest part of who we are.

One of the reasons that this gets so quickly confused is another one of those exegetical fallacies that you've probably heard before, if you've been in church. We see three primary words used in the New Testament for love. See the word Agape, Phileo and Eros, and you may have heard them defined as specific expressions of love, which can be true, but they're not always quite that firm in terms of their lines and boundaries to one another.

In her upcoming book, Rebecca McLaughlin highlights the nuance this way, she says “In the Bible, married love, parental love, and friendship, love are all held up as precious, but only the last kind of love is mandatory.”

See the generous nature of how God made you can be self-sacrificial, like stereotypical agape love. We can offer deep friendship and connection like stereotypical phileo love, and eros love can be expressed through more than just romantic feelings when we extend care through deep desire for someone else's good. It's not just sexual intimacy, we extend love as this complicated part of who we are when we show up as whole people.



The New Testament talks about sexual temptation and the potential dangers of succumbing to the destructive patterns in our lives, and we'll get to that. But it talks way more about how we can express our truest selves, including our sexuality in the way that we love other people in this generative, self giving kind of way. As a matter of fact, that phrase "one another", it appears 59 times with specific expressions of how we love people who are trying to follow Jesus well.

If you're not a Christian, these are not things that you've signed up for. And maybe you don't feel like you've seen Christians model them well, but that's what we're supposed to model. See, beyond the act of sex, our sexuality, even if we aren't married is a part of who we are and how we extend love. Beyond the romantic expression or the physical act of sex, the spark of the generative nature that we are made to love one another with a self-sacrificial love is something that shows up in all human connection as we love God and love people.

As a matter of fact, Jesus said that the calling card of our community of Jesus followers, the way that the world is supposed to recognize who we are. Well, he says it this way. "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another", it's the heirloom of humanity that we pass from generation to generation.

So if all that's true, then why do Christians care about the body? Or the physical act of sex at all? Why can't we just celebrate the fact that sexuality is bigger than the act of sex, and let people do whatever they want with their bodies. But remember, we talked about this last week, that sexuality isn't about more than the bedroom, it's humanity's greatest heirloom. And just like we talked about last week, there are massive implications with how we use our bodies, we are not souls with bodies, we are embodied souls, you're an image bear, including your body, even in its broken and frail state.

So before we get into the biblical framework for physical sexual intimacy, let's take a look at how we got here, how we landed in the spot that we are in culture, it didn't happen overnight, but it has been rapidly changing and we all feel it, whether you think that this change is good or not. And for many people, they think it's kind of connected to the 1960s. And we'll see that in a second. But I want to start a little bit earlier than that, I want to start in 1900.

In 1900, you had the prominence of Sigmund Freud, and Sigmund Freud had this kind of important framework that became really, really popular around this idea of sexual repression. That our best selves would come to pass, our better desires would come to pass, our dysfunctional behaviors could be stemmed, if we would avoid repression, if we would lift off those things that society was telling us we weren't allowed to do. That happened in 1900.

Fast forward to 1930. And you have another character that we're introduced to in Reich in the 1930s. He is a German writer who's describing some of the same things, but he goes on even more than Freud does. He says that basically, all moral codes reinforce the patriarchal family, which was just trying to maintain power, and it was not just repressive, it was oppressive. His books advanced and advocated the abandonment of moral authority entirely.

And so what these two things did in 1900 and 1930, really set the stage in our nation for the 60s. And in the 60s, specifically, we saw the widespread adoption of birth control. And before you're like, what are we talking about right now Phil, I am not making a statement about birth control, or like my own personal feelings about it. I'm simply saying that this did something in our culture. Fundamentally, what it did is as a society, it removed or greatly reduced the risks that had been associated with sex, namely, financially, and socially. The stigma was gone. There was no longer nearly as high pressure to live within a certain framework as it was before now,



STDs would grow over time. But the spark of the sexual revolution meant that the recreational sex without long-term consequences could be widely adopted. And it was.

Now fast forward a couple more decades, and you end up in 1983. And down the street, maybe some of you helped create the internet. And the internet, all of a sudden made unbelievable advances, advances that humanity had never seen before. It connected us in a way that we had never experienced before. But one of the things that it did is it made access to adult content - pornography, it made it anonymous, affordable and increasingly accessible. There were no more seedy back rooms, there was no more embarrassment with it at all. And so as this was taking place, we're sort of watching culture continue to catch up to what this means.

And then in 2007, again, I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but some of you may have done this part also, we started putting smartphones in everyone's hands. And smartphones did this thing that where the accessibility, the affordability and the anonymity of what we had, because of the internet, smartphones, took all the good things of the internet and rapidly moved them forward. But it also took this access to pornography, and it made it more personal, more private and more portable than ever before. And it led to an even faster rate of adoption of things like cohabitation out of marriage, hookup culture, casual sex in our world, and an increasing devolution of the way that we saw content on the internet.

And for a lot of us, like we just, we've never asked for any of this, like, we're just kind of here. And we're going like, wait. So what do I do with all of that? How do I, how do I process that that's the world I live in today? We didn't agree to it, we didn't cosign on it. And here's the thing, I'm not trying to convince you of everything, I just want to say there is something about this timeline that we need to be very honest about.

See, this timeline is really about the promise of the sexual liberation movement in our culture. And the promise of the sexual liberation movement in our culture has been this, that the more authentic expression of sexual desire we have, it leads to greater happiness and satisfaction. That's the promise. And so what you would expect, as it's gotten more and more and more, decade, after decade, after decade, that we would be happier and more fulfilled than ever. How's that going?

See, we have been getting less happy. Regardless of the study, you go look at including the most recent ones, especially as it's been accelerated after the 1960s. And so maybe you don't believe any of what I'm telling you, but I'm just saying you're swimming in waters that are making you a cultural promise that isn't working. And I'm not trying to undermine the progress that we've made some of this social progress has been really, really important. But this promise of the sexual liberation movement isn't working, Google it.

In addition, in this important book, theologian and historian Carl Trueman kind of connects the dots for us, he says this, he says, "The expressive individual is now the sexually expressive individual. And education and socialization are to be marked not by the cultivation of traditional sexual taboos, but rather by the abolition of such and the enabling of pansexual expression, even among children. One might regard this change as obnoxious but it reflects the logic of expressive individualism in the sexualized world, that is the progeny of the consummation of the Marx-Freud nuptials...."

What he's saying is that, of course, we are in the spot that we were in, it's where we've always been heading. We are less happy as a society than we have been in a very, very long time. And maybe it's a coincidence. But it seems like one heck of a coincidence to me.



And again, I'm not arguing that we abandon all the social progress of the last 100 years to help lift people out of marginalized communities, and give them greater voices, and create greater equality in our world. That's all great. But maybe swinging the pendulum back the entire other way isn't our only option, I would argue it's not.

So no matter how you understand this conversation, or your own theological convictions, we can hopefully see that there is an insidious nature, too much of what we're talking about, particularly the pornography industry.

There is more traffic online for pornography than Amazon and Netflix combined. There is much less money today in the faithful expression of the biblical sexual ethic than there is in the other experiences of our culture. But there is so much more hope in finding Jesus for all of our lives.

A lot of the New Testament of the Bible is written to address specific churches that were just beginning to work out what it meant to follow Jesus, some of them had questions, and others got letters from someone like the apostle Paul, who had heard about challenges that needed to be addressed in those churches.

I think it's safe to say that if the church in America was still in that era, we would be getting a letter from the Apostle Paul, for sure. And actually, 1Corinthians might be one that has some of the most overlap with what that letter that we would receive might include.

Paul was brilliant. And he had done his homework. As a matter of fact, he borrowed a saying from Corinthian culture. When he said this, he said, "All things are lawful for me..." he's quoting their philosophy. And maybe for us, we wouldn't say it that way. Instead, we would say things like, "it's a free country", but the sentiment is the same. I can do whatever I want. Now, Paul, he didn't even disagree and that's largely still true for us. But he adds, "but not all things are helpful."

Even if you're not a Christian, you agree with this on some level. Sometimes the question isn't can I do something, but should I do that thing? He expands and references another part of a popular saying when he says "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated" I will not be mastered I will not be controlled by anything. Just because I can doesn't mean I should or that it's good. Just because I can have something doesn't mean I will let that thing have me.

Have you ever stopped to think about whether or not what we're experiencing in our culture moment is good for us?

The average teenager carries a device that until very recently, would have been considered a supercomputer. And there's amazing things like amazing things that they can do, that they have access to, and they can stay connected with. But it's also given them a in many cases, unlimited access to a portal that has so those good things, but it also has the very worst, most devious sex content that has ever been created in humanity available all the time to all of them all, while their brain is still under construction, is that good for us? And here's the thing, all of this, all of this, we know, does not just go away, when they grow up.

As good as our sexuality is, and his life giving as it can be in our normal lives of serving and caring for people. The sexual act of physical intimacy can be in the context of marriage, it can also be used and abused. And Paul goes on to warn the church at Corinth this way, he says "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food - and God will destroy both one and



the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

See, long before Freud and right would enter the scene Paul acknowledges our student, our physical appetite, and the difference between our physical appetite and our true hunger and the midst of our appetite, he tries to show us that God has a vision for us, that does not just save our souls, but satisfies our deepest longings, the hunger inside of us that only he can satisfy. He goes on to share some really practical implications and choices that we make with our bodies, and the connection to multiple sexual partners that will be made whether we want it to or not, it's not just a physical act. More on that in a second.

He finishes the section this way, he says “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside of the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within, you whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

So this is maybe the part of the message that you are a little scared of coming today for right? But I hope that you hear the good news of Jesus. That there is hope. That even if you aren't following him yet, even if you failed in this area, even if you disagree with me, God doesn't give up on us and He loves you.

But Paul calls out sexual sin because it's the kind of thing that when we commit it, we're actually committing it against our own body. There was a teaching around the early church that Paul was regularly trying to combat called Gnosticism. And inside the framework of Gnosticism, it taught this idea that the spiritual was good, but that the physical was bad. Our bodies were then evil, therefore we could do whatever we wanted physically. But Paul says that the Holy Spirit, who lives in every Christian is in us and our bodies, that God came to save all of us. And if that's true, then we need to give him influence and access to how we use our bodies too. That's what Paul is saying.

The word “flee” here that we see is a translation from the Greek that it was originally written in, and let me tell you after a couple degrees in the original language, this word flee, it means run. It means run really fast. Don't dabble, don't debate, don't try to manage sexual temptation, of all the different kinds that we may uniquely face that sexual sin is uniquely painful.

And again, I want to reiterate that we have a lot to answer for here; that the church has historically vilified the LGBTQ+ community as uniquely sinful in this area, while ignoring the mountains of sexual sin inside of heterosexual people's lives. And on the other side, we have idolized marriage and family to a point that single people have felt like second-class citizens, and we forgot that our Savior and Lord who we worship was himself single.

Author Rachel Gilson calls out the idealization of marriage this way, she says “Marriage is not promised or preferred. It can't make you straight nor prove that you're committed. It's not the prize for faithfulness, nor the source. Jesus Christ is the prize. The Holy Spirit is the source. God is our Father, our husband, our friend.”

I want to personally apologize, for the massive harm that this has caused and once again commit that Menlo is a place where we want you to belong before you believe. That no matter what you've done, or what's been done to you, God loves you. And he has not given up on you.



Author and theologian Deborah Hirsch provides a beautiful vision of this, she says, "Creating a redemptive focus to our lives means that we love LGBTQ people as ourselves. It means that we treat them with the same kind of grace, respect, care and compassion with which we want to be treated. It means that we fight alongside of them against hateful action aimed at their community. It means all of all of the above, even if we do not agree with their sexual ethic."

Last week, we talked about the choices that sometimes feel like the only ones we have; culture warrior, culture capitulate, or you are an ambassador, if you're a follower of Jesus of a different kingdom and we will have to walk with tension, this will be difficult. And here's the thing, if you aren't a Christian, you're kind of off the hook. I mean, I would argue this isn't working, you have to figure out what to do with this.

But this picture of a set-aside sexuality is a part for followers of Jesus, of what it means to be holy, to continue to let God change and work in me this lifelong - thank God it's lifelong - this lifelong process of what's called sanctification, that God is regularly shining flashlights in your life and in my life about what he wants to change, what he wants to become Lord over in your and my life. That includes every area, including our sexuality. We are all sexually broken, the foot of the cross is even for all of us. God loves all of us. And we want to be a community where that is reiterated.

I want you to understand that this is a part of the path of following Jesus.

Now, for me, I was first introduced to pornography as a young child in an abusive home. I didn't ask for it. I didn't want it, but it was really challenging and it would set the next several years of my life up to have a very distorted view of relationships and sexuality and women. And it was painful.

I would go on to date more girls than I could count chasing a vision of something that was not healthy or good. It took a group of guys who loved me boldly in college, to help me break free, to be able to see that there was a different path of freedom and Jesus to be able to surrender this part of my life. And for some of you today, today is the day that God wants you to say, "look, I know it's not going to all be better. I know, I can't just pray something away, but God, I want you to have access to this part of my life." And so in a few minutes, I'm gonna give you a chance to do that.

But I've really good news, whether you're a follower of Jesus today, or you're going to maybe make a decision to become one, you're on the fence about it. That in Jesus, there is no condemnation.

Jesus is not looking at your life, if you're a follower of him, and he's looking at something you did, something that you carry deep deep shame about, he's not looking at that and going "well, I love you until" no, no, no, no, no.

God loves you for all of eternity.

And the good news of the gospel is that no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, or what's been done to you, His love is on shakable. His love is the only place that we find true liberation. His love is the place that he reshapes and refines and redefines our identity.

So, as we finish our service with another song together, I'm gonna invite you, actually, at all of our campuses, you're gonna see prayer teams across the front of your campus. And maybe for



you, it's something that came up last week when we talked about the body or it's something about sexuality in your own life. Maybe it's about how you love somebody in your life that you're trying to figure out how do you reconcile all of this? I would just encourage you just come ask for prayer, even during this next song, and ask that God would show up in your life. Make this moment a marker that God could do something with for years to come, that you could look back on moments like this one, and see that God is real, that he loves you, and that he's still working.

With that in mind would you stand with me as we pray?

God thank you so much. Thank you for the gift that is to be able to share your love. That God we didn't do anything to earn this, we couldn't have if we tried. That God you gave us your free gift of love. And whatever we are facing today, whatever is in front of us, whatever barriers that feel insurmountable. God would you just give us a moment even right now to be able to surrender those areas, those areas of bondage, those areas where we're are struggling, those areas where maybe God, we are wondering if we even know you. God use this time. Use this season to give boldness to your people, to ask for, to be prayed for, to sing to you. And to believe that no matter what we've done or what's been done to us, there is still hope for us. In Jesus name amen.

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