

Discipleship Class

Sex

On speaking of sex in the Church

I realize that many would think it imprudent or even scandalous to have a discipleship class on sex. ~~S~~But scripture does not share this attitude towards sex. It is true that Paul exhorts the Church to not talk about sexually immoral things or to make sexually crude jokes (Ephesians 5:3-5). The intent of this class is not to deal so flippantly with sex so as to be guilty of this charge. Although Scripture condemns sexual immorality, it never condemns sex itself. This is particularly true for sex in the lane that God designs it. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul exhorts married couples to have sex regularly and to be careful not to go too long between sexual encounters with one another. Something perhaps more interesting is found in verse 36 of this same chapter. Paul is giving advice to people who are engaged and feel that they are acting “inappropriately” towards one another in this lane. Imagine for a moment that a couple comes to their local pastor and confesses that they are crossing physical boundary lines. The expectation of this couple is that they may get a scolding from their pastor or be given advice on how to stop behaving badly. That is not what Paul says. He simply says, get married. It’s like he is saying, “look, sex isn’t bad. Just enter into the covenant in which it is designed to be.” Of course, this is saying nothing of the book The Song of Solomon, which, among other things, is a celebration of sex in rather explicit terms. My point is that Scripture’s attitude towards sex is not that it is bad or taboo. Scripture is not silent about it and neither should the Church be.

Further, when the Church is silent on this topic, the culture will shout at the top of its lungs. The result, over time, is that our culture has shaped the dominant view of sex for a whole generation, perhaps more, in their view of sex. Unfortunately, the view propagated by our culture is confused (to say it generously) for it can’t conclude whether sex is simply the mutual pursuit of pleasure and otherwise meaningless or if it is the most important thing about a person ~~and the nature of the desire the very thing that centrally informs someone’s identity~~ such that even sexual desires inform our very identity. In addition, when people attempt to walk out the culture’s view of sex, they inevitably crash into God’s design for it and the result is very often terribly painful. The truth is that sex is a powerful thing and, like most power, has the capacity for being incredibly life-giving or life-taking. The difference will be found in understanding it according to the design of the one who made it and submitting to that design.

The Church has not always been entirely silent on this topic. Not always, but often, the Church has given rather simple teachings on sex that included essentially two points. Sex is for marriage (point 1), so abstain from sex outside of marriage (point 2). Both these points are biblical. However, in the gaps there is room for confusion and more questions. The “why” that is withheld in these assertions would often be filled by the world, as stated earlier. People would hear that the reason we don’t have sex outside of marriage is to not have kids and not get

STDs. They may be told (overtly or subtly) that ~~they~~their “love” was naïve and immature and that they couldn’t ~~hand~~handle having sex. Of course, the first two issues are solved (in the eyes of many people) with a condom and the second assertion can sound more like a challenge that spurs on sexual activity more than it sounds like wisdom. Lastly, it leads to the question that would often go unstated, but felt; if God is good, why did He create sex to be so good and then command us to abstain?

God’s design & having children

This is where we begin. God made sex. It is a part of God’s good creation. In fact, after making Adam and Eve, God gives the very first command in Scripture to humanity. He says, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it…” (Genesis 1:28). ~~Be fruitful~~Being fruitful, without a doubt, implies having sex. Consider this, the very first command is to have sex. This, not as ~~it’s~~its own end, but to the end of having children in order to fill the earth and rule it in God’s stead and as His image bearers. Herein is the first purpose of sex; to make new human beings. The singular attitude towards children in Scripture is that they are a blessing. Unfortunately, our culture has made the central pursuit of life comfort and pleasure, often attached to the accumulation of wealth. With this firmly in place, children are a hindrance to the goal and are therefore seen as a burden and not a blessing. The result is that our culture sees children as an unfortunate side-effect of sex and can be avoided either before or after the fact. Tragically, this reality gets lumped in with avoiding STDs and if both are being staved off, it is labeled “safe sex”.

God’s design & ~~creating~~union - Christ and the Church

The next time sex shows up in Scripture is one chapter later. There is a second pass at creation that takes a deeper look at the sixth day and the creation of Adam and Eve. God makes Adam and says that it is not good (Genesis 2:18). After letting the tension build a bit, God makes Eve and Adam is very pleased. Then we read, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Genesis 2:24-25). This “one flesh” union is certainly ~~referencing~~referencing sex. At the same time, Jesus quotes this text as being God’s design for marriage (Matthew 5:19). So, the same text that is speaking about sex is the same text that defines marriage. Ah, but it is also the text that Paul references as a mystery (the notion is that it was hidden and now revealed) that was always pointing to Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Now, this text that speaks about sex is also speaking about marriage and Christ and the Church.

I believe this to be the lynch pin for all of God’s design for sex and we will observe more of this later. For now I will only point to the second part of God’s design. God designs sex to unite two people. This is not simply something physical in nature. People who have sex are bound together. This truth is baked into us. It is why having sex with someone against their will or without their consent is so criminal. The crime is not simply using someone’s body for pleasure, there is something more profound than the physical reality. If it were not the case, then justice for this crime would be akin to assault and battery or holding someone against their will. People

would not feel dirty after being the victim of such a crime, if this union was not felt. sex is supposed to be willful, rooted in delight, and a mutual self-giving like Adam's response to meeting Eve, and not forced, rooted in either pleasure or power, and singularly selfish.

This reality of the uniting power of sex is felt by the people who have sex. In the right context, it is wonderful. You genuinely feel closer to your sexual partner and not simply during the act of sex, but after. The truth is that ~~is fosters~~ ~~it fosters~~ and spurs on love. We are more inclined to be patient, kind, generous, and to overlook wrongs when we are mutually bound to someone through sex and this reality is more potently true closer to the most recent sexual encounter. I will often tell people in premarital counseling that they are far more likely to fight five hours before having sex than five hours after (waking hours).

Beautifully, the goodness of this is a sign that is pointing to Christ and the Church. We are designed by God to be united with Him. If our thinking about sex is shallow, such that we can't see past the purely physical reality, ~~thathen~~ it will sound odd (at best) to suggest that sex points to our union with Christ. But, when we realize that there is something about being deeply spiritually bound to someone, such that your affections are aimed at them more naturally (among other things), it is an exciting and beautiful reality. Of course, as I've stated earlier about this being the lynch pin for the rest of God's design for sex, I believe there is more to it than this.

God's design & vulnerability, knowing, and accepting

Here is the next reality about God's design for sex and, again, it can't be detached from what we now know sex is designed to point towards. Sex is supposed to be the context in which we are naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25). This is drawing from Scripture's second mention of sex, as we've been speaking of. It also points to the third time Scripture mentions sex is found in Genesis 4:1. Here, Scripture says that Adam "knew" Eve which ~~leadled~~ to Cain, their first son. Of course, this is not suggesting that Adam had a great conversation with Eve and she miraculously got pregnant. No, it is saying that Adam and Eve had sex and got pregnant. The language of "knowing" is a reference to sex here. I don't think that Scripture is shy to speak about sex, but rather is inspired by the Holy Spirit and using this language on purpose. Sex is an act where two people are naked and unashamed, where they know one another fully and accept one another.

Consider Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 13, the famous love chapter. He says that knowledge will one day pass away, for "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12) In this way, sex is a sign that points to a future reality of knowing God fully and thereby being enabled to love and delight in Him fully.

God's design and pleasure

This segways into the part of God's design for sex; pleasure. Timothy Keller asserts in the Meaning of Marriage, "To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything." His point is that being fully known and fully loved is absolutely incredible. He calls it a consummate

experience. It is pleasant. Similarly, when we experience what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13, it will be the height of delight and joy. Being in God's felt presence, without the proverbial veil, and to be fully loved and received and to fully love in response is literally what we are made for. It is, without a doubt, the absolute height of human experience. Therefore, if sex is a sign that points us towards our union with Christ, it should be associated with pleasure. To this end, the Song of Solomon is a whole book of the Bible dedicated to the celebration of the delight ~~of the sexual~~ of sexual union.

At this point, I need to make an aside, especially for those who are not married yet. I'm not ~~talking about simply~~ talking simply about the physical pleasure of sex, although it is certainly in view and not detached from what I'm speaking about. I say this, because one of the more pervasive lies of our culture about sex is that ~~it always~~ it is always physically incredible and, if you're doing it "right" and (even more heinously) if you are a good match as a couple, it will be physically fantastic. The reality on the ground is that sex is not ~~often~~ often physically pleasant at first, particularly for women. Sex gets physically more pleasant, the more it is within its proper lane; a part of a larger set of realities pertaining to mutual self-giving commitment, affection, and right-desire. With this in mind, even if sex is painful at first, it can still be pleasant with the rest of the ~~pieces are in~~ pieces in place.

The next observation is this; the more pleasurable sex is, the more accurately it points to the consummation of our union with Christ. Consider the language of Scripture that points to the Church and Christ being and getting married, where the final union with Him is immediately after judgment, when He creates the new Heavens and the new Earth and we enjoy Him forever. There is the consistent language throughout the OT where God expresses His jealousy over His people up to and including the whole book of Hosea, which is about an unfaithful wife as a picture of His people with Him. Then Jesus arrives and John the Baptist refers to Him as the "bridegroom." (John 3:29). Jesus refers to Himself as the "bridegroom" in Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19, & Luke 5:34. Jesus gives parables that speak of a pending marriage (Matthew 25:1-13) and being invited to a wedding (Matthew 22:1-14). As stated earlier, Paul refers to the Church as the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5. Perhaps most potently is in Revelation 21:9, John has just finished describing ~~judgement~~ judgment and the creation of the new Heavens and the new Earth, then the angel comes to him and tells him that he is going to show him the bride of the lamb. He then proceeds to show him the new city that is populated with all of the people in the lamb's book of life. At the end of the book of Revelation, one chapter later in 22:17, John writes, "the Spirit and the Bride say, 'come.'" The point is that the consummation of this marriage is joining Jesus on the other side of marriage. The marriage that God gives us on this side of eternity is pointing to that and our consummation of marriage is sex. Since the thing sex is pointing to is the height of pleasure, ~~(the very thing we were made for,)~~ the more pleasant sex is the more ~~accurate of a~~ accurate a sign it is.

I want to be careful about something here. The pleasure of sex is not simply orgasms. It is true that sex is designed to be physiologically pleasurable. But the pleasure that I'm speaking about is more centrally the pleasure of knowing, being known, and the full and mutual self-giving in this context. I am not being crass to say that Heaven is not an orgasm, it ~~is height~~ is the height of knowing God and being known by Him and being fully embraced by Him forever. The truth is,

because of the fall, many people will not get to experience sex as being physically pleasant. This does not mean that they are necessarily robbed of the pleasure of sex, because there is still the mutual pursuit of vulnerability and acceptance that is delightful.

Consider this. There are two kinds of pain. The pain experienced through physiological injury. We get scrapes, cuts, broken bones, and burns and it hurts. But, there is another kind of pain. This is the pain of loss. This is the pain of losing a loved one, a hope that is dashed, deep disappointments, and things of this nature. Similarly, there are two kinds of pleasure. There is the pleasure of the senses; eating good food, smelling your favorite cologne or perfume, hearing your favorite song, seeing a sunset, and the sudden relief of back pain when your back is popped just right. There is another kind of pleasure. It is the pleasure of having (as opposed to losing). Having the approval and pride of your parents, having wonderful friends, having a loved pet, having a good job, and having a good laugh. Sex can engage both kinds of pleasures. As with pain, the capacity of the pleasures of having far surpasses the pleasures of the senses. The height of the pleasure of being both fully known and fully loved far surpasses the best orgasm. Sex is the act of being known.

God's design & goodness leading to guidelines

The pleasure of sex is a part of God's good design. It accurately points us to the joy of our pending union with Christ. In addition, it draws us to the rest of God's good design in sex. Having children is good and the pleasure of sex draws people together to create this goodness. It is good for those who have committed their lives to loving one another, to be further and continually knit together, spurred on to love one another better. It is good to experience pleasure together that points to us and Christ at the consummation of all things and to thereby be reminded of the goodness of knowing and being known and loving and being loved.

Herein lies the problem. The more pleasant sex is and the more we are drawn to it, the more likely we are to seek it out outside of the context that properly points to us and the Lord, which is a faithful covenant relationship. This is why the Song of Solomon says, on three occasions, not to awaken love before its time (Song of Solomon 2:7, 3:5, & 8:4). Ironically, we will chase down the pleasure that is supposed to point us to the joy of our union with Christ, at the expense of our relationship with Christ as Lord. We lose the very thing that our desire is pointing us to. That being said, for those who struggle with lust (desiring sex for pleasure alone, detached from the relational realities that it is designed to come with), which is the vast majority of us to varying degrees, we should understand that the desire for sex is not bad. Sex is a good thing and the union that it is itself pointing us to is the best thing. However, the very thing that makes sex good requires that it exist within the confines of God's design for it, marriage.

Consider each of the parts of God's design for sex and what happens when it is engaged outside of marriage. First, it should be noted that the nature of not being fully committed leaves open the door for a breakup. Now, think of having a child and then breaking up. There are only a few outcomes here. The first and most likely is that someone ends up single-parenting. Anyone who is doing this will tell you that it is straining at the oars. We simply were not made for this. It is very ~~very~~ difficult and for this reason, it is my opinion that the community of God should

rally to these folks to help them. But the point is that God is good and right to command that children be had within the confines of committed relationships. There can also be a sort of split custody situation or the child is given up for adoption. All of them are concessions to the ideal.

Now consider being knit together with someone and then breaking up. This is arguably in the top five worst things that can happen to a person. Again, Tim Keller says that being known and rejected is our greatest fear. The very thing that helps bind people together who already intend and have committed to being together, serves to crush the heart of the person who has sex prior to being committed.

What about the pleasure of sex detached from ~~commitment~~, childbearing, **committed union**, and **mutual commitment vulnerability**? ~~There are a few~~ **There are a few** realities here. The first, as I've already stated, is that it compromises the greater pleasure that sex points towards and that we were made for. The second tragedy is rooted in the first. Because sex is a sign that is designed, by nature, to point to something else, it is never actually satisfied. The result is that there is an endless pursuit for sexual pleasure that leaves people wanting. Because of the second design of sex, knitting people together, people who pursue this pleasure down to the dregs tend to leave a wake of relational destruction behind them. They are never satisfied and it destroys their relationships, which is ultimately not satisfying, both presently and forever.

God's design and purity

Now we get to the last purpose for sex in Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 7, we see that Paul is suggesting that one of the reasons each man should have a wife and each ~~women~~ **woman** a husband is because of or desire for sex. By having sex regularly, within the boundaries that God designs it, we are protected (to a degree) from having sex outside of that context and thereby harming ourselves. It is like recognizing that you have a tendency towards eating food that is harmful for yourself. When you realize this, you start being very intentional about keeping yourself full of good food. The fullness of the right thing will guard you from seeking to fill yourself with the wrong thing.

I said that it protects us to a degree, because having a regular and robust sex life will not fully guard you against sin. In addition, if someone in a marriage does sin sexually, we need to be careful to not place the responsibility of that sin on the shoulders of their spouse for not having enough sex with them. Although having sex regularly is helpful towards the goal of not sinning sexually, it is still our personal responsibility to deny ourselves in the pursuit of holiness, out of our affections for the Lord.