

SEXUALITY AND LOVE

LESSON 6: HOPE FUELS A CHRISTIAN'S VIEW OF SEXUALITY

Main Idea: The biblical understanding of hope is the life-shaping, joyous certainty that our future is experiencing the eternal love and glory of God in a new heaven and a new earth. The Christian's hope affects every area of life, including how sexuality is viewed.



SIGHTLINE: Acquire Your Target

We underestimate just how much what we believe about our future determines how we live now. What we believe about our future is the main determining factor of how we process, experience, and handle circumstances now. The hope of a future in heaven is core to the Christian life.

There is a lot of mystery surrounding heaven. But some of the most descriptive language we have about it comes from the final book of the Bible: Revelation. The book records a vision God gave of the end times using symbolic, apocalyptic language.

In the last two chapters of Revelation, it paints a picture of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1), which God will bring about at some point in the future. Here’s how the writer describes it in 21:2, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” This verse is describing the end of the world as we know it as a wedding celebration. Most often, when Scripture describes God’s relationship with His people, it uses the metaphor of a parent and children. God is our Father. The second most common metaphor used in Scripture to describe our relationship with God is of a husband and wife. The Church (those who are followers of Jesus Christ) are the bride and Jesus is the groom.

Could this be a reason why the Bible teaches sex is exclusively reserved for married couples? (See Ephesians 5:22–33.) Sex is the sealing of a covenant between a man and a woman—at last they are together as “one flesh.” If you are having sex with someone, in God’s eyes the encounter includes a spiritual connection along with the physical one (1 Corinthians 6:15–17). Sex seals the bond. So, sex with multiple partners is spiritual polygamy—your soul is linked to multiple people. That’s a messy, messy business. It is not healthy for you.

The word *sex* comes from the Latin, *secare*, which means *that which has been separated and longs to be reunited*. That’s what the believer’s hope of heaven is about. We’ve been separated from Eden, from the perfect world in which we were created, and we long to be there again. Heaven is the climax of the covenant between humankind and God.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:31–32, “‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” The sexual imagery of one flesh implies that there is something about the act of sex in marriage that is meant to teach us about heaven. Somehow sex on this earth offers a metaphor of what it will mean to finally be with God in heaven.

Paul writes to the young church in Corinth about sex, quoting two popular views of that day in chapters 6 and 7 of 1 Corinthians. Although the two views are very different from each other, they were prevalent, and the Corinthian Christians had to deal with them.



The first is addressed in 1 Corinthians 6:13: “‘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.” To paraphrase, this attitude says sex is just an appetite. When you need food, you eat. When you need sex, you have it. Part of this view arises out of the Greek understanding that the material, physical world was temporary and unimportant. Therefore, according to this view, it’s not what you do with your body; it’s what you do with your soul that really matters spiritually.

The second, very different, view Paul quoted is in 1 Corinthians 7:1, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’” This view seems almost opposite of the first, except that it also arises out of the Greek understanding of the physical world and body as being bad. This view can be paraphrased to say, “Sex is dirty and defiling. Though it might be necessary for procreation, in general, a holy person should abstain from it.”

To summarize, these were the two views:

1. Sex is just an appetite; it’s perfectly natural to have sex when you need and want it.
2. Sex is dirty and defiling. You should stay away from it at all costs if you want to lead a holy life.

Although Paul wrote to Corinth thousands of years ago, in a whole different culture and time, the two perspectives he identified are still widespread today. In fact, they may actually be the two most prevalent views of sexuality humans have.

Paul says both are absolutely, completely wrong. Instead, in 1 Corinthians 6:18 Paul commanded believers, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” The English words *sexual immorality* are rather vague in meaning, but the Greek term Paul uses in the text is not. He says, “Flee *porneia*.” Although we get our word *pornography* from *porneia*, Paul is not talking about pornography. *Porneia* meant to have sex with somebody to whom you weren’t married. Paul had a perfectly good word he could have used if he had been referring to adultery (to be married and have sex with someone you’re not married to), but he doesn’t use the word for adultery either. He uses the word that means any kind of sex outside of marriage, whether you are married or not.



Notice Paul didn't just say, "It would be good for you to refrain from sex outside of marriage." He said, "Flee," have nothing to do with it! Have nothing to do with any kind of sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage.

Now, this may sound on the surface like Paul is promoting the view that sex is dirty and defiling. But his approach is neither that sex is just an appetite nor that it is dirty. It's something better than both. Paul presents an approach to sexuality, much higher than any other view of sexuality we know.

This is astounding. This is not the traditional understanding of sex is that *sex is just for creating the perfect little model family*. Nor is it the modern understanding that says, *unless you have sex and romance, you can't possibly be fulfilled*. Paul says Christians have a higher view of sexuality, yet at the same time are freer to be sexually healthier and happier than those who espouse unbiblical views.

How can this be? The answer is in what we hope for in our future. We view sex not just in terms of what we experience on a day-to-day basis, but what we hope to experience in the end. As followers of Jesus, we are offered a life-shaping, joyous certainty in our future with God. That revolutionizes our sexuality in two important ways.

First, we don't have to strive to build a family for ourselves because we have been given a place in the family of God. Our only hope of living on past death is not exclusively tied to producing offspring. The Christian approach to sex and marriage is based on lived experience of the fellowship and love of other believers (brothers and sisters) in Jesus as well as the hope of perfect, heavenly fellowship with this family.

It's hard for us to understand, as individualistic people who live in an individualistic society, how in traditional societies, especially ancient ones, there was no such thing as individual honor, success, or achievement. There was only family honor, success, or achievement. The family was everything. Therefore, the expectation for men and women was to be married and have children, or, in the eyes of society, you were no one of significance. In particular, there were very few single adult women besides slaves and prostitutes. Christianity was the first religion, philosophy, and thought system to affirm chosen, long-term singleness for adults as a perfectly good, even desirable, way to be. Paul lifts marriage as a sacred and holy thing, and at the same says that contented singleness is a "gift from God" (1 Corinthians 7:7). Those who are single are better able to give "undivided devotion to the Lord" (verse 35), being free from things involving one's spouse.



Now notice what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:29: “This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.”

Paul explains what he means: You shouldn’t mourn too much when you mourn. You shouldn’t rejoice too much when you rejoice. You shouldn’t put all your emotional eggs—your hope for ultimate meaning and joy—in your earthly marriage. Why not? 1 Corinthians 7:31 says, “For the present form of this world is passing away.” As great as marriage is, it’s temporary. This present world is passing away. Now, many people believe Paul is just wrong in his belief that time is short, pointing out that although he thought Jesus would come back during his lifetime, it didn’t happen. Therefore, he must be mistaken about the world soon passing away.

However, Paul doesn’t actually say this world will soon pass away. He says it *is passing* away, using the present progressive tense. Paul understood that in His first coming two thousand years ago, Jesus inaugurated the new age of the Spirit, yet the old age of sin and death also continues. Today, we live in the overlap of the two ages. Through the Spirit we have a foretaste of our future love and grace. The taste of that future now radically frees us from the things of this world, which are in the process of passing away.

Jesus made a radical statement in Mark 10:29–30:

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”

If you belong to Jesus, you’re radically free to have a family or not to have a family, to have children or not to have children, to be married or not to be married. It’s your choice, because even though we have a foretaste of the future through human families, we’re already a part of God’s ultimate family, the church community of brothers and sisters.

To summarize, in this present-day overlap of the ages, both singleness and matrimony testify to hope in God’s future renewed world, whereas traditional, conservative society always makes an idol out of the family. Our Christian hope undercuts that idolatry, while still honoring the family.



The second way our view of sexuality is revolutionized is by our hope in Jesus as the ultimate lover. This is where Paul's view is particularly shocking to modern society. At the same time Paul says, "Traditional family—take it or leave it," he also says, "Sexual fulfillment—take it or leave it." This is not something people today readily accept. Although we live in a radically different society than that of ancient times, what Paul is saying is just as revolutionary now as then, maybe more so. People commonly believe that to deny yourself sex is to deny who you are.

Ernest Becker was a philosopher and anthropologist who won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*. In it, he argues that our secular, Western society is the first in world history to have a widespread belief that there is no ultimate future. Many people today hold the belief that when you die, you go to extinction. Your personal consciousness is temporary, and when you die, it's gone. Ernest Becker says there's never been a society that had such a deep belief in the insignificance of human life. As a result, he says, ours is also the first society to put so much emphasis on romance and finding your one true love.

Here is why his reason is fascinating and right: Becker says even secular people need to know their lives matter in the grand scheme of things. We still want to merge ourselves with some higher meaning. But if we no longer have God or the promise of existence after death, how do we do this?

One of the first solutions the modern person comes up with is romantic love, Becker says.

The self-glorification that human beings need in our innermost being, we now look not to God; we look for it in the love partner. What is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? We want to be rid of our faults. We want to be rid of our feelings of nothingness. We want to be justified. We want to know our existence has not been in vain. We want redemption. Nothing less.¹

So, it makes sense that today's society says it's impossible to be fulfilled without sex, romance, and love. This message is seen throughout pop culture. In contrast, the Bible says followers of Jesus already have the ultimate fulfillment they need because they experience His love and hold fast to all His promises.

One time Jesus was talking to a woman at a well and told her, "I have living water. I have water that, if you drink it, you'll never thirst again" [paraphrased]. In response, she says, "Sir, let me have that water." And Jesus says to her, "Go

¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1973), 299.



get your husband.” At the woman’s admission that she had no husband, Jesus spoke truth to her: “You’ve had five husbands, and the guy you’re living with right now isn’t.” It’s an interesting conversation. Why, when she asked for living water, did He turn the subject onto her romantic life? When she said, “I want the water of life,” why did He start talking about her sex life and about how she’d always centered her life around men?

Jesus is saying, “You’ve been looking for the water of life in sexual love and romance. Unless you let me become your one true love, you’ll never find what you’re looking for. Without me as your true love, your attitude toward romance and marriage will be utterly distorted.”

Unless Christ is the true love of a person, they will either be desperate for romance, putting all their deepest hopes into finding their *soul mate* and then smothering that person under impossible expectations, or they will become cynical, avoiding love and marriage out of fear, unable to enjoy them.





CROSSHAIR: Focus on Your Target

What does a wedding lead up to? Eating cake and throwing rice aren't the pinnacles. The newly pronounced husband and wife have stood before God and witnesses and have spoken vows to join their souls and lives together, and now they are going off to seal their marriage by joining their bodies together. Sexual intercourse is the physical symbol of the marriage union.

By the way, that's why ongoing, frequent sex between a husband and wife is such an important thing in the Bible. Husbands, when you want to renew your commitment to your wife, you take her by the hand and lead her to the bedroom to gaze lovingly at . . . the framed marriage license on the wall? No! It is to have sex. Every time you have sex, it serves as a physical reminder of the spiritual commitment you have entered.

The section above discussed how Paul says human sexuality is a dim reflection of what it will be like to fall into the arms of the Lord on the final day. He's the lover we need. Even the foretaste of that future—though we only have a little bit of it by faith—gives enough sense of His love for you to radically free you by putting sex and love in their proper place in your life. If human sexual love is just a dim hint of heavenly bliss, what must it be like to finally be with the Spouse our hearts most deeply long for?

Do you see why the Christian understanding of sex as intended only for marriage is not just narrow-mindedness? It's not just prudery. Our sexuality reflects our relationship with God, and you cannot have intimacy with God without losing your independence. Get this: Even God couldn't have intimacy with us without giving up His independence. God could not join His Spirit with ours, entering into intimacy with us, unless He lost His independence. He did that by become human, in Jesus. He became weak. He became vulnerable. And He died for us on the cross.

If even God did not enter into intimacy with us without giving up His independence, how dare we say to another person, "I want to have sex with you, but I don't want to lose my independence—I don't want to marry you. I want to keep my options open." To do so is to sin against this amazing gift, the symbol of God's loving commitment to us.



Jesus Christ says, “Make me your one true love, and everything will be all right.” Are you single and want to be married? Fine, but don’t get married out of social obligation, and don’t get married because you want personal fulfillment. Find somebody you want to go on a journey with—someone who understands that life is a spiritual journey, someone who is also one in spirit with the Lord.

If you’re happily married, you need Jesus as your one true lover, or you’ll make marriage an idol and you’ll become spiritually dependent on the person you’re married to. Are you unhappily married? You also need Jesus as your one true lover, or you will be tempted to let the voice of despondency rule your life.

To every believer, no matter their marital status, Jesus says, “Make me your one true love. Come to me.” On the cross, He got down on one knee and proposed to us. If we will say “yes” to Him, heaven will be the wedding we so long for. We can put up with some trouble now because we have hope in what’s coming then.





BULLSEYE: Zero in on Your Target

1. If the church is described as a bride, could this be a reason why sex in the Bible is exclusively reserved for married couples? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree that the phrase “one flesh” is sexual imagery that is meant to teach us about heaven? Why or why not?
3. Describe in your own words Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 6:13, “Food is meant for the stomach and stomach for food.”
4. Which of the two views of sex did you most resonate with—just an appetite or dirty and defiled?
5. At the well, why did Jesus talk about the woman’s romantic life when she asked for living water?
6. Describe in your own words how a wedding and marriage are a foretaste of heaven.

- Take some time to listen to the Lord about what you just studied. How did this study help deepen your love for God?

- As a result of your deepened love for God, how can you practically demonstrate the thought you experienced to your family and to others around you?





NEXT STEP

If you are single, go over them with a trusted mentor who can give you feedback and hold you accountable.

- Courage:** Write down a thought from this study that you experienced this week.

- Strength:** Write down your struggles and victories when it comes to sex in your relationship. Talk with your wife about your discovery. What did you learn?

- Endurance:** Talk with two or three men about your struggles and victories when it comes to sex. What did you learn from them?

USING MY *FIREBIBLE*

Read the *FireBible* article “Standards of Sexual Morality” and answer the following:

- What does it mean to be sexually pure before and after meeting your future spouse?
- What is the warning for those who commit sexual sins?
- Which type of sexual relation does the Bible bless?
- What two things does sexual activity represent?
- What does God define as sexual sins?
- Describe sexual immorality, sensuality, taking advantage of someone.

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