

## Section 3: God's Good Safeguards For Marriage (Part Three)

### Lesson 8: Maintaining the Marriage Bed

#### Introduction

*“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.” (Ephesians 5:3)*

There is no denying it: we live in a sexually broken world. But let's get something straight right from the start of this uncomfortable but important chapter: *The thrice holy God is the creator of sex.* Sex and sexuality are not the Devil's invention, nor are they the Devil's property. These things are part of the “good” creation of God from the very beginning, (Gen. 1:31). To legitimize this point, I would ask you to consider a few basic biblical observations: **(1)** By God's design the male and female body were physiologically made to intimately unite as one. **(2)** By God's design, humanity cannot continue existing without the act of sex. In our Lord's infinite wisdom, it is through the sexual relationship that offspring come forth. **(3)** Even if sin had never entered the world, sex would still have been a part of human life by God's design. How on earth was Adam supposed to fulfill the mandate to “*be fruitful and multiply*” without engaging in sex (Gen. 1:28)? **(4)** Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, while the act of sex was **not involved** in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the act of sex **was involved** in every generation of the genealogy that finally culminated in his glorious incarnation. This is the literal meaning of the Greek word “ἐγέννησεν” or “*fathered*” which is repeated over and over in the opening verses of Matthew's gospel.

The point I am making is this: It is unmistakably clear that we live in a sexually broken world. We see the evidence of this all around us everyday. And if we are honest, we also see the evidence of it in our own hearts and personal histories. But we need to understand that the problem is not *sex* or *sexuality* as things in themselves. The problem is that, apart from the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, our sinful nature continually corrupts and deforms the goodness of our God-given sexuality. This has been true of all mankind from the very moment that sin entered the world. In Genesis 2, the very last verse of Scripture that we read *before the account of the fall* says this: “*And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed,*” (Gen. 2:25). Then, in stark contrast, the very first verse that we read *after Adam and Eve fell into sin* is this: “*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths,*” (Gen. 3:7). Before the fall, the husband and wife were able to enjoy a shameless intimacy with one another, uncorrupted by lewd desire, selfish lust, or insecurity. But since the moment sin entered the world, the good gifts of sex and sexuality have been one of the great centers of human rebellion against the Lord our Maker, (Rom. 1:24).

For this reason, the restoration of our sexuality as Christians is a critical part of our sanctification. Not only do we need the blood of Christ to cleanse us from the guilt of all our sexual depravities. We also need the Spirit of Christ to renew our minds in the truth of God's Word. Moreover, we need the Spirit to evict evil lusts from our hearts, to strengthen us to fight against our temptations, and to enable us to learn how to express our God-given sexuality in holiness and without shame. As has been true of most aspects of this study, this sort of spiritual restoration applies far more broadly than merely to the subject of marriage alone. But our focus will primarily be centered on the application of these things to the marital union between husband and wife—specifically, to maintaining the marriage bed. Our aim is discover from God's Word how we might fulfill the words of Hebrews 13:4 within the context of our own marriages:

*“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”*

#### What Is Sex Meant To Be According To God?

*“Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love,” (Proverbs 5:18-19).*

It is clear from the verses above, as well as many others which could be noted, that God intends for sex to be a blessing to us. By God's design, sex is meant to be the culminating expression of the distinct spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy that is shared between a husband and his wife. Sex is the climactic expression of a husband and wife's love for one another, their trust in each other, their enjoyment of each other, and their exclusive devotion to each other. Some people argue that the Bible never explicitly says that sex should only happen within marriage. Instead, they seek to broaden the context in which sexual interaction is appropriate. But those who argue for such a position are not paying very close attention.

The first verse of the Bible that describes marriage makes it crystal clear that the sexual union is the consummating act which symbolically depicts the permanent binding of one man and one woman into a life-long marital union before God: "*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh,*" (Gen. 2:24). The sequence of this verse is as follows: A person is raised by their (married) parents, someday given in marriage to their spouse—to whom they shall "*hold fast*" all their life—and only then shall they "*become one flesh*" with that other person—which is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. You do not need to be a Hebrew scholar to understand the clear intention of God that stands behind these words.

Moreover, the truth that sex is only meant to occur within the bounds of marriage is also clear by the fact that, according to God's design, sex has both the *potential* and *intention* of yielding permanent consequences—that is, *producing children*. If we know that it is God's will for children to be raised under the nurture of their mother and father within the context of marriage, then we can also know that *the act of sex*, by which children are brought forth, should *only* occur within the context of marital union.

Thus, the biblical view is that sex is the joyful, pleasurable, and fruitful climax of the unique intimacy enjoyed between a husband and his wife. However, this is not the view of sex that is held by the world. Nor is it likely the view of sex which has had the greatest influence on our own hearts and practice. Instead, we have all been raised in a world gone astray—a world where God's design has been ridiculed, rejected, and replaced by all manner of debauchery.

## **What Is Sex Meant To Be According To the World?**

It is not our purpose here to fully diagnose and describe all of the ways that the world misrepresents sex and sexuality. However, it will be helpful for us to at least take a moment to consider the general environment in which our own thoughts, assumptions, and practices about sex have been formed. Like it or not, none of us have fully escaped the influences of the world in this category. Even in the best cases, the world's distortions have had some voice in setting our own expectations and desires with respect to sex.

In the hands of men, God's design for sex has been utterly corrupted. What was originally meant for good has been distorted and abused to such a great extent that there is not a single facet of society in which sexual deviancy has not left its indelible mark. Years ago, if a person desired to obtain explicit materials, they had to leave their home, travel to a shady corridor of town, physically enter a store, look another person in the eye at the checkout, and hope no one recognized their car in the parking lot. Now, in our present time, the advent of the internet has allowed sinful men and women to indulge their vile fantasies without ever leaving the home. We carry a portal in our pocket which, at any moment, can fetch whatever our eyes want to see. Access to explicit materials has never been easier, nor has its consumption ever been more prevalent. In fact, the average age at which a young person first views explicit material has dropped to 11 years old—and *some people would argue that the real average is even younger*. Think about what this means. This means that for large swathes of society—including many of our preteens—the pornographic industry is serving as their educator and instructor concerning sex and sexuality. Dear ones, the pornography industry doesn't just *exist*, it has claimed dominion over the private lives of billions of men and women throughout the world. It has made slaves of some for the *production* of explicit material, and slaves of others for its *consumption*. It is no exaggeration to say that pornography's crude distortions of sexuality have literally reshaped the contours of what men

and women even think sex is, or what it should be like. Stop for a moment and imagine how damaging this is (and has been) to the minds, hearts, and marriages of millions upon millions of people.

But I don't want to overstate the case by only pointing to the extremes of pornography. It is not as if the pornography industry is the *only* way in which sex and sexuality are distorted in our world. Even if you have successfully avoided the vile filth of the pornographic, you have still been surrounded by sexually-distorted and sexually-charged material all the time. In our present day, children's books with the intention of promoting homosexuality and transgenderism now openly line the shelves of bookstores and libraries. The prevailing values and pressures of society train our young women from their earliest days to view their bodies as objects to be advertised and lusted after. Likewise, young men are trained to evaluate the value of women based on their physical features, and to view them as *playthings* to be used for self-gratification. Even in settings which are not explicitly pornographic, the storylines of sitcoms, the lyrics of music, the locker-room conversations of teens, and the cover of every magazine at the grocery store are all seeking to impress upon us a certain view of men, of women, and of the meaning of our sexuality.

Sadly, the world's numerous distortions of sex and sexuality have become *the accepted definitions* of sex and sexuality in the minds of many—even many within the church. In the eyes of the world sex is:

**Casual** | *It has nothing to do with long-term commitments or deep relational bonds. It is just about pleasure.*

**Inconsequential** | *The world pays no attention to the effects caused to others (or self) by sinful sexual behavior (i.e. abortion, divorce, STDs, bodily harm, depression, shame, guilt, confusion, violence, etc.). It sees no correlation between deviant sexual practices and broken lives.*

**Merely Physical** | *It isn't really about expressing love, tenderness, or care. It is simply about gratifying bodily passions and cravings.*

**Fictional** | *It believes the exaggerated sexual expressions displayed in movies and pornography are examples of normative and healthy sexuality.*

**Selfish/Consumeristic** | *It views other people as objects to be used (and abused) for personal satisfaction (whether virtually or physically).*

Now, you and I may reject all of these things outright—and *we absolutely should!* But there is no escaping the fact that this *is* the world we have all grown up in. Moreover, we have to square with the fact that, even in the best cases, far too much of the world's definitions of sexuality have seeped into our own ideas, expectations, and practices. This is why we must turn again to the Word of God where the holy will of our Father in heaven is set forth for the good of our bodies, souls, and marriages.

## Let the Marriage Bed Be Undefiled

*“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous,”*  
(Heb. 13:4).

It is God's express will that *“marriage be held in honor among all.”* That phrase is pregnant with meaning. In general, it teaches us that, according to God, *marriage is a very good thing*. Therefore, we should not participate with those in the world who denigrate its validity and desirability. As often as we can, we should speak positively to our children and to others of the gift and blessing of a godly, Christ-centered marriage. But the phrase also has a more specific focus. For *“marriage [to] be held in honor”* means that we are to show proper integrity to our own spouse and to the spouses of others by never violating boundaries which ought not to be crossed, (I Thess. 4:6). In fact, the verse goes on to identify a very particular way in which we *“hold marriage in honor.”* The text says, *“and let the marriage bed be undefiled”*—that is, let the marriage bed be kept pure from all forms of corruption. Broadly speaking, there are two ways that the marriage bed can become defiled: (1) *By going outside of the marriage bed with another*, or (2) *By what we bring with us into the marriage bed*. We spent time in a previous section discussing the kinds of healthy boundaries that will strengthen us against the sin of *“adultery.”* For that reason I won't belabor the point again here. Instead, I want to focus our attention on the second, more subtle, and more common way that the marriage bed becomes *“defiled.”*

The reason we took time to consider a snapshot of the world's distortions of sexuality is because the single most prevalent assault on "*the marriage bed*" is the worldly distortions that we bring with us into it. Many people—even godly people—enter into marriage with almost no instruction from God's Word on sex and sexuality. Instead, they typically enter marriage in one of two ways:

- (1) *Their definitions, ideas, and expectations of sexuality have all been formed by the pornographic industry and/or the wiles of the wayward culture.*
- (2) *In overreaction to the world's distortions, they have gone to the other extreme in which sex becomes an entirely taboo subject that feels altogether dirty and unholy in their minds. They feel that any sort of erotic expression—even within marriage—is inherently sinful.*

We need to understand that *both of these views are misrepresentations and distortions of God's good and holy will.* Moreover, *both of them—not just worldly distortions—lead to significant challenges in the marriage.* Let's consider the impact of each one in turn.

### **(1) Bringing Worldly, Lewd, and Lustful Notions of Sexuality Into the Marriage Bed**

In many cases—and often without consciously realizing it at first—the husband or wife bring worldly distortions of sex and sexuality into the marriage bed. That is to say, because their notions of sexuality have been informed and shaped by the corruptions of the world, rather than the Word of God, they bring expectations, desires, and practices into the marriage bed that are unhealthy, unholy, and unsettling to the peace and purity of the marriage. When this happens, it brings with it many sorrowful effects. In some cases, the desire to please their spouse causes the one to embrace the impure practices of the other—thus multiplying sin. In other cases, the impure desires of the one can make the other spouse feel deeply uncomfortable, as if they are not desired just as they are, or even pressured to engage in things which violate their conscience (and potentially even mistreat their body).

Wherever this has happened, earnest repentance needs to take place. If this has been true of your marriage, you need to confess your sin to God and apologize to your spouse for asking them to mimic and participate in the ungodly expressions of sexuality so prevalent in the world. You need to confess that you have approached "*the marriage bed*" in ways that have caused it to be "*defiled*" by the world's distortions and by the selfishness of your own heart. These sorts of violations can be true of *either gender*, but they are much more commonly the failures of husbands toward their wives. Brothers, we must take seriously the call to be holy and "*undefiled*" not only in the public spaces of our lives, but also in the privacy of "*the marriage bed.*" Yes, even there we are called to love our wives as Christ loves the church—and Christ would never *violate, abuse, or mistreat* his precious bride.

However, this is not the only way in which the world's influence can corrupt the sexual union between a husband and a wife. Just as much as we can fail by embracing the world's corruptions, we can also fail by allowing the world's corruptions to prevent us from joyfully embracing what God has made for our good and his glory.

### **(2) Viewing Sexual Expression As Inherently Dirty & Unholy—Even Within the Context Marriage**

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the propensity for some people to enter marriage with a view that any forms of passionate sexuality are, more or less, sinful and wrong. This sort of view is typically formed in the same way that other excessively restrictive theological views are formed: *By an overreaction to an error.* However, we need understand that an overreaction to an error is not the removal of error. It is simply the trading of one form of error for another. Our goal as Christians is not to be *as unlike sinners as we can.* Our goal is to be *as much like Christ as we can.* And that means the answer to the abuse of something is not a total avoidance of it, but rather to engage in it in the right ways—that is, those ways which agree with the teaching of God's Word. Just because the world has distorted and corrupted sex does not mean that sex and sexuality are inherently bad things. When sex and sexuality are expressed in the right context (marriage) and with the right practices

(holy and pure interactions), then they are a beautiful part of God's blessing. We must understand that our sexuality is not sinful when it is expressed according to God's good and holy will.

Now, the reason this is so important to state is because of the *effect* that this sort of overreaction has on the relational intimacy of a marriage. When a spouse is reluctant to engage in physical intimacy, or seems disinterested, pensive, or uncomfortable during that interaction, *it screams rejection to the other person*. It makes the other person feel undesired and unsatisfying. This is because part of God's design for the sexual union between a husband and a wife is that through this deepest form of intimacy, each person says with their body and their heart that they are fully and joyfully giving themselves to the other. Thus, when reluctance and rejection enter this part of the marital union, deep emotional hurt, insecurity, and tension tend to follow. Another way to put this is that *a breakdown in the bedroom of the marriage always ends up showing its face in the living room as well*. Our daily life in marriage and our sexual life in marriage are not separate silos. They are an interconnected web meant to produce unity, joy, trust, intimacy, delight, and peace with one another. This is why a healthy view of sexuality, rather than an avoidance of it, is so important for us to pursue.

Similar to what was stated above, this particular form of struggle can be true of *either gender*, but it is most typically true of wives. Ladies, it is important that you understand that healthy expressions of sexuality within the context of marriage are not taboo. They are not dirty or unholy. When you and your husband's sexuality are expressed in line with God's Word, they are part of God's good design for the health and flourishing of your marriage. And this leads us to I Corinthians 7:3-5 where the Apostle Paul lays down several important statements about what healthy sexuality in marriage should look like.

## Rules For Healthy Sexuality In Marriage

<sup>3</sup> *The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control," (I Corinthians 7:3-5).*

**W**e have spent a lot of time talking about various ways of *getting sexuality wrong* within the marriage—and that is because this is a subject which is so deeply fraught with distortions and confusion. However, it is now time for us to consider the Bible's positive description of what godly sexuality looks like. Let us consider five essential lessons which are all taken from the passage quoted above:

### 1. A Healthy Sex Life Is an *Exhortation* Not a *Suggestion*. (I Cor. 7:3)

*"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband."*

When the Scriptures use the word "*should*", they are not giving us a *suggestion* but a *command*. They are not offering us advice, but outlining God's express will. And as much as it may make us blush, the command given here is that "*the husband*" and "*wife*" "*should give*" each other their "*conjugal rights*". That is, God commands husbands and wives to express the love and intimacy of their marital union through a healthy sexual relationship. Barring unique circumstances, letting the marriage bed grow cold is not just unwise, it is disobedient to God's Word. It is God's will that a husband and his wife maintain healthy sexual intimacy.

### 2. A Healthy Sex Life Is About *Giving* Not *Taking*. (I Cor. 7:3-4)

*"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband."*

It is not only important that we recognize God's command in this verse, but also that we notice *how that command is written*. It does not say, *'therefore the husband or wife can take or demand their conjugal rights from the other.'* It says that both the husband and wife "*should*" each "*give*" each other their "*conjugal rights*." That is, they should freely "*give*" themselves to one another in a joyful

intimacy that seeks to serve and bless the other. The world views sex from a deeply selfish place. It reduces people to little more than objects to be used for selfish pleasure. But according to God's Word, the Christian is called to an entirely different approach. Rather than viewing sex as *taking*, or *satisfying oneself*, we are called to view the sexual relationship primarily as *giving* and *aiming to bless our spouse*. The specific ways in which this difference might be expressed are inappropriate to be written. But it should be said that when selflessness, thoughtfulness, care, and devotion to the blessing of the other begin to define the sexual relationship, the joy and delight of that union will be greatly multiplied. Indeed, it will reach heights of ecstasy which the world's pitiful distortions of sexuality could never know.

Paul expands this point even further when he says in I Corinthians 7:4:

*“For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”*

This, of course, does not mean that you are free to use your spouse's body however you will. As we discussed above, any worldly and unnatural sexual expressions, including those things which would in any way harm or disrespect your spouse, are strictly forbidden because they *“defile the marriage bed.”* Moreover, they fail even the simple Christian test of *“loving your neighbor as yourself.”* But this verse *does teach* that part of our covenant in marriage means that we have given our body to our spouse such that it is no longer ours alone, but also theirs. That means that we cannot be selfish with our bodies in marriage, but rather we must selflessly endeavor to use our bodies to serve and honor the one to whom we have pledged our love.

### **3. Do Not Deprive One Another. (I Cor. 7:5a)**

*“Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer...”*

In addition to God's blushful command that husbands and wives *“should” maintain a healthy sexual union*, is the further clarification that they *should be intimate together with regularity*. In fact, the command is stated negatively—that is, it tells us what we are *not* permitted to do. And what we are *not* permitted to do is *“deprive one another...” of sexual intimacy*. The only exception is when both parties *“agree”*—perhaps to focus on *“prayer”*—but even then, exceptions should only be *“for a limited time.”*

This command carries two very simple, but also very important applications:

- (1) *“Do not deprive one another...”* means that the expectation within healthy, God-honoring Christian marriages is that husbands and wives *“give”* their *“bodies”* to one another in sexual union *frequently*. No specific rhythm is set, but the general notion is crystal clear. Extended gaps between sexual intimacy should be avoided. There are many reasons for this, but a very specific reason is given in the second half of v5 and we will touch on it momentarily. However, first let us consider a second important application arising from the command *“not to deprive one another.”*
- (2) *“Do not deprive one another...”* also means that withholding sexual intercourse from your spouse as a means of *punishment, manipulation, or retaliation* is prohibited by Scripture. Sex within marriage is never meant to be used selfishly, and that includes using your spouse's desire for intimacy against them by refusing to share yourself with them. While it is never appropriate for a spouse to force or demand sexual intercourse from the other, neither is it appropriate for a spouse to withhold sexual intercourse for selfish reasons. The focus simply needs to be off of self, and onto loving our spouse.

### **4. A Healthy Sex Life In Marriage Is Part of How God Guards Us From Satan's Schemes. ( I Cor. 7:5b)**

*“...but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”*

As Psalm 103:14 reminds us, *“[God] knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”* God never approves of sin. Nor does God ever say that it is okay that we sinned. His holiness demands perfection and his Messiah calls us to put every single one the wicked deeds of the body to death. Even still, the God of all mercy knows that even his strongest children are weak. He knows

that we are susceptible to temptations of every variety—and that certainly includes temptations to sexual sins. Thus one of the reasons that God *commends* marriage (Heb 13:4) and *commands* husbands and wives to be frequently intimate with one another is “so that Satan may not tempt [us] because or [our] lack of self-control.”

To use a metaphor: *Stealing bread is always sinful. But a starving person is much more inclined to lay their hands on the loaf than a person who is well fed.* In the same way, God kindly uses the satisfaction, delight, and joy that we are meant to experience with our spouse to guard us against the allure of the false satisfactions and sinful delights that are peddled all around us in the world. Frequent, joyful, loving, and selfless intimacy with your spouse not only strengthens the bond of love between you, but also builds thick and strong walls of defense around your home that help to keep out the deceitful siren calls of the world.

## Conclusion

**A**s I have contemplated how best to conclude this portion of our study, I have determined that this section should end with a warning of judgment. Why? Because so often in the Scriptures this is exactly how God concludes his teaching about sexual purity. We have already seen this together in Hebrews 13:4, and we could easily see the same pattern in many other similar passages throughout the Bible. It is clear that God wants us to stand in fear when it comes to sexual sin. He wants us to be alert, to be vigilant, and to be ready to “*flee from sexuality immorality*” whenever its beguiling wiles attempt to lay its hooks into our heart, (I Cor. 6:18, see also 6:9-11).

It is true that there is grace for all our sexual guilt in the bleeding wounds of Jesus Christ. And O how we should praise God for this gospel mercy! Even the most sexually defiled person in the world can stand spotlessly righteous before the throne of grace through the substitutionary merits of Jesus Christ in their place, (II Pet. 2:7). But it is also true that God is the “*avenger*” of the sexually immoral, and that “*whoever disregards*” God’s commandments concerning holy sexuality “*disregards God*” himself. Therefore, let these timeless words from I Thessalonians 4:1-8 be a sobering echo in our hearts that give us both holy fear and healthy defense as we zealously pursue sexual purity in all of life, and especially within our own “*marriage bed*.”

*“<sup>1</sup>Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup>For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup>that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup>not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup>that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup>For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. <sup>8</sup>Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”*

### ***I Thessalonians 4:1-8***