



# SEX & THE CITY (PART 2) - DIRECTING DESIRE

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT

**Sunday 3 September 2023**

Thanks for your feedback, directly and via our Pastors. One reason why I put the notes up is so you can review exactly what I said - and perhaps what I didn't say - and I can respond to your thoughts or questions.

Barna research from a couple of years ago showed 3 of the top 6 reasons why teens and 20-somethings are leaving the church in America are:

1. Church teaching on sexuality is often simplistic and judgmental.
2. Christianity is shallow.
3. Churches are overprotective.

It's our avoidance or over-simplifications that damage more. This is a conversation that's already happening in society and it has to be one we have in the church too - and it's no quick conversation.

They don't teach you this at bible college, but as a Senior Pastor you live between pats on the back and ultimatums of leaving. It doesn't really matter the topic, everyone wants me to say it just right. But it is simply impossible to say it right for everyone in the room and sometimes it is more beneficial to listen in order to learn something you don't know rather than listen for something you already know and want the speaker to affirm.

There's a reel on Instagram of two owners and their dog in a carpark:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S73ca-6pcR4>

The owners run in opposite directions, and the dog is so conflicted about which one to run to he just spins in circles... Sometimes I feel like the dog! In a church like ours, people can have strong opinions that run in opposite directions to each other. For me, as the spinning Senior Pastor in the middle, I have to keep remembering my job is not to run to the people who will most give me a pat on the back and a tummy rub – but to help us hold together in our diversity at GRLC.

So let me say it again: we have to do something harder than being right. We have to hold grace and truth together. Jesus was full of grace and full of truth. Clarity is important, as is kindness. We prioritise both; not pit one against the other.

I think it's just helpful for me to keep affirming that we hold the Bible as our final authority for life and faith; that we want to be faithful and thoughtful in our interpretation of scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit and the weight of historical orthodox understanding of all the essential claims of the faith – not making convenient interpretations and omissions. (Personally, I find many things in the Bible very hard to understand and accept, but I can't delete the bits I've not yet fully comprehended.) I neither can nor want to be theologically ambiguous about the ubiquity of sin and its consequences both now and eternally... And the way of rescue and new life through faith in Jesus Christ alone, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. These are primary issues. Lose these, and all we have is therapeutic self-help or moralistic deism – Opra and Chopra!

Likewise, weighing up all the views, I think a faithful handling of scripture leads to an affirmation of the Bible's vision of human sexuality – that sexual intimacy is between man and woman in a permanent marriage covenant as the biblical ideal for people who choose a life of marriage. And marriage is one ideal, always imperfectly applied, and no more an ideal than singleness which comes up later in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. These are important secondary issues but not the basis of salvation, and we must distinguish between what is primary to the Gospel and what is secondary and disputable.

Some want me to say that sexual immorality in all its variants, and particularly homosexuality, is more offensive and condemned by God than other sins. (If you want to cite the Genesis 19 story of Sodom, that's fine so long as you also cite the words of Jesus in Matthew 10 and 11 about who it will be more bearable for on the day of judgment...) I can't put sin on an arbitrary scale of most offensive to least offensive to God and be faithful to the Gospel, nor the words of Jesus who puts the thought of adultery as equal to adultery, or Paul's warnings in diverse lists of behaviours that reveal the contrast between new life in Christ and still living under the sway of sin. Romans 3:23 says, "*ALL have sinned and fall short...*" God's not sending us to hell. He wants to rescue us from the Hell we are already headed for. We are all on the same Titanic-catastrophe, sinking, in need of rescue – all can reject that rescue or accept it along with the life-changing implications that come with a fresh start. We have to be consistent. I also hear Jesus' words loudly in Matthew 7 about

judging the sinful speck in someone else's eye and missing the sinful plank in our own. We must address our planks first.

I also believe a faithful handling of scripture leads to the binary design of biological sex as the normative. Apart from a small possibility of intersex, we are created male and female in every chromosomal fibre of our being. But I do realise that gender is not just about x and y chromosomes, and I do realise that gender norms in culture often create unhelpful stereotypes of how a male and a female should act, and this alienates boys who like stereotypically girl stuff and vice versa. I think that when we have hard cultural lines around what toys or colours or careers boys and girls must like and do, we actually push people into places of greater confusion around their sense of embodiment and identity.

I think it's becoming clear that gender is extremely complex, especially for Gen Z and Millennials today and for people who feel a disconnect or ambiguity between their biology and their sense of self. And if you are the parent of a child experiencing some aspect of gender dysphoria, you bear a weight of emotion and complexity that few parents can comprehend.

Life is messy, complicated, marred by the fall, and everything is a shadow of a greater glory that we do not yet see. So we can't pretend that in the church it's not as messy. We can't pretend that everyone who comes to Jesus has resolved their sexuality, is comfortable in their own skin, and that their marriage is just fine. A church our size will have significant experiences of the utter devastation of domestic violence, leaving a toxic marriage, and rebuilding life. A church our size will have people trying to make sense of their gender and their sexual orientation and their sexual behaviours - both heterosexual and homosexual. A church our size will have people addicted to pornography and alcohol or shopping. This is who we are, and when we set up an alternate reality that these things only happen outside the church and we have overcome it all, we create a sense of alienation and rage in people in the church and cause wider society to see the church not as a haven for humanity but unsafe, judgemental and immoral.

We have to have an overabundance of love and kindness toward people. I want to be in a church community where people can come as they are, feel genuinely loved and included as they are, and, through that, be transformed by the Spirit and Grace. A church where people are safe and feel like this is a community they can belong to and be genuinely included in, and I will talk specifically about this next week...

Last time we looked at a maxim of Corinthian society that looks suspiciously like our society: "Food for the stomach, stomach for food, and God will destroy them both..." I won't repeat most of what I said, but where we came to was the Corinthian view that sexual desire is a basic appetite of the body to be satisfied however you like, whenever you like, with whomever you like (at least as a male - women had no such liberty)... Do as

you please with your body because it doesn't matter; because matter doesn't matter.

We live in a similar time. I mentioned the influence of Plato and Descartes; but then in the mid-20th Century, the fathers of the sexual culture we now inhabit were Freud, Kinsey, Derida, Foucault, Satre (the French have a lot to answer for), which really began in the post-war period but went viral in the 60's.

Take a closer look at the fathers of the sexual revolution:

- **Sigmund Freud** died in 1939, but his work massively shaped the 50's and 60's.
- **Alfred Kinsey** - pioneered the study of sex as a science.
- **John Money** - body as gender neutral at birth - nurture over nature.
- **Michel Foucault** - any historical norms or biological norms around sex and sexuality is pseudoscience and are fundamentally about power. He argued for a "liberation" of sexuality from cultural, moral and capitalistic oppression. The fundamental idea behind queer theory is that there is no natural fundamental that lies behind identities such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, etc. Instead, these identities are considered cultural constructions that have been constructed through normative discourses and relations of power. There is no normal.
- **Jean Paul Satre** - existentialism: the authentic in our lives is life experience, not knowledge.
- **Jacques Derida** - deconstruction: dismantling loyalties to any idea and seeing the truth in its opposite. Criticised the idea that behind every problem was a neat and good solution.

I mention these names because how people think is always the product of something or someone, of philosophies, forces or agendas, many of which are antithetical to the way of Jesus. We must not live perpetually criticising culture or, at the other end, merely consuming it. We do need to understand the cultural air we are all breathing, how we got to where we are, if we want to know how to live in it well as being creators of culture. Which is hard today because our culture is full of contradictory ideas.

- We make absolute truth claims about truth not being absolute.
- We prize equality and tolerance on the one hand, yet seem more outraged and intolerant than ever before.
- We hold to this myth of perpetual social progress, and yet, on so many metrics, our success is depressing us and killing us.
- We are the most connected with technology yet the most lonely and isolated.

Johnathan Grant in his book 'Divine Sex' wrote: Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality. The only rule being that they must resonate with who we feel we really are. The worst thing we can do is to conform to some moral code that is

imposed on us from outside by society, our parents, the church or whoever else.

More specifically, on the topic of sex, Louise Perry points out other contradictions swirling around us. In this modern gospel of sexual liberation – where, with consent, anything goes – we seem reluctant as a society to see the downside of all our freedoms:

- People don't seem to want to talk about the connection between unfiltered and virtually unregulated instant access to violent, degrading pornography for anyone of any age with a phone and the explosion of domestic violence against women and children, marital breakdown, and even sexual dysfunction.
- We don't want to connect all the perfect, sexy, retouched bodies in advertising, social media and film with mental health and eating disorders in adolescent females.
- We don't want to connect the sexual hedonism of hookup culture with sexual assault, harassment and misogyny in schools, universities and workplaces.
- As Louise says, the #metoo movement was an outworking of a sexual liberation culture that was not working and consent alone was an inadequate safeguard.

Let me quote Louise: "Today, our Western culture's narrative is that sex is a skillset to be learned and refined across different partners with good sex the result not of intimacy but of good technique. In this framing, sex becomes something one does to another person, not with another person. All of the emotion is drained away, leaving the logic of the punter triumphant. We must resist that logic at all costs. If we believe the notion that sex is of no special value, we end up in dark places. If sex is not worthy of its own moral category, then neither is sexual harassment or rape. If sex is merely a service to be bought and sold, then we have no reason to object to its abuses. Once you permit the idea that people are products, everything else is corroded."

Her basic point is that our '50 Shades of Grey' hyper-sexual culture is not really liberating or dignifying women or building a world people want to build healthy, sustainable relationships and communities in. And why? Because sex is never meaningless or neutral and never NOT doing something to us.

### **Our second maxim:**

*"Now concerning matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." (1 Corinthians 7:1)*

This verse is the opposite of the Corinthian view of what we've just been talking about. This view says that sex is to be avoided. Where does this view come from, and why was it something they wrote Paul about? There are several possibilities depending on whether this statement relates to sexual relations between a man and a woman or sexual relations between a husband and a wife – they are the same Greek words.

**1.** If it's a statement about sexual relations between husbands and wives, then the maxim may originate from a common Corinthian view of marriage, especially in the upper class:

- Greco-Roman households were not closed nuclear families but open communities with extended family, slaves and their families – the place of work and commerce.
- Greco-Roman culture marriages were mostly arranged and involved little personal choice on the part of the participants – at least among the prosperous. A good Roman marriage was one that enhanced your property and status. So, a good marriage was one of peace or harmony, not necessarily intimacy, love and affection.
- Because in the male Roman mind, sex in marriage was for procreation, not recreation. Men would have children with their wives to continue their lineage, but have sex with others – men, women, or boys.

In other words, neither intimacy nor sex was a marital priority, and this may have become the attitude for some in the church. Now hold that thought...

**2.** If it's a statement about sexual relations between men and women in general, then it could be an attitude forming among some of the Corinthian believers, particularly the women, that the answer to the sexual hedonism of the culture was to avoid sex altogether. This ascetic view existed for a few reasons:

- There was a view among upper-class Corinthians that sex was basically connected with childbearing and if you could afford not to have children and thus sex that was more desirable than having them... (think about mortality rates of mothers in childbirth)
- There was also a cult of female prophetesses in Corinth and Delphi, who saw their prophetic vocation linked to sexual purity. Sex was physical, dirty and defiling and should be avoided.

So if our first interpretation is that sex has nothing to do with intimacy or marriage apart from kids. The other way it can be understood is that spiritual life is sacred, and sex is fallen and fleshy and to be avoided... And that attitude is perhaps still the other dominant view in society, in large part due to a history of Christian teaching that had a low view of sex.

The word 'puritanical' is defined as displaying a very strict moral attitude towards self-indulgence or sex. Christians are responsible for that word because the Puritans in the 1600's had a purity culture that promoted a very dim view of sex and punished all deviation and saw it as an unforgivable sin. People were imprisoned or even executed for sexual immorality... They interpreted the Bible in a way that left women in an unholy submission to men and cast women in two extremes. As Angie Hong in the Atlantic writes, "either bastion of radiant undefiled purity and temptresses dangerous to men who were incapable of controlling their lusts." The Puritans did us no favours in this regard – they promoted a

negative view of sex and really amplified a patriarchal and misogynistic kind of Christianity that greatly harmed women and the witness of the Gospel for centuries. And in modern form, this is the dark side of a purity culture that I think in the past 30 years has done some real harm and induced a lot of shame in young people who inevitably will experiment and do things they may end up regretting.

So, is Paul correcting some attitude that sex is to be avoided altogether OR some attitude that sexual intimacy has nothing to do with marriage?

I suggest Paul is correcting both:

- that you swing the moral pendulum too far by seeing sex as dirty or just a necessity for child-bearing, to be avoided, and you misunderstand and abuse the gift of sex that God gave in our design.
- if you fail to keep sex connected to intimacy in a covenantal relationship, you likewise misunderstand and abuse the gift of sex that God gave in our design.

*"But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Corinthians 7:2-5)*

Paul is saying several things here about our sexual desires and relationships:

- Sexual immorality is everywhere in the culture, and it is happening among members of the church community too where there is a propensity for a lack of self-control.
- Paul affirms that a marriage relationship is the appropriate location for sexual intimacy to live.
- That sexual intimacy is a mutual and equal commitment of two people in a relationship, of self-giving and yielding both for the wife AND the husband.
- That sexual intimacy is not just for having kids; it's for celebrating love, intimacy and covenant commitment to each other (see Song of Songs).
- Assumes that abstaining from sexual intimacy is reasoned, agreed and spiritually motivated as you together pursue intimacy with Christ.

Pause a minute here... This may be an aggravating passage. This part needs a trigger warning - you may be:

- A senior or a widow, thinking those days are long gone and this is irrelevant...

- Married thinking, “Well it’s not that simple – marriage is complex, life is exhausting, there are health issues, and life stage issues that are in play...”
- Divorced thinking that sex was traumatic, and you don’t want to think about it...
- Single and thinking, “That’s well and good for all the marrieds, but where does this leave me...?”
- Or anyone who lives with the guilt you feel or shame put on you about what you have or have not done in the past...

I’m thinking about you, and I ask you to hold your thoughts and feelings on what it may not be saying to you and lean in on what it is saying that is so good. What Paul is presenting here is a Christian ethic for life, sex and marriage that is born of his Jewish culture, not His Roman citizenship. He effectively starts a sexual and cultural revolution right here:

- **of mutual consent** – that sex could not ever be demanded by a man of a woman – that cut against all the norms of Corinthian male-dominated, patriarchal society: to demand sex and see women as the means to self-gratification and have no voice in the matter. For Paul, this violated the image bearing dignity of women.
- **of mutuality responsibility** that sex in marriage was a mutual responsibility, not to self-gratification but radical service and self-donation to the other – that both men and women had equal responsibility and voice. The dignity and power of women in marriage, sex and relationships was amplified in a scandalous manner. And the biblical ideal of marriage only works in mutuality of consent and selflessness. Remove mutuality from marriage, and you revert to a coercive and abusive setting. And that is never ok. And never should be tolerated.
- **of shared spirituality** in sexual relations – that the intimacy we can have within marriage points beyond itself to a greater intimacy than sex and marriage can ever supply: Marriage and Sex beautifully image a greater reality that we are all yet to know.

One of the reasons why Christianity flourished, especially among women in the early century, was its sexual ethic that gave dignity, power and security to women and children who had simply never had it before. And not only in marriage but in freedom to abstain from it, as we will see later in this chapter.

The global church has a terrible history of being patriarchal, misogynistic and causing great suffering to women around the world in the name of Jesus. And honestly, I don’t get how you can read the New Testament and come to that conclusion. Paul is presenting here a beautiful picture of equality and dignity between the sexes; a Christian feminism existed long before its modern expressions... forgotten both by Feminists and the church.

I said last time that sex comes from the word to cut or divide or separate. I recall a sermon on sexuality – it may have been a reference to Roleheiser – explaining that from



conception, we start life in a perfect union of mother and baby. We have no concept of being divided or separated. And even after we are born, we are inseparably linked to our mothers for everything we need to survive for years. But as we grow and develop through childhood and adolescence, that attachment changes. First, it's food, then mobility, the toilet, clothes, reading, school, sports, friends and playdates... And into adolescence, we increasingly feel sexed, divided, alone in a sea of pimply desires and emotions... And on through the teenage years, we become aware of our own desires for intimacy, our attractions and our desire for companionship and love. We long for that perfect union once more. Roleheiser in his book 'Holy Longing' says, "We are lonely people who occasionally experience fulfilment, restless souls who sometimes feel restless, and aching hearts that have brief moments of consummation." And as I said last time, that longing, that desire for intimacy, is really the underlying desire in our sexuality. And it is a good desire!

So, what are we to do with all that desire for intimacy and connection and love? The two extremes that we have explored in these two maxims are extinguishing desire and ignoring our sexual longings, or succumbing to desire whenever or however we feel...

The problem is neither are overly satisfactory, practical or lead to flourishing in the long run - both end up stealing the very thing we are desiring and leaving us lonely, curved inward and unhappy. There must be a third way neither of extinguishing desire nor succumbing to it completely. A third way is of directing our desires in life toward the greater, more beautiful reward or blessing behind the desire. Desire the greater reward:

Contentment over pleasure

Patience over instant gratification

Community over self-sufficiency

Generativity over consumption

Significance over popularity

Wisdom over cleverness

Nobility over privilege

Holiness over sophistication,

Commitment over novelty

Love over ambition.

I think there is much more to ponder here around how we direct and, as Augustine would term, order our desires. Augustine's 'Confessions' are classic meditations on this subject.

Married or single or single again: Where are our desires leading us? How are our desires forming us? What kind of legacy are we establishing? What kind of people are we becoming and becoming together, be that in a marriage or in Christian community? Jesus' and Paul's letters share a vision of life that whispers to our deepest desires - far in excess

of 'married with two kids and a dog'. Jesus was, after all, the most fully human, alive and fulfilled man to ever live, and he was single and celibate. So, there is more to fulfilment than marriage and sex can offer.

I love that sneaky little verse at the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 12, after cataloguing the gifts of the Spirit, Paul says, "*And yet I will show you the most excellent way.*" Paul then guides them through the landscape of love in chapter 13: the most excellent way is not ultimately described by what you can do but how you love.

Jesus' ultimate vision is life in an ever-growing community of love and fellowship with God and one another (forever). The church imperfectly images that now. Where each person can direct their good desires for intimacy, commitment and generativity within the pursuit of faith and love and hope. Sometimes that happens in the bond of marriage and the fellowship of God's people - but never perfectly.

And ultimately, there is only One who perfectly loves us. He has loved us all the way and will for eternity. If talking about this topic brings sadness, anger, confusion or shame - that's our shared story, and that is what we bring to the One who bought us for a price - a price so great it took Him all the way to the cross, to make us whole.

Psalm 37 is a beautiful psalm worth meditating on in full. Verse 24 says:

*The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him;  
though he may stumble, he will not fall,  
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.*

*Amen*