



SEX & THE CITY (PART I)

SERMON TRANSCRIPT & EXTRA NOTES

Sunday 20 August 2023

In recent weeks I've been talking about the devastation of sin and how that original sin in Genesis chapter 3 saw the breaking of four relationships - with creation, with one another, with ourselves, and with God. Actually, in just the first three chapters of the Bible, you can see these relationships in their full beautiful design and purpose (chapters 1 & 2) AND in their corruption (chapter 3, onwards), which I think is so good because when it comes to these relational categories we live between their perfection and their corruption until the final chapter of the bible. And this is our human reality - Christian or not.

Pretty much all of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians has something to do with the power and desire we have in those relationship categories of God, Self, Others and World, and the reality of their utter brokenness, even in Christian community.

Over the next several weeks, I'm going to talk about some complex and often painful parts of our relational lives with self, God and one another - like sex, gender and sexuality, celibacy, marriage, divorce, and singleness. Parents, if you have teens, this content will be tailored for them at the 5pm gathering and that's really where you should be bringing them. I have been avoiding these topics for ages because they are painful for some, inflammatory, and seem to bring out the worst in people...

1. I'm not the expert on any of these topics nor on how best to preach it. I've been married for 29 years. I can't remember what it feels like to be single, nor the pain of divorce. I understand something about sex, but I'm not claiming to be an expert there. And in terms of the LGBTQI+ space, I'm a learner and listener, but again, it's not my story.

2. My basic approach – Full disclosure: I will teach the Bible and the orthodox historical teaching of the church across the world as faithfully as I know how. I can't and won't compromise on a Christian definition of marriage and sexual ethics – that it is exclusively between man and woman as the Biblical ideal for people who chose a life of marriage. I can't teach other than the binary design of biological sex: that apart from a small possibility of intersex, we are created male and female. I can accept that gender often creates unhelpful stereotypes of how a male and a female should act, and that gender is extremely complex and tender for people who feel a disconnect or ambiguity between their biology and their sense of self. I do think the Bible has a high view of sex, marriage, and singleness, BUT life is messy, complicated, marred by human brokenness, and everything is a secondary imaging of a greater glory that we do not yet see.

We live in the shadowlands where nothing is as it may ideally be. And because of that, we need an overabundance of grace, kindness and generosity toward each other while we hold firm to Biblical convictions.

3. If we differ, that is mostly ok. There are some issues that are integral and essential to the integrity of the Gospel which are not really negotiable – such as the divinity of Christ, His bodily death and resurrection as atonement for our sin, the authority of Scripture, the necessity of faith, and the return of Christ. Likewise, there are some essentials to salvation – confession, repentance, and faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord over our life, evidenced by the Spirit's work of transforming us. If you don't have these foundations, you don't really have Biblical Christianity.

But then there are a range of other issues that differ in their impact on the integrity of the Gospel and Christian witness, like marriage, divorce, singleness, sexual orientation, the meaning of the Lord's Table, the type of baptism, the manifestations of the Spirit... These are important (some, I would say, very important), and these create distinctions but need not create divisions. Unity does not require uniformity on every matter. The world seems to want to polarise – and the church does too; we are experts at dividing and gathering only with people that agree with us... And this lack of diversity in our churches is not a strength; it's a real limitation. We must do something harder than dividing – we must live in complexity and tension – we must hold grace and truth together. Jesus was FULL of grace AND truth – not 50/50 but 100/100 – solid on the essentials and gentle on our non-essentials.

4. Follow up – If I say anything in the next few weeks that leaves you confused or needing to process further, please reach out to me or the team. I promise I will not say everything well, and you may not hear it well, so ask! I care about the theology, but I think Jesus is more concerned with our care for people. You can get the theology right and yet fail to love – the Pharisees did that a lot. The pastoral response matters more to people than being right. So, in our gatherings and in your Small Groups, be gracious and kind to one another. If you are struggling in one of these areas, if it's a source of pain or shame, let's talk about it.

But let me give you a giant spoiler for the rest of 1 Corinthians: when it all comes down to it, what we most need, in fact, what all people most need when grappling with sexuality and relationships, is an overpowering vision and encounter with the goodness and love of God in Christ. Only Christ is our Redeemer and Healer. We need that for our lives and for one another, and we need that to love others well with genuine grace and care. This should not bring out the worst in us as followers of Jesus but the best. *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* (John 13:34)

RESOURCES

I have nothing original to say. It's all borrowed from people far smarter, far more intimately involved in the topics. These resources are not definitive. Other people have other authors. Parents, I think these are resources for over 18's, but if this gets you thinking, do some more research outside of Sunday. Again, come and talk to me or a member of Staff if you would like more information or to just chat about your own circumstances.

Books:

Gay/Same Sex Attracted Authors/Theologians

- War of Loves - David Bennett
- Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert - Rosaria Butterfield
- Is God Anti-Gay - Sam Alberry
- Gay Girl Good God - Jackie Hill Perry

Secular Authors

- Cynical Theories - Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay
- The Case against the Sexual Revolution - Louise Perry
- The End of Gender - Dr Debra Soh

Pastors/Theologians

- A Letter to My Congregation - Ken Wilson
- Messy Grace - Caleb Kaltenbach
- The Meaning of Marriage - Tim Keller
- The Fire Within - Ronald Rolheiser
- Live No Lies - John Mark Comer
- Love thy Body - Nancy Pearcey
- Being the Bad Guys - Stephen Mcalpine

Links

- The Centre for Faith Sexuality and Gender - www.centerforfaith.com
- Christian Sexuality - www.christian-sexuality.com
- The Gospel Coalition - www.thegospelcoalition.org/topics/gender-identity/

Podcasts

- Moral Revolution
- The Girl Defined Show
- Premier Unbelievable
- Ask NT Wright Anything
- Anything on the topic by Tim Keller, Dave Lomas, John Mark Comer

Read 1 Corinthians 6.

There is so much I want to say about this passage... 1 Corinthians chapters 1-6 are about troubling matters that Paul has been informed about by people from Chloe's household. Chapters 7 and 8 onward are about matters that the Corinthians have written to him about - and Paul's tone in the two sections is quite different. The former feels urgent and decisive because of the crisis of sin in the church; the latter feels more relaxed and pastoral. So, this passage today is the culmination of the first section and has that urgency and decisive tone to it. And as a result, it has the capacity to be jarring. Especially because it talks about sex and sexual immorality in the church. All things sex is the topic of our time and I feel the pressure around this topic because it seems like you are committing cultural heresy to hold an orthodox biblical, historical and biological worldview - it's a time when a Christian sexual ethic moved from the moral centre to the immoral fringe.

Paul has a three-step logic to all sin in our lives and the church:

1. See the contrast between the way of Jesus and the way of the wider Greco-Roman culture
2. See your identity saved in Christ and His Church
3. In the power of the Spirit, BE who you really are already!

Paul has had reports from Chloe of quarrelling, boasting, pride, lawsuits and sexual immorality... And the real thing he is getting at here is one of identity: "That's not who you are! You were, that catchall word 'wrongdoers'. That's what some of you were, BUT," (see verse 11) "*you were washed sanctified and justified*" in Jesus and by the Spirit. You already are a new creation, made holy through Jesus, forgiven and acquitted of all your sin. This is who I am. And my life is catching up to the reality of what I did not achieve, deserve or earn - I am a new creation in Christ.

This passage has already mentioned 'sexual immorality' - the Greek word is *pornea* - and it is the word from which we get porn; but it means any sexual activity outside of the covenantal framework of marriage between a man and a woman. Paul lists several examples:

- Idolatry - in Corinth it was directly connected with temple prostitution
- Adultery - sex with another married person

- Homosexuality - which is sex with another person of the same sex... (and I will be more specific about this in the coming weeks)

...but then, for good measure, Paul throws in verse 10 and a few more examples of wrongdoing - "*nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers...*" This is no exhaustive list; 'wrongdoers' is a category of people.

Something important - You don't go to Hell for committing any of these sins just as much as you don't go to Heaven for not committing them. Is sexual activity outside of marriage in all its forms outside of God's original design a problem? Yes, absolutely, it hurts you and it hurts other people (and we will say more on why this is in coming weeks) and it dishonours Christ and the people of God. But you aren't saved because you never had an adulterous thought, were a virgin on your wedding night, or had a marriage that went the distance. Did you know the Bible talks about greed 10 times more than adultery? Perhaps because greed is so subtle and needs so much more highlighting than sexual sin which can be so obvious. Both are toxic and damage lives and vandalise the masterpiece. They are that fatal/fertile cancer of the soul... But they don't send you to Hell. If that were the case, we would all be going there.

You aren't saved because you got your sexual orientation sorted out and you aren't saved because you have no gender identity issues... We all come only by surrendering all our lives to His Lordship and freely receiving the same grace, and then yes, Jesus will likely want to talk to you about your sexual desires and activities and where your source of your identity and value is, just like He may want to talk to another person about selfishness, or greed, or vanity, or pride, or addiction. It all equally need to be placed at the cross and be healed.

What sends you to Hell is self-righteousness, thinking you can be your own saviour and king and do whatever you like. And what sends you to Heaven is realising you need the grace and forgiveness of God because all your good deeds don't qualify you any more than all your bad deeds disqualify you. We are all drowning men and women who either reach out our hand for rescue or say, "Thanks very much, I'll save myself."

I think it's really helpful that Paul talks about the highly sensitive matter of sexual immorality and, in the next breath, talks about greed and gossip and dodgy business practices because as much as we want to do one thing - and yes, some actions have more obvious damage - it's all sin and it's all toxic! We simply need to be consistent and not think one kind is less fatal than another. We all equally need Jesus's forgiveness which He freely offers. That's the beauty of grace, but it's also the burden of grace. Because you could say "Well, God loves me and will forgive me anyway because of grace." In fact, this attitude was probably what Paul is quoting in verse 12 when he says:

"I have the right to do anything," you say, but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" but I will not be mastered by anything.

There were evidently some Corinthians who were taking their freedom of not living under ceremonial and cultural parts of the Mosaic Law because the cross cancels their sin, and they are under grace... To mean that they could keep living like the Corinthians, which included how they expressed themselves sexually. And in chapter 10, how they ate meat offered to idols. And Paul responds, "Even if all things were lawful, sure you can say 'I'm free to do anything I want,' but not everything is good for you or those around you, and nothing should be allowed to master us as a sinful habit. That would be cheap grace, wouldn't it?" Paul says something similar in Romans 6: "*What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!*"

We come as we are but don't stay as we are. If you are thinking coming to Jesus is easy and grace is a loophole to then go back to living your own way, or getting the Bible to justify your lifestyle of sexual immorality or any other habituated pattern, then maybe you've not met Jesus yet.

As I said:

1. See the contrast of the way of Jesus
2. See our identity in Jesus
3. Be who you are! Live a new life.

And the process of this is operating through the whole of your life. We have a word for that: discipleship. It's being re-born and re-formed with Christ because no one is a blank slate. We come already formed and discipleship in a counter-formation process. The world is constantly forming us. We are being evangelised to, every day. We learn the values, rituals, priorities and mantras of the loudest voices in our life - on a whole range of topics from what the good life is, where to live, what to own, eat, do, dress, who to cheer on, who to hate... The Corinthians were already formed by their culture when Paul showed up with the Gospel, just like we are. And you can see that in the mantras that they are still speaking and still living. Paul says, "*You say, 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.'*" And then in chapter 7 Paul echos another one: "*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.'*"

These two mantras of Corinthian society represent two of the main views of 'sex in the city' then and now. I'll address one today and the other next time:

"Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both."

Let me describe a little of what sex in Corinthian culture was like:

- Sex was everywhere and it was a male-dominated right and freedom. In fact, if you check the dictionary, to Corinthianise meant to live a promiscuous life... the city had quite a reputation! A bit like the idiom, "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas..."

- Sleeping around, temple prostitution, and just prostitution in general, was a widely accepted activity for men to engage in – just like getting a haircut or going to the gym.
- It was not a good time or place to be a woman. Singleness was a highly undesirable state for women and if a woman was single, this was shameful. She was seen as a prostitute and fair game.
- Sex was like *“food for the stomach.”* When you are hungry, you eat. When you want sex, you have it. It's just another base desire. An appetite to fill. And don't worry about it because *“God will destroy them both.”* The Greeks had a view that the body was temporal and not all that important, so do with it as you please because it's the immaterial soul that really matters.

Now that's not too far from where we are in our city today after coming full circle. Since the sexual revolution of the 60's, we've seen massive shifts in human sexuality toward a modern equivalent of Corinth. For example:

- The pill meant sex could be disconnected from that long-term commitment called 'having babies', which meant sex could be more easily disconnected from marriage and even love and emotional commitment.
- So people marry later due to economics and career, and the one-night stand from the night club has, with the wonders of apps like Tinder, spawned a hookup culture. Uber for quick emotionless free sex with someone nearby.
- Pornography has also moved from the plastic-wrapped magazines in the newsagent to in the pockets of every single person with a phone. And not simply photos of nude bodies but 4k zoomed in, streaming live sex of every kind you can't even imagine. Only Fans subscriptions and global traffic of degrading violence against mostly women and children occupy upwards of 30% of all internet traffic.
- Our children are being formed from a very young age to view sex as emotionless, video game entertainment; and gender as distinct from biological sex and having no gender norms at all as mandated by Queer and Trans theory groomed through media and schools and universities.
- AI-generated pornography takes this to a new level, which, combined with augmented reality tech and next-generation robotics, cyber-bullying cases are now emerging. Take a picture of a person at school and let AI generate the porn.

We are not far off the view of sex as a Corinthian – a base appetite which you satisfy whenever you like, however you like, with whoever you like, with zero regard for the emotional wellbeing of others or commitment.

How did we get here? Before Freud came along, people believed desire was broken into virtues and vices and it was the right of all people to restrain vices and carnal desires for the sake and honour of others. And you navigated your desires through a trusted external authority source, like the Bible or the Church.

Freud said the opposite. He said our most important desire was our libido. Not just for sex but all pleasure. But because libido without constraint may lead to anarchy, our culture and its institutions, including the Church, forced us to repress our desires. And for Freud, the repression of desire was the problem. To say that another way: the reason you are unhappy is because other people are telling you you cannot do stuff! And this is the West's view of reality. What are our mantras today? "Love is love." "Just follow your heart." "Be true to yourself." "Speak your truth." "You do you and I'll do me." "If it feels good..." Cornelius Plantinga, who I quoted last week, said now, "the self exists to be explored, indulged and expressed... but not disciplined or restrained."

You want to read a good book on this? Read or listen to **Louise Perry's 'The Case Against the Sexual Revolution'**. I like it because she is not a Christian but comes to the conclusion that Freud and the Sexual Revolution of the 60's has proven to be a disaster for women and feminism - as it was in Corinth - and a Christian sexual ethic of restraint and monogamous lifelong relationships between men and women are, on analysis, the best model for both men and women and the fostering of healthy families and societies today. Go figure!

Another brilliant author on this is **Nancey Pearcey's book 'Love thy Body'** and she talks about "Personhood theory" which is this very Corinthian view thriving today in post-modern culture. Their guy Plato said, "the soul in the body is like the driver of a chariot trying to steer an unruly horse." Your body is this instinctual machine that just does what it does and your mind or soul is the true self. "God will destroy" all the material stuff but your mind is the real you. Later in the 1700's, this gained traction with Descartes, who also said the body is like a machine and you are your mind, thinking, perception, consciousness, and will. We see this in films like 'I.robot', 'Ghost in Shell', 'Altered Carbon', 'Cyborg' and 'Robocop', or the Borg Queen in Star Trek! Your mind is the real you. You are just a brain on a stick. And your body? that's just a morally neutral organic machine that you can do anything you like to.

This is at the source of so much of our Western thought today: from abortion rights to trans rights; where biology is secondary to the real you; where gender is a social construct, not a biological construct. Charles Taylor described this in terms like the Age of Authenticity and Expressive Individualism - meaning the authentic self, the real you, your identity is found exclusively in your desires and feeling and thoughts and experiences. "It's my truth. My experiences and feelings are who I authentically am. And unless you have the same experiences or mirror my identity, you have no authority to speak to my life or choices. And if you do, it's hate speech." In this age of 'authenticity', people reject any model or ideology imposed on them from the outside - which ironically is an ideology imposed from the outside!

But does all this really pass the pub test for most of us? Do we really see our bodies as inconsequential or sex as emotionless? And when you take the mind out of the body, what

do you get? A corpse. The Bible says you are a whole person. Your body and mind and emotions matter. We are a unified glorious whole person designed as a masterpiece, and what you do with it matters such that God not only enters into the physical world in Jesus but, after His death, is raised with a physical resurrection body. Not some ghost. "Touch me," Jesus says to Thomas, "See my hands and feet. Touch me for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as I have."

So Paul continues in verse 14: "*The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*" By His power, God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also. God is not going to destroy our bodily attributes. He is somehow going to include our physical body in a new heaven and earth. Paul says your body, mind and emotions have eternal significance and that informs not just the future but the present.

Paul continues in verse 15 and 16: "*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."* But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit."

This Genesis reference of two becoming one flesh points back again to that matter of design and the intent of sex. That sex is so precious because it creates a one-flesh union between a whole man and a whole woman. You can't think that your body doesn't matter. It's not two machines interacting and it's not two brains on a stick. It's two whole persons – flesh is all of you joining with all of someone else. Tim Keller put it this way: he says God did not invent sex to be "simply a necessary mode of procreation or a way of self-gratification and self-expression... but a means of radical self-donation and surrender to another person." It is an expression of covenant commitment to another person with all of you for all of your life – not just your body in a moment.

Paul concludes: "*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.*" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

I know this is much easier said than done, but Paul says, "Run a mile from the toxic pull of all forms of sex outside of God's design! This is not who you are in Christ. You are way too precious for that!" Sure, you are free. But what you do with your freedom is so important because, as Paul has said in verse 12, "*not everything is beneficial.*" Not everything that feels good is good for you. Not every desire you have is going to deliver on its promises. And you are hardly free when you have been mastered or enslaved by something in the

process. Popular culture lies to you about this all the time!

This is a raw area for many of us. It's raw at some level for most people because our lives look nothing like the ideal. Our sexuality is a source of great pain, trauma, regret, and confusion, even if it is met by grace. Yet that also tells us something, doesn't it? Our longings, wounds and regrets tell us that sex is much more than a physical act because that's not always possible for a hundred reasons and stages of life... But what we long for is what we were designed for: intimacy to know and be known, to love and be loved. The word 'sex' comes from the Latin 'sexus' which means to divide or cut - you know, like secateurs. We are sexed, cut off, divided, not feeling whole. And we all long to be reconnected with God, with others, with ourselves and with our world.

Sometimes that partially happens in marriage, but never perfectly. Sometimes that happens in the community of God's people, but never perfectly. And ultimately, there is only One who will ever perfectly love us, and everything else is a shadow. 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 with a price - a price so great it took HIM all the way to the cross, to be cut off, sexed, in order to make US whole.