



SONG OF SONGS

A Biblical Vision for Marriage, Sex, and the Body

SONG OF SONGS: The Standard of Beauty in the Bible and in Culture

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Song of Songs 6:4-10

Our world has struggled to pinpoint the purpose and meaning of sex and marriage. The sanctity of sex and marriage, sexual fulfillment, and corresponding mental health are all down while promiscuity, divorce, cohabitation and sexual trauma are all up. Even as cultural rebellion rises against the values of Judeo-Christian marriage, the data continues to show that alleged progress is hollow and rife with problems. Problems that the world does not have the answers to. Our journey through the Song of Songs centers around the love poetry that has given a biblical vision for marriage, sex, and the body for thousands of years. Does it still work? Is it still helpful to us today? Join us and listen in as we study the Song of Songs. Go to doxa-church.com to learn more about Doxa, find service times, or support the making of disciples in the everyday stuff of life.

Good morning, Doxa. We are going to read scripture from Song of Songs, chapter 6, verse 4-10.

You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me— Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?"

This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated.

Well, good morning, everyone. Hey, for those of you that are new, my name's Eddie. I'm one of the pastors here. Do most of the teaching around here. I also do probably all of the book recommendations, uh, because I'm a nerd. And for this series, we've been walking through the Song of Songs, which is really a book about semi-erotic love poetry found in the Old Testament. So if you're new, welcome, this might be your first introduction to something like this. I wanted to recommend two books to you that I've been using over the course of the series. One is called *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain*. And that might give you a little glimpse on how the sermon's gonna go today. And then, *Divine Sex*: —this is a book by Jonathan Grant—*A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age*.

These books have been really helpful for me and I think they'll be helpful for you too, and if you are really, really dying to have one, I'll just give you one of the ones I have down here. So, but you have to take it out to the second service so I can show everybody the book. Okay. As we've been doing for most of this series, we have a question and response time after. And so if you would like to ask a question around this series, you can scan that QR code. Now, you might not have a question right now, but I assure you after this sermon, you may have a few, so you might want to just preemptively scan it, but we'll also put it up later. If you are stubborn, that's fine. We're going to have Josh and Crystal Ricciardi, one of our elders and elders' wives, join us on stage for the Q and R as well; give Sarah a break, my wife. So, it'll be fun. Okay? Alright, let me pray for us. We got a lot of ground to cover. We're going to be in chapter 6, verse 4, so if you've got a Bible, please turn there. Let me pray for us.

Well, Father, we come to you humble, or at least in pursuit of humility, we come to you asking and wanting that you would reveal through wisdom literature what it is you have for each of us in our lives. I pray for my friends here. We're all coming in different spots, we're all looking for something different, unique in our marriages and our future marriages, and so I do pray that you would be kind to us and reveal those things to us. I also pray for clarity for myself, for calm, for courage, that I would communicate your word adequately and timely in a way that you see fit and might this word be profitable for us and also pleasing for you. We love you. We praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Alright. Well, we've come to a section here in chapter 6, where our lovers, that's right, lovers. again, if you're new, married lovers, once again, embrace one another. Now, remember, Song of Songs has been alternating between, kind of like our marriages, alternating between pursuit of one another and embracing and intimacy with one another. Now, at this time, the man speaks. We've been watching the woman mostly predominantly dominate the conversation. Usually, the woman speaks. But here we get an extended section of the man speaking to his wife. And what does he say? Well, here he rains down copious praises and compliments, as all men should, and all these praises center around her beauty. Now, remember, Song of Songs gives us a glimpse at the ideal marriage, okay? The ideal marriage. One that we should really strive towards if we're married or if we're unmarried, we should strive towards something like

this. And part of the biblical marriage, and I'll just say it, part of the biblical marriage centers around the beauty of each person. We can't get around that.

Now, there might be some doubts and some questions around this, like, beauty, I thought, you know, we shouldn't talk about beauty, beauty's not culturally kind to say. Well, yeah, I think I would say that I think the culture gives us mixed signals on how we should think about beauty. I think that's true. On one hand it tells us that outward beauty kind of means nothing, and we shouldn't ascribe any meaning to beauty at all. And on the other hand, the culture tells us that everything is beautiful. So, which is it? Is nothing beautiful or is everything beautiful, right? Which is it? Everything's beautiful. Sunsets are beautiful, children are beautiful. You know, black is beautiful, you know, big is beautiful, small is beautiful, tall is beautiful, short is beautiful. All these things are beautiful, right? And we're supposed to believe in 'em all. Everything's beautiful.

And other times we hear from, I mean, I don't know, mostly our moms, let's be honest, but also sometimes corporations trying to sell us stuff, that beauty is not on the outside. It's where? Oh, wow, mom did a good job. Beauty is on the inside. But if that's true, if that's true, does that mean that what's on the outside doesn't matter? Does it mean it doesn't matter at all? If that's true, why do we get dressed with nice clothing, some of us, right? Why do we get dressed with nice clothing? Why do men shave, some of us, right? And ladies, why do you wear makeup, right? Like, why do these things matter?

One of the most famous marketing campaigns of all time is the Dove Beauty campaign. You've all seen it, even if you can't articulate it. It's 19 years old in the running. And this campaign has made this company Dove a lot of money. Its goal was in their own words to redefine traditional beauty standards and to advocate for a more inclusive and diverse representation of beauty. Sounds like a good idea, right? I feel like that's, that sounds great, except everybody copied them. Everybody. All the campaigns are basically doing the same thing. No matter what you look like, no matter how you are, no matter how small or big or beautiful or simple or whatever you find yourself to be, there is a soap for you and it is Dove and it is 99 cents and it is cheap, and that's why you should buy it. It's not that cheap anymore though, right? Shot up from like 1.99 To like 11.99, like overnight. I don't know what that's about. You tell me, but, not an economist.

The point is it sounds like a great idea except for everyone copied it. And guess what happens when everyone copies a good marketing campaign? The sales go down. So, they decided to start figuring out and sort of polling their different ad campaigns to find out what they could do differently. And they found that only a small percentage of their campaigns were directed and marketed towards the intelligence of its buyer, the intelligence of them. So, they put out ads for their soap in 2023 this year, marketing towards the intelligence or the inner beauty for their customers. Moving away, not totally, but moving away mostly from the outer beauty. Beauty for Dove again, once again was not on the outside, it was back on the inside. The issue with that is, well, marketing a soap towards people's intelligence doesn't exactly sell. Your brain doesn't need to be scrubbed down with a soap, right? Like it just doesn't work. So, sales took a hit.

The point is this is really confusing. It's really confusing for women and men. And before, I just want to say before we direct all of our sympathy towards the women in this area of beauty and cultural standard, men are also getting blitzed with the standard of beauty by women, as well. It's happening. For those of you that's ever been on a dating app, according to dating app statistics, only 15% of women would even swipe right, whatever that means, on a—I've been married a long time by now—would even swipe right on a man that was 5'8" or below, let alone date him. 15% of men.

You know what's curious about that? The average height of a man in the United States is only 5'9". So only an inch lower and all of a sudden no one's—you should see the bell curve on Bumble. For those of you that are older than 30 years old, Bumble's a dating app where women are predominantly in charge of how it goes, or something like that. But the point is, the height breakdown is in the 6'6", 6'5", 6'4", 6'3" range at its apex. And then after 6 feet, into the dump. The point is, if you weigh a lot as a man, or if you are short as a man, you are getting filtered out of these dating apps and you're wondering, why am I not swiping, or why am I not getting connections? That's why. Outside beauty, inside beauty, skinny beauty, curvy beauty, tall beauty, short beauty. What is beautiful? What is it? Why is beauty such an important part of marriage? I think it is by the way.

Let's explore Song of Songs a bit and apply its wisdom to our marriages and to culture and to uncover why beauty is important. And I think what we're gonna see is that true beauty is wildly underrated, despite what many of us might have thought about beauty. So, to start, let's ask two questions. Okay? First question, what is Godly beauty in the context of marriage? What is it? What is Godly beauty in the context of marriage? Let's start in our text, verse 4. "You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love," more than that in a second, "lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me".

Here the man rains down compliments, not of beauty, but of might and awe on the woman. He says she's beautiful as Jerusalem and Tirzah, two capital cities that invoke power, stature and royalty. He's looking at his bride and going, holy cow. Like, you are unbelievable. You are amazing. You are awe inspiring. He's not even at her beauty yet, right? She inspires all like a mighty army. Here it says that he's envisioning an army coming down from the hill and the banners of the army are there and it's like, whoa, oh, wow. This is unbelievable. That's what he sees in his bride here. It's amazing power that he sees in her, remember? Power, royalty, stature. Here's where we see what is Godly beauty in the context of marriage.

When we think about this, there's three things, I think. The first thing is this: beauty is made in God's image. Why? What inspires power, stature, and royalty like God himself? What inspires that? For those that don't know human beings, for those that are Christians, we believe, that human beings were made in God's image. Scripture says that we were made in God's image created after God's likeness. So, we reflect God's glory and image back to the world. So the man says, he even looks at her and says, I can't even stare at you. You are so beautiful. You see that? Turn your eyes away from me. Like you are unbelievable. I can't even look at you. And you

know, God's often portrayed in scripture that way. When God's glory is revealed, most people can't look at it. It's too powerful. It's too overwhelming, it's too good. In fact, there's only one angel that's even able to stand in the presence of God, let alone look at the presence of God. And so here he's connecting his beautiful wife, thinking about her through God's image. Oh my gosh, you are unbelievable to stare at, the apex of all creation. Unbelievable. He's seeing this.

Again, real beauty then is seeing someone reflect God back to you. Seeing God in somebody else, seeing the glory and image of God reflected back to you. It's hard to explain, but think about it like looking at the moon on a dark night and clear night. The moon is beautiful, it's wonderful, but what is the moon really doing? The moon doesn't have any source of light itself. It's actually reflecting the light of the sun off of itself, and what you're seeing is the reflection of the sun off the moon, and it makes the moon so beautiful. That's exactly what's true about us. What makes human beings so beautiful is that they reflect the image of God.

Now listen, I love dogs <laugh>, actually that's a lie. I don't love animals. But here's the point. When you look at Fido's eyes, he's wonderful and he's glorious, but he doesn't reflect the image of God back at you. Now, you might enjoy him, and that's great, but he's not like looking in the eyes of a spouse, or like in the eyes of children, or even looking in the eyes of a stranger. It's not the same. There is something about the image of God that draws us toward it, okay? And again, this man, the husband, he's not merely addressing her appearance, although he's going to do that plenty, get ready, but he is addressing the sort of Godness she reflects.

I think we see this pattern all throughout scripture. Look at 1 Peter 3 with me. It says this, this is Peter talking to ladies. "Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is God's sight is very precious." Addressing women here, Peter tells women that their adorning is not to be found on the outside, okay? But deeply on the inside, more specifically, their never-ending beauty is found in their Imago Dei, the image of God, reflecting to their husbands and to the outside world the character of God in gentleness and in a quiet spirit. Real beauty as best we can get in this life is best seen when you and I reflect the image of God back to one another in glory in our physical image, but also in our character. That's what Godly beauty is in the context of marriage.

But there's more: beauty also compels us toward our purpose. Now, some of you men know what I'm talking about, okay? When you see or begin to engage the right woman for you, like the beautiful woman that you're in love with, all of a sudden you get clarity, don't you? You get some clarity like, what are my goals? What are my desires? Like I gotta start to fall in line. I need a job. I need to clean myself. I need to get a haircut. I need to start talking more. I need to get all the ums and uhs outta my speech. I've gotta be on point, right, 'cause I'm gonna meet her mom and dad and I gotta start looking like I'm something. Okay? And if you don't know that's true, it's time to level up. Okay? Like we've gotta, it's time. Like it's time. This is what happens.

There's an old phrase, and many of us have heard this old phrase. Many theologians have said it over the years. Many people on a farm have said it over the years. It's this. Men are like trucks. They drive straighter with a load in the back. Isn't that true? The moment the beauty of a woman is in the back of the truck, all of a sudden, the back tires start catching. And that's true for all of us. Single guys, we're all out there, right? The moment, that beautiful woman, oh my gosh, like, what am I going to do with my life? Nothing makes a man question his own existence more than a beautiful woman that he's starting to pursue. It just is true.

Look at how our husband does it to his wife. Look at his description. Start in the middle of verse 5. He says, "Your hair is like a flock of goats" <laugh> leaping down the slopes of Gilead." What an insult, can you believe that? "Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil." Now this is all very weird, right? This is very weird. But the point is, he finds her radiant. He looks at her and he says, look at those beautiful teeth. They're all white. You haven't lost any. That's, I feel like that's the bar, let's start there, unless you're in Europe, and in which case you know it is what it is. But here in America, let's get all the ewes nice and white and let's keep all of 'em right? Like let's make sure. And then your cheeks are like halves of pomegranates. It's like basically you've got some color in you, it's beautiful, it's wonderful. He finds her radiant.

When a beautiful woman for a man is interested in you, and you get married and you have kids, the responsibility of her beauty pushes you towards your purpose and your calling. It's also true the opposite way. When you marry someone you love and respect and you care about, all of a sudden, the responsibility of their beauty pushes you towards purpose.

Now if you remember, we've talked about this before, there's four components of the ideal marriage we talked about earlier in our series, in week two. You can go back and listen, but I'll give you a little bit of a refresher. Beauty compels us towards living these four things out. First, companionship. I want to be friends and connect with that person. They are beautiful inside and out. I want to be close to you like I want to be in your proximity. How do we, can we go somewhere? That's what going on a date is. Can I be near you, companionship, I want to do life with you.

Second thing, calling. Again, what am I called to do? What am I called to do? Men, go make money, provide for her needs, the needs of her children, right? Ladies, Proverbs 31 is your chapter all of a sudden. How do I manage the affairs of my life, my children, how do I earn money like the Proverbs 31 woman? All of a sudden we begin asking questions, how are we going to order our lives, and order them together?

Third thing that beauty compels us towards is children. This one's kind of intuitive, but beauty makes you want to make babies, okay? There's a reason why we have content for students at this point right now during this sermon, okay? And if we just did a talk two weeks ago on the two sex paths, you can go back and listen to that one if you want more, but I guess I'll give you a spoiler here. Beauty compels us towards intimacy.

It's our fourth thing. Sex is a means to an end, but it's also an end in and of itself. God creates sex, sexual intimacy, to explore and to enjoy amongst one another, and it helps us engage in pleasure that reflects the wonder and glory of God. Beauty compels us toward it, okay? Beauty is made in God's image.

Beauty compels us towards our purpose, and last thing here, beauty is chosen for you. What do I mean by that? Beauty is chosen for you. Well, look at verse 9. The man says to the wife, his wife, "My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and the concubines also, and they praised her." So, what are we seeing here? We're seeing that the woman is admired by all these people.

The man is describing her. She's honored, she's respected, she's loved, the concubines and queens look upon her and go, my goodness, she is wonderful. Look at that lady. Look at her and all her mystique and her wonder and her beauty. She's amazing. She's so graceful and powerful, like, we're seeing that there. It says that here, she's also the only daughter of her mother.

And so, there's some uniqueness to her, but then also she's the only woman for the man, right? She is my, he says the only one. The only one. How many women are for the man? How many women are is for this man? Just one. The perfect one, right? How many women? One. The perfect one, the only one. We talked about it a couple weeks ago, the qualifications for an elder, an elder is to be a husband of one wife, right? Literally translating to a one-woman man. The same is true for ladies to be a one-man woman.

One-woman man; one-man woman. Guys, before the foundations of the world, God, I'll just tell you just like this, theologically astute and everything, God sovereignly predestined you to marry the person you are married to or will be married to. We talk about Doxa here, you know, having the particular theologies at Doxa. We believe in the sovereignty of God here at this church. Hopefully that's not a shock and surprise to you, but we believe that God is absolutely in charge of the universe. We believe that's true. We talk about being reformed or something like that. And I think many of us aren't reformed enough. Your spouse was designed for you to be your other half. She was chosen for you. He was chosen for you.

You might think, I don't know, they're frustrating me. Yeah, they were chosen to frustrate you <laugh>. You are not a perfect person by any stretch, right? There's a great book by Mark Sayers called *The Trouble with Paris*. We always want to go run off and go somewhere cool. I can't wait to move and go to Paris. You know what the trouble is with Paris? It's that you're still you when you get there. When you leave your marriage and you go to a new marriage, you bring the common denominator problem with you, and it's you. Okay? That's the trouble. Your person was chosen for you specifically your husband was chosen for you specifically to be married to you, to help form you and to grow you.

Here's another insight that might be I think helpful for you as you're thinking about this. Beauty is generated in the exclusivity of your relationship. Beauty is self-generated in the exclusivity of

your relationship. Think about it. Why should you love your wife so much? Because she's yours. That's your wife. That's nobody else's wife. Out of all of the women on the planet, that specific one is yours. Ladies, why should you love your husband so much? This isn't a trick question, because he is your husband. There's no other person for you.

In our society and culture today, we love to break down men versus women, men versus women. You go online and read the just absolute trash heap of comments in all of these posts. It's men versus women. Men do this, women do this. Really, you're going to look at 4 billion people and distill them down into your dating experience and go, they're all trash. That's lunacy. But that's what we do. You're not called to go wrestle 4 billion men or 4 billion women, you're called to find one specific one. And when you find one specific one, all of a sudden beauty becomes really obvious and really clear. Oh, this is the person for me, this is amazing. I could have any, or I could pursue let's say any woman in the world, but this one is mine. That's God's intention for you.

But people will ask, you know, all the time, how do I know though if I married my soulmate, though? You know what I'm saying? Like, my soulmate, like, I dated a guy for seven years and it didn't work out 'cause he's not my soulmate. I need my soulmate. First of all, what? <laugh> Is your life like a Hallmark Christmas movie and you're like looking for the—that's just not realistic.

Second thing, how do I know my wife is the one for me? How do I know she's my soulmate? Because we're married? Because we're married. Because I chose her, because God chose her for me, because God chose me for her. That's how I know. I trust God's sovereignty, I trust that he placed me in an unbreakable covenant, not to torture me, but to form me more closely to the Father and the Son. That's why he put me, and to enjoy the wife of my youth, not so I can lust after every other woman. He puts me in that relationship. And guess what? He's done the same for you.

So, the question for you then today is, is my spouse the only one? Are they the only one for me; is my future spouse? Because right now, if you're not married, whatever you're doing now comes into your marriage. It does not stay outside of it. I'm telling you right now, it's going to take you a decade or more to deal with the problems that you may or may not be causing right now in your own, in your single life. You're bringing those in. Is your spouse, future or current, your only one physically, emotionally, spiritually and digitally? Are they your only one? Okay.

Second question, I'm getting fired up. Second question. What is the difference between the Godly standard of beauty we just talked about and the cultural standard of beauty that we kind of all see intuitively? One of the reasons I think for most marriages that it's hard to fully enjoy the beauty of our spouse, is that we're judging them by a standard they can't see or don't know about. The culture's standard. Now I think there are three main differences between the culture's standard of beauty, which is what we see on billboards and magazines and Instagram, all this stuff, and our Godly standard of beauty, that which is our spouse.

The first difference is that one of these is simple and the other is complex. Straightforward. The culture's standard of beauty looks mostly at just the appearance. It looks at billions of people dead or alive, and then what is popular and attractive right at this very moment, and then it spits out a sort of standard of beauty out of the algorithm that is ever changing, uncommon and unrealistic for you to fulfill. Just pours out of there, right? Size zero anybody? Size zero, kind, gracious, right? Paul talks about all those things.

Proverbs 31 woman, she's all these. Size zero, kind, Proverbs 31, great mother-in-law, laughs at all your jokes. I mean this is the perfect woman. And guess what? She's unrealistic, mostly because you're not all that funny and it's hard to laugh at you, but there's other reasons as well.

Ladies. Six foot two, six foot three, 400 grand a year, six-pack abs. Oh by the way, loves dishes, loves laundry, loves changing diapers, right? The perfect man. Listen, Chris Hemsworth can only marry one woman. Okay, good luck, by the way.

Next. The culture's standard of beauty algorithm is complex and it's uncommon and it's always changing. So even if you somehow do get the culture's standard of beauty, just wait a while and, sure enough, it will change and they will change races or change hair length or change age, and all of a sudden you no longer have the culture's standard of beauty.

The Godly standard of beauty is simple because, because it's your spouse. It's your spouse, that's it. Whoever you've married, that's your standard. Perfect. Sarah, my wife, is my standard. She'll always be my standard. Your spouse will always be your standard. So, if you married a blonde, then that's what you like, you like blondes, you no longer like brunette women. You like the blonde woman, that one, right? Unless she dyes her hair, in which case you switch immediately, that's kind of the way it works. <laugh> One time my standard of beauty was a blonde with a blue streak in her hair because she dyed her hair with henna and it didn't work. And I loved it. It was great everybody. It was fantastic. Simple versus complex.

The next thing, difference between the two standards: content, contentedness versus insatiability. The culture's standard of beauty, friends, is never satisfied. I don't think I'm telling you anything you don't know, but sometimes it's like you need to hear it again to really believe it, to really go, yeah, I know that's been true but I haven't really been living that way. The culture's standard of beauty will never be satisfied. And if we hold our spouse or your future spouse to that standard, we've set them up for failure because they'll never meet the goal.

Remember, ever-changing, uncommon, unrealistic. I mean, even Kim Kardashian cannot keep up, and listen, she has unlimited desire and resources to change. And Lord knows she is trying like every day she's like a video game character. She comes out with different hair, different height somehow, different weight. And you're like, what happened one day from the next 5'5" to 5'2", it's like how is it happening? It's hard to maintain that. It is impossible to do. You're going to grow, friends, if you follow the culture's standard, hungrier for all of the different meats of your cultural stew. And your spouse will eventually begin to feel bland to you every time you indulge in the culture's standard. That's just the reality.

Marriage though, the Godly standard of beauty, leads to contentedness because it aligns with how God designed us. He wants this environment for us. Some of us—you have to understand we are designed for marriage and to flourish in the context of Godly covenantal marriage. That's what we're designed for. Many of us are out there using a MacBook as a baseball bat and we're trying to hit a home run with a laptop that is being destroyed. Like that's not what it's designed for. But that's what we do when we live out in the culture's standard of beauty.

Look what the Godly standard view looks like in verse 11. Bear with me. "I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines have budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince." Now as you had to guess as to what that may or may not mean, they are coming together in sexual intimacy and they're describing it in such a poetic way that maybe it's hard to understand or see. It's very hard for people in church to hear stuff like this because we never talk about it. The truth is 2 Timothy 3:16, all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, correction, reproof, training in righteousness including this.

What is this trying to tell us? Using this wisdom, and trying to apply it to our lives, we can discern that this couple does not let the culture's standard of beauty in. They keep it out. And what happens? Companionship, calling, aligned calling, babies and sexual intimacy. It is wondrous, it is creative and it is holy and it is enjoyable. Quick aside, okay, just sidebar here, we can't hear this and say, yep, contentedness, that makes sense. See honey, we need to be content with everything our marriage is. You hear that? Finally, someone's gonna say it. We need to be content, right? Not exactly. You see, effort in our marriages is still required to make a marriage work. Okay? We can't just say, you see, babe, you need to take me as I am. Everything I am is fine. I don't need to improve, I don't need to look nice, I don't need to work hard, I should be good enough for you.

Let me tell you, our couple here works to pursue one another. They pursue and embrace, and it is not so much, it is not so much a great marriage to say, I'm going to be exactly as I am without any change. In fact, I might even dig my feet in a little bit into the dirt and I'm not gonna do anything at all to pursue you, but you better pursue me, or this marriage doesn't work. No, our couple doesn't do that at all. They love one another. There's mutual love and respect going back and forth here. They wear perfume. You hear about the nard, like that's, it's a weird word, but it's cologne and perfume. They look nice, they smell nice, they take showers, okay, they do, they look nice because they're trying to attract one another because they love each other. We should pursue that as well.

The last difference between the two standards, the culture's and the Bible's, is one is humanizing and the dehumanizing, the Godly standard of beauty sees people as they are made in God's image. Hear me, three parts. Mind, body, spirit. Fully integrated beings, fully integrated beings. When you and I are made in God's image, we are fully integrated. We are body, we are soul, we are mind, we are spirit, we are all of these things connected together, right? The cultural standard of beauty loves to remove one or two of these elements. Usually, the culture's

standard will remove the mind and the soul, and what you're left with is a body to sort of harvest pleasure from as a result.

Tell me I'm lying. Many dating apps will do this. Not all I understand, okay? I already know. But listen, they swipe bodies away looking just at merely appearance, swipe, swipe, swipe, forgetting a soul is attached on the other side of that person. And when you think about it like that, man, it really is a lot of responsibility to do that.

One of the worst dehumanizing elements of the culture's standard is digital with things like pornography. I'm gonna spare you all the shocking statistics of pornography and its damaging effects. Even secular society understands that it's damaging and is destructive. I'm not going to give you the shock value of all that, but all I'll say here is that pornography and really even social media in general, by the way, mostly all versions of it where you view the bodies of other people without their soul attached, treats human being like a commodity, a flesh pod to be utilized for sexual pleasure.

Online subscription sites get even worse. We've talked about this before, but things like OnlyFans are even more insidious. Last time I talked about this, I got a question, I forget, maybe a couple questions like why would you talk about something like that, right? Why would you mention a paid subscription site for intimacy? And I said, well, I didn't say anything at that moment, but here's what I'll say now, \$5.55 billion in 2022 were spent on this website. Half a million new subscribers a month on this website. And nobody knows who's using it. So somebody's lying.

The point is this thing is insidious, and I'll tell you why, because it uses the culture's standard of beauty, which is images and sexual intimacy, all these things, as a lure to give people a phantom amount of what they actually are really after, which is a deep solve for the ache of loneliness and a lack of companionship in their heart. So, they get you in with an image and then go, hey, actually let's have a relationship together. And it's preying on the Imago Dei's desire for deep companionship. The Imago Dei longs to be connected because we've been disconnected through sin. It's insidious. And so men sort of destroy and have put women out there and absolutely harvested them and used them through pornography. And now there's sort of a turning of the tides where in some sense predominantly, but not exclusively, in some sense there's a turning of the tide where women are now in charge, and now are preying on lonely and disaffected men. This is horrifying, it's sad and it's a bastardization of what's true about the Imago Dei.

Sadly, this type of behavior literally rewires the brain. We reshape our brain so they find pleasure and satisfaction in images rather than people. This ends up impacting various aspects of our lives, including certainly how we see men and women, but especially how we actually interact with our spouse. This is a huge problem. So here's the deal. Every time you view digital sexual images, neurologically you're carving a path in your brain, right? A rut, you're carving a rut into your brain that becomes more pronounced each time you travel down it until it

becomes permanent in your head. That's just neurologically what's taking place with our pleasure centers.

It's kind of like driving home from work, like sometimes you just kind of wake up and you're there. Kind of scary, kind of like, what, how did that happen? Like, do I have it? Is it hitting me? Is CTE finally here? You know what I mean? I'm thinking about it, right? But you just show up. It happens like twice a day to everybody, right? I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding.

But the point is—don't laugh! My wife's laughing at me. The point is, every time you use these forms of pleasure, you're carving a neural pathway. In the book I just recommended to you by William Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*, he says this, "This neural system trough, along with neurotransmitters and hormones, are the underlying physical realities of a man's sexual experience. Each time that an unhealthy sexual pattern is repeated, a neurological, emotional and spiritual erosion carves out a channel that will eventually develop into a canyon from which there is no escape."

Essentially, we short-circuit our God-given desires towards Godly standard of beauty, which is our spouse. And in its place, we have a rewired, biologically engineered neuro-path that ultimately leads to our destruction. And it's chemically and biologically wired when we do it.

And now all of a sudden, in the cultural standard of beauty, every new person you walk past is hot. Oh, look at her. She's so hot. Look at him. Oh man, he's so hot, right? They're hot; eternal hell fire, far hotter and likely where we're headed if we don't get this under wraps. This is very serious. Listen, the, the, gosh I can't even talk. The devil has fooled people way smarter, way more intuitive, way more thoughtful, way more careful than us. We have to run to the grace of God. We can't presume upon our strength and our willpower. We even know just biologically that willpower is a finite resource in the human body.

You cannot white-knuckle a Christian faith. You need to go to a source that's far deeper, far stronger, far more powerful than you. Apart from Christ, you and I are capable of anything. It would be foolish to think otherwise. We have to be careful, it's very important. Now, if you don't do any of that stuff, I get it. Of course, people have the good old fashioned sort of sexual sin in the form of affairs, AKA adulteries, hookups in the form of fornication, so we have actual real word for it. And we also discard the soul and only use the body in those senses too.

Millennials and Gen Z-ers love to increase their body count as they say. Now if you don't know what that is and you're old, body count used to mean how many people you would kill in a war. And now we use the term to describe how many partners we had, intimate partners we've had, right? The issue with a body count is that you forget increasing your body count actually means you're increasing your soul count, which makes you the grim reaper walking around snatching the souls of other people. That's the actual brutal facts and reality of what we are doing.

You understand, right? Like I'm not just trying to be crass, I'm trying to tell you that the culture has softened the blow of sexual sin. So that way we can absorb it and deal with part of it and

it'd be okay. But I'm telling you, it's actually a really serious thing. It's a serious thing that leads many people away. This guy, Solomon, had a thousand partners that he was committed to. That's a lot. He had a real harem, but a lot of us have digital harems on our phones and computers, and we mock Solomon. How could Solomon do that? Really, we do the same thing.

We're in danger. Now, it's not all of our fault. I think it, and ultimately, we're all responsible; we all have to stand before Jesus and give an account, but I will say that I do think the culture has set us up for failure. It has given us every option to sort of binge on what the world has to offer to indulge in temptation and ultimately leads to our destruction. And we know it's wrong. Like we feel it in our gut. Like, man, I just don't know if this is right. And culture's like, no man, do it. It's fine. Do you! That's who you are. It's college, it's fun. Do you, enjoy your life, just do it. You know, like, but it didn't make me feel great. I think I made a bad decision. And culture's like, no you didn't. You're fine. This is, it's just a fun. Culture spits on your head and tells you it's rain. That's demonic.

If this is you and you've succumbed to this in some ways, and listen, all of us have on some level, so hear me, I'm not calling you out and making you feel like you're worth less than, or anything like that. All of sin and fall short of the glory of God. We're all in this boat and we're all implicated. There's not good people and bad people in this life. There's people and Jesus. We all need Jesus.

If this is you, I think William Struthers does offer us a response that might be helpful. He says this, "The process of sanctification is an addiction to holiness, a compulsive fixation on Christ and an impulsive pattern of compassion, virtue and love. This is what we are wired for. This is what we are meant for." Friends, if you're in sin, then you need to replace your addiction with an addiction to Jesus.

If you become enamored with the world, you need to become enamored with Jesus. You need to be intentionally impulsive in your desires to consume God's word and to meditate on him day and night. And don't go dormant sexually. Go to Jesus and explain your frustration with your spouse or with the world and let him awaken you.

Now maybe this feels trite; maybe it feels trivial. Like, oh thanks, just go to Jesus, huh? I think I feel like I could have figured that one on myself. I get that, and I know, and that frustration is significant because maybe your struggles are significant. Maybe you are struggling. Maybe your marriage or relationship hangs in the balance.

But let me give you one last word. Beauty, whether it's Godly or whether it's cultural, is always unsatisfied. I'll say it again. Beauty is unsatisfied in this life by nature. Beauty, even love, always creates a deficit the more we pursue it. That's why we chase it so badly. We engage even a spouse and we just want more of it and want more of it, we're not fully satisfied. We're always striving to fill the gap it creates, and hear me, we're never going to fill the gap. Following the cultural standard of beauty will give you the most hollow form of satisfaction. It will make you

discontent, frustrated, and it will make you manifest addict-like behavior as you try to solve that problem.

But, you see, the spouse God brings you is the deepest form of partial satisfaction of beauty, but it is only partial. Total satisfaction from beauty will not come in this life. Love, just being in the very thing it is, is always in a constant state of lack, married or unmarried. Your spouse, though, because they exist in this Godly marriage environment, then can be a window to God. They can be a window to God. Their beauty then can point you to Yahweh who is the only form of total satisfaction. You see, when you look in the eyes of your spouse, you see a wondrous reflection of the beauty, not of themselves, but of God. That's why it touches you so deeply because you're sensing transcendence. Not just because they're hot, although maybe they are. You're sensing transcendence and power in them that they're reflecting God.

If you don't have God today, married or not, married or not, you will never be satisfied. Never. You will always search. And hey, you know, you may have done some stuff you're not proud of. Okay? I understand that. Jesus though isn't just the apex of beauty like I described. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who offers you grace and forgiveness in sin. And you can right now leave in this moment whether you've got a 10,000-pound millstone on your back, or whether you've got just a backpack full of a bunch of textbooks, either way, you can leave without any of that stuff and give it right to Jesus.

Jesus is the great reconciler. Isn't that good news? You don't have to walk out of this room with a boulder tied around your neck. Jesus is the great peacemaker. He wants you to know that you can be made forgiven and you can be made new. You don't have to walk away being dirty. Jesus doesn't let people stay dirty, not when they want him. He makes them clean. All who come to Jesus can be made clean, full beauty, rest in the presence of Christ and Christ alone, who forgives sin and reconciles us with our maker. That's good news. Do you want to be satisfied today? You can in Jesus. And so it is.

Question and Response

Eddie:

Alright, sermon's over. Will you welcome—Oh yeah, sure. Will you welcome Josh and Crystal Ricciardi up? We're gonna do some Q and R. Normally we've been doing Q and Rs, and again, if you've got questions, you can absolutely scan them in.

"Did God only create it so every person has their one "true love", or has God given us humans the free will to assess others and pick our spouse (based on what the Bible describes a spouse to be like)?"

Josh:

Do you want to go?

Crystal:

Sure. I would say that yes and no. So yes, there's one true love, but I think it's really about when you decide to make that covenant relationship, that commitment to that other person, that God fully honors that. And yes, we only have one spouse, we're not looking to others to fulfill that love, and yeah, God honors that. I think we put unrealistic expectations on our spouse when we get married and we think you're our soulmate. And then we quickly realize that they've failed us, and it's okay, you know, that we can just come to Jesus with that. But when we put all those unrealistic expectations of you, you're the one, and you're my soulmate and then uh-oh. <Laugh> You know, it takes work. So yeah.

Josh:

I mean I think we bring that into our Christian life and when we do premarital mentoring and if you're, if you engage in your relationships, like I need to find the right person who is that one soulmate, it really becomes, it's gonna be my standard. And it's gonna be about me, and it's also gonna give you a card to say in your marriage later on, maybe if they're not the right one, it's okay to jump and do that. So it is like we shared, your one soulmate, your one person is the one that you pursue and you commit to for your life. And they're a Christian. So there is those that you say no to, and those that are not aligned, they're not a Christian. Because that's like the biggest part of your life. So yeah.

Eddie:

Good. I would just add, I mean, in case this is a theological question, does God only create every person or does he give us the free will to choose? I mean, the Bible's capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time, guys. You're free to choose whoever you'd like. And God's allowed to sovereignly predestine that at the same time. The only reason why we see like a contradiction in that statement is because of our limited human understanding of the world and the Bible. God's totally capable of doing a lot of things at one time. So, let's do next question.

"Is it demeaning or condescending for beauty to be such a primary part of woman's identity? Isn't there more focus in this book on a husband encouraging other areas—sorry, why isn't there more focus in this book on a husband encouraging other areas of his wife's life?"

Josh:

Yeah, I mean, seeing this question, um, the broken world has made it demeaning when you focus on the physical is the only thing, and there's been a lot of harm and a lot of just bad stuff when someone's lifted up, especially a woman, if beauty, physical beauty is the only thing. And so, uh, it can be. But, what I love about what we're going through is this picture is redeemed. This picture is the fact that we need to look at all aspects of beauty, that it's okay. And so we need to hear that. And, um, I don't know. That's what, that's good.

Crystal:

I also think of, like, our first love, so Jesus is our first love, and always coming back to that first love. And when we fall in love with Jesus and when we meet Jesus, you know, this is a picture of that, of we want to tell everybody about the beauty of Jesus and the beauty of him loving us.

And he sees us as beautiful. And so to accept that, that the Lord sees us as beautiful. And over time, yes, we get very distracted. And I think it's really important to come back to that first love and remember what that beauty is and to take time and to appreciate beauty, just like you're saying, that draws us to Jesus and who we've been made to be. And we are image bearers of Christ. And so, it's okay to feel beautiful to know that you're beautiful and that I'm happy that my husband thinks I'm beautiful. But there is so much baggage too that can come with that. So recognizing, you know, where someone's coming from with trauma or you know, any of that, but like getting back to that first love and proclaiming the beauty of Christ.

Eddie:

That's good. Wow. Geez, you're really good at this stuff.

Crystal:

<Laugh>. I'm done.

Eddie:

I think it's interesting, is it demeaning—there is a focus on the woman's beauty, but I think it's interesting, just, it's helpful to know that we're all looking through the Bible in a particular time through a particular context and particular place in the world, particular region of the world. And there is a lot in this book on the focus of the woman's beauty, and there's also a lot of focus on the beauty of the man, too. And I think it's interesting, just I'm curious more than anything why we decided to choose the woman as the one being sort of looked at in her beauty and not the man. I think that's curious. Why did we do that?

And I would also say, as we just described, the beauty of the woman is described not just in her physical beauty either, but in her presence, in her power, and in her stature. We talked about that. And the man is described the same way. So I would, I would always just remember when we read the scripture, we're reading through it through our own particular lens and that may or may not inform the way we see or not see things. And it's always helpful to get other perspectives and ask questions like this. And then that's why this is a great question. Next question. Ooh, it's a big one. Okay. I need bigger glasses for this guy here. No, I'm just kidding.

"As a husband, how do I compete with my wife's relationship with social media? I want my wife to believe me when I tell her that she's beautiful and that I love her. Even when social media gives her the impression that life is measured in other things like big house, lavish parties and social events. If I don't look like the things she sees online, I feel like I don't measure up."

Crystal:

Can I start this one?

Josh:

Go ahead <laugh>.

Eddie:

That would be wise. Yeah.

Crystal:

No, I would just say pay attention to what you're paying attention to. And as wives, as women, I think we fall into that trap of, I won't generalize, but I know a lot of women, even more so than like pornography online, of just really fantasizing about what life could be. And we watch a lot of movies, you know, the man comes in and saves the day and he's amazing, you know, all of that. It's not reality and that, you know, that's okay, but we spend a lot of time paying attention to those things that are super distracting to what our purpose and even as a wife too. So yeah.

Josh:

I mean, not knowing all the context here, but it looks like, you know, how do I compete with social media? If it's not social media, it's gonna be the kids, it's gonna be the in-laws, it's gonna be the friends. So for men, I just would encourage you, you're not competing. You need to love your wife. And you're gonna feel all kinds of stuff. And I think what stands out for me is especially like, hey, I can't get my wife to believe that I love her. Like, you're going to have to figure out trial and error over and over again. Your wife's not a piece of IKEA furniture that you just fixed real quick, boom, I'm done. You're going to have to work at it, men. And, um, some of that may be leaning into, because I see here, maybe like you're probably angry, you're probably hurt, but can you, can you tell that to your wife, like, wow, when these things are happening, I feel lonely. I feel scared, I feel shameful. Lean in with that, because I think for men that's very hard for us. And so yeah, I would just encourage you there.

Eddie:

If people are, are deep in a problem like this, and obviously we can't answer or respond to that in this short time of what can they do guys? What are some tips? I mean, is there a way we can help them?

Josh:

Yeah, no, that's good. I mean, there's a reason we're in community. Like when we've struggled in our marriage, we tried to white-knuckle it alone. When we're struggling in our marriage, we don't know how to communicate, we don't know how to love each other, we've reached out to other people around us. And that's the value of being vulnerable in your community, making friends trying to connect, but also our gospel care. Crystal and I do a lot of ministry and I work with men, we work with premarital couples. You have to be in community. You have to know that it may just be a 10 minute conversation. It doesn't mean you're going to be in therapy for four months.

Eddie:

Mm-hmm.

Josh:

So take advantage of those of us here that really want to love you in this way and give you a chance so you can check out that QR code. Definitely.

Eddie:

Yeah. Our pastors, you know, we have gospel care ministry and so if there's things you'd like to work on in a more deep level, whether that's one of our elders, you have an opportunity to get help. I understand maybe there's a little fear about pulling out a QR code or something like that. This is available on our website. You can absolutely go and find some gospel care, if you would like to talk to somebody, and we could refer you to different professionals, as needed. But it's always helpful to bring the light to that which is in the darkness. Marital problems happen. You're not, you shouldn't be ashamed of going through marriage counseling. Marriage counseling is a sign that you care about your marriage. It's a good thing. Okay. That's all the time we got. Do you mind if I pray for us?

Josh:

You got it.

Eddie:

Well, Lord, thank you for another opportunity to come together. Lord, thank you for Josh and Crystal, their ministry, they're such a blessing to Doxa. I'm thankful for their marriage. Lord, I pray strength over their marriage as they minister and care for the marriages of others. And I do pray for all of us here. We're coming in different spaces. Some of us are single and disgruntled, some of us are divorced and upset, some of us are married and very unhappy, some of us are just really excited about life, wherever we find ourselves. Lord, would you be gracious and kind to us, and minister to us, and show us that you truly are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who gives us all satisfaction. In Jesus' name, amen.