



Sex Before Marriage

When you remove covenant from intimacy

In my last post, I wrote about how sex is an act of worship because having sex, the way God intended, gives worth to Him. It honours what He created by using it as He intended.

However, our society is doing its best to invert that by taking away elements of God's plan so as to distort sex. To make it not something that's worship and creative, but rather destructive to ourselves, to each other, and to society as a whole.

So, today we're going to explore sex outside of marriage, or what happens when you remove the covenant from sexual intimacy.

And to be clear, the legal status of the relationship is not the big problem here. It's the intentional lifelong monogamous commitment to each other. Arguably, many marriages in the Bible are considered marriages simply because they had sex. However, sex is meant to seal a covenant, not substitute for one.

The Biblical Order: Covenant, Then One Flesh

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. - Genesis 2:24 (and quoted in Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7-8, 1 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 5:31)

The order is clear: leave your family, create a covenant with your spouse, then you become one flesh (have sex). But it's the covenant that makes your spouse your spouse.

Yet you say, 'For what reason?'

Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth,

With whom you have dealt treacherously;

Yet she is your companion

And your wife by covenant.

Malachi 2:14

Note: The word “covenant” here (בְּרִית – berith in Hebrew) is the same word God uses to describe His commitment to His people. This is not a light thing. He went through a lot of pain and suffering to fulfill that covenant and continues to do so with us as well. If you want a short metaphor of His relationship with those people, read the book of Hosea in the Bible, and that about sums it up. That is the type of commitment we should be giving to our spouse.

Why Public Declaration Matters

Now, the public declaration of your intention is also important. It tells others what your intentions are. In the case of marriage, it gives them a good example of a covenant preceding sex. It builds community stability and invites accountability. After all, if you're “just having sex,” not many people will stop you if you decide to call it quits. But if you declare that you've made a covenant, hopefully at least someone will step in to help if you start having trouble. If you start betraying your covenant, someone should step in and attempt to set you straight.

God's Will for Sexual Intimacy

Keeping sex within this covenant is God's will for us.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. - 1

Thessalonians 4:3-5

It's so important to Him that He equates our bodies to temples, and what we do with them should glorify Him rather than what the world does, which is to glorify themselves.

"For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." - 1 Corinthians 6:16b-20

Promise First, Passion Second

This order of promise first, passion second, creates safety for intimacy. Inverting that order, as our world teaches, creates nothing but problems.

This is why we are called not to awaken love before its time (Song of Songs 2:7). Things should be done in the right order because while sex before marriage is sexual immorality, outside of God's plan, sex within marriage is highly esteemed.

Beyond Legalism

Now, will you find a verse that says "Thou shalt not have sex before marriage"? Nope. Does that mean it's not a sin? That's a very legalistic way of approaching God's will.

It's exactly what Jesus came to fight against. Jesus inverted their understanding of the law - the Pharisees were using it to find the edges of what they were allowed to do. Jesus clarified that the intent is not to show the boundary, but show the direction. You don't just need to find the boundary and stay within it, as if we're trying to be as sinful as possible without being too sinful. Rather, we should be moving toward God's intent. That's one of the things the law does, showing us where the wrong direction is so that we can move in the right direction. You shouldn't just not commit adultery, you should be utterly faithful to your spouse. (We're going to talk about gatekeeping in another post.)

This is how you walk out a faith that's focused on God rather than focused on sin. Too many Christians act like children, trying to figure out how much they can get away with without getting into too much trouble.

Sex Outside the Covenant Brings Harm

Every example in the Bible of sex outside of that covenant ends in pain or judgment. There is not a single positive example, whereas we are repeatedly reminded that a man should have his own wife, and a wife her own husband.

"Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge." - Hebrews 13:4

The solution to sexual sin? Yep, find a spouse. Not "make sure you find someone good at sex." It's not even "don't have sex." It's "get married." That's God's solution to the problem of sexual desire.

Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. - 1 Corinthians 7:2

Guidance for the Unmarried and Widows

This doesn't just include young people either.

But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. - 1 Corinthians 7:8-9

This order of "covenant first" is there to save us from a lot of natural consequences to ignoring that order.

How Sex Bonds Us (Neurochemistry)

Because the approach should be finding a spouse, someone who will honor the covenant you wish to make. Instead, our society often defaults to finding someone they have fun with, and then later trying to decide if they would make a good spouse. However, having sex changes things. The releases of oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine, and more from sex create attachment (as shown in research by Carter, 1998; McIlhaney & Bush, 2008). They make it more difficult to end a relationship. This is by design. In a marriage, this is a fantastic thing because it encourages you to work through problems, to grow, to learn how to love in the truest sense of the word, not just make you feel good. Sex is like glue; it helps hold a marriage together.

But outside of marriage, this becomes a hindering factor. You shouldn't be using glue to test to see if you're compatible. You become even more infatuated with your partner. You may fail to see red flags that you otherwise would have. As a result, those who have sex outside of marriage are more likely to feel stuck in unhealthy relationships because their body is committed before they ever made a conscious decision to be, and also often haven't evaluated their partner as a long-term partner. Because oxytocin doesn't know if you made a commitment or not, it just knows that you had sex, and so it's going to help bind you to whoever you had sex with.

What Cohabitation Research Shows

And if you have sex with a lot of people without that commitment, you start ignoring that bond, your brain will start discounting it. People who have multiple partners prior to getting married are shown to struggle more in their marriage, particularly in those things that feeling emotionally bonded would help with.

Couples who have sex prior to marriage tend to exhibit higher jealousy and relational anxiety and have lower long-term satisfaction (as found in Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2012, and in the Before "I Do" report from the National Marriage Project). Research shows that when couples cohabit before formal commitment, marital quality and satisfaction tend to decline. For example, the Journal of Family Psychology study found that transitioning into cohabitation was associated with declines in measures of relationship quality over time.

Compatibility vs. Commitment

Now, I think this is partially because many of them didn't really "choose" a life partner. They chose a "good enough for now" partner that then sort of morphed into a long-term relationship.

As well, if you can manage to hold off on the temptation to have sex before marriage, then you train yourself against similar temptations within marriage, including adultery. Those who have sex before marriage have higher rates of adultery as well. This increases with the more partners you've had before marriage. Women with only one partner in their lifetime have about a third of the divorce risk as those who have had two or more, and it keeps increasing. By the time you get to nine partners, it's then double the risk (as summarized in Smith 2023, IFS update on premarital partners).

Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. - Proverbs 4:23

Your risk of divorce also increases when you have sex before marriage. The idea of "testing for compatibility" falls on its face because those relationships that don't test for compatibility by jumping into bed seem to be more compatible. I think this is because their relationship is based on a covenant rather than a sizing up. It's the idea of "whatever you've got, we'll figure it out" rather than "well, let's just see if we're a good fit," and then if things change in the future, the "fit" is broken.

Testing compatibility actually reduces commitment rather than what it's claimed to intend to do.

As well, compatibility is based on a lie that people are static beings who never change. I talk to men and women all the time who are frustrated that the sex they had before marriage is nothing like the sex they're having within marriage. Now, that brings other issues to the table, but the point I want to address here is that people change. Their sexual preferences, responses, and abilities change. Marriage isn't about finding someone where sex works now; it's about finding someone who will be with you to figure out how to have great sex no matter what happens (barring death, then you should stop).

In these marriages, sexual satisfaction continues to get better as they age, as they grow, as they learn together. They both become more skillful, they gain more control, they learn new tricks as they experiment together. I know for us, the sex we're having today is far better than what we had 20 years ago, despite being 20 years older now.

Really good sex requires intimacy, which needs vulnerability, and that trust builds over time. It also requires time to practice and experience working through sexual struggles together.

And lastly, those who wait until marriage report higher trust in their partner's faithfulness, honesty and financial reliability (as also observed in Rhoades & Stanley 2014, Before "I Do").

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. - Luke 16:10

In this case, abstaining from sex when it's inappropriate to have sex is what is considered faithful.

Practical Consequences: Health, Births, and Children

In addition to this, if you and your spouse have never had sex with anyone else, then STDs/STIs aren't much of a concern other than non-sexually contracted means. I have never had to worry about getting tested, about what I might be carrying, or about contacting previous partners because I've never had one. Even so-called "safe sex" isn't perfectly safe (see CDC STI surveillance).

And of course, there's the concern about having children outside of marriage. Sure, people use birth control, but it's not 100% effective. These days about 40% of U.S. births are to unmarried women (CDC NCHS, 2023). That's not including nearly 90% of abortions (CDC, 2023).

Children of unmarried parents are more likely to experience poverty, behavioral and educational challenges, and family instability, often due to their parents splitting up at three times the rate of married parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Manning et al., 2014; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). And children of divorced parents are far more likely to divorce themselves.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate. - Psalm 127:3-5

Our children are our heritage. We should not be setting them up to fail. That covenant between parents brings stability, a better chance at prosperity, and a happy, stable marriage themselves.

We were designed to have children within the stability of a covenant marriage.

Realigning if You've Crossed the Line

Now, if you're currently in a relationship that's engaging in sex outside of marriage, I would challenge you to repent and realign yourself with God's plan. This isn't a "well, we messed up, so no point trying now" situation. Giving in to sin is never a good path.

So, you have two choices:

Stop having sex or get married.

And by the way - there are no loopholes here. Sex is anything sexual. If it involves genitals - it's sex. That includes phone sex, sexting, sending nudes, and anything else you can think of. If you're attempting to illicit a sexual response - you've gone too far.

Those are really the only two options you have to realign with God. Everything else is a lie. And I get it, it's hard either way.

Trying to stop having sex is incredibly difficult for a couple once you're used to it. This is why "just try it once to see if it works between us" is a terrible idea. It won't be once, I guarantee it.

Getting married is daunting and not a decision that should be taken lightly, but presumably you thought enough of this person to open yourself up to them, get naked, have sex together. Hopefully you haven't made a terrible error in judgment.

Either way, it's a good idea to seek a mentor and accountability. It may be awkward to ask, but most mature Christians should be happy to help and thrilled you're looking for it.

“Not Fair” vs. Safe and Wise

Now some will say “Well, it's not fair that I have to wait to have sex.” It's a bit like a five-year-old arguing that it's not fair they can't play with fire. It's not fair they can't play with the sharp knives. It's not fair they can't shoot the rifle.

It's “not fair” because it's not safe. We want you to have an absolutely amazing sex life, and the best way to achieve that is to wait until you're married. Is that a guarantee? Nope. What is a guarantee is that you're going to do some damage by not waiting. It may be small, it may be subtle, but it will happen. The number of people I've had tell me they had no negative effects from sex before marriage, right before they start telling me about their problems with sex in their marriage, is astounding.

Waiting isn't withholding; it's investing in future joy and security. Again, is it guaranteed? Nope, we're human and we have free will, including the will to do stupid and hurtful things, and others have the free will to do stupid and hurtful things to us, so we can't promise it will work out. But I promise you're going to struggle if you don't wait, even if you don't recognize it.

Waiting is the best advice I have, based on all the data and my experiences talking to a vast number of couples with a wide range of experiences, and the Bible agrees with that assessment.

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Sexual intimacy is designed for covenant marriage and reflects God's intent for unity, faithfulness, and sanctification.