

The Quest for Christian Values:  
Sexual Ethics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
John 8:1-11

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When God made you and God made me, he made us male and female for each other. In our quest for Christian Values, I want to land today on the question of sexual ethics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now for parents of young children, let me assure you, this sermon is rated G. Its intent is not to sizzle but to stimulate sound thinking. To stand in a pulpit and speak of God and sex in the same sentence for some, may seem like an oxymoron; an incongruent, contradictory connection of words like awfully pretty, barely dressed, diet ice cream, down escalator, holy water, United Methodist. Herein lies our biggest problem. So I would like to start our thinking with some simple affirmations about our sexuality.

**OUR SEXUALITY IS A GIFT OF GOD**

The creation story says it best. *“God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them. Male and female He created them.”*

With apologies to author John Gray, men are not from Mars and women are not from Venus. Men and women are from God, created in God’s image, designed for full partnership, meant to be equals; for pleasure, for procreation, for covenant and for community.

In the dark ages, at the birth of a child, the first question on the minds of parents, grandparents, even the community at large was the question of gender; is it a boy or a girl? We even put wooden storks up in front yards announcing to the world that a boy or girl was born at this house. Nowadays it is different. Now our children walk in and hand us a video of an ultrasound of a 20-week fetus and saying meet your new grandson or granddaughter. Either way, our gender is a gift of God and not a plaything of modern science.

The fact that we are male or female sets in motion a whole realm of physical, social and spiritual interactions which make us who we are. So our 5-year-old grandson sits at the kitchen table not only counting the number of boys and girls present, but occasionally going into explicit detail about the differences. Such discussions have intensified since our newest grandchild is a girl with ribbons and bows and dolls and clothes. The mystery of our maleness and femaleness will challenge and fascinate us for a lifetime, provided we can get beyond the battle of the sexes and live in the wonder of God’s creation.

**Our bodies are sacred.** No where is that illustrated better than in the incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas time. *“And the word became flesh*

*and dwelt among us.”* The incarnation of Jesus Christ gave sacredness to our physical selves that most religions deny; or as Charles Wesley put it:

“Veiled in flesh the God-head see;  
Hail the incarnate Deity.  
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus our Immanuel.

We are not spiritual beings trapped in a physical body waiting to be delivered to a higher realm. We are human beings, an intertwining of body and soul that still requires a body to function completely on the heavenly shore. So Paul, pleading for responsible sexual behavior says to the people of Corinth, *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?”*

Let me hasten to say, the Church has done a miserable job of communicating this message of sexual giftedness and physical holiness to believers. Long before the sexual revolution of the 1960’s the Church was repressive in its teaching and inconsistent in its practice of sexual ethics. While we are doing better with sex education classes in churches, we still have a long way to go to incorporate healthy, sexual attitudes in the minds of our people. May God help us repent and change our ways and find a better way of life.

### **OUR SEXUALITY IS A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Sexuality is about what we **do** as well as who we **are**. It has everything to do with our being, with who we are, with how we are made, but it also has everything to do with what we do, how we act, what choices we make, how we live out our lives; personally, in relationships, and even in the community. While the Church Fathers, like Augustine and Aquinas, generally approached sex with the admonition of “don’t, except for conceiving children,” the message of secularism over the last 40 years has been “do whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you like.” Both positions are poor places from which to begin an ethical discussion.

So I invite you back to the Bible. While the Bible is certainly no handbook of sexual ethics, it is open and frank about sexual matters and generally lifts the principle of fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness as a tried and true standard of Christian behavior. Now one must ask at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, does this principle have any relevance today? I think it does. Let me tell you why.

### **Fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness is rooted in respect.**

The Bloodhound Gang blasts across our airwaves lyrics to a song that goes like this: “You and me baby, ain’t nothing but mammals so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery channel.” As an old farm boy, let me tell you, people are not animals. We are not rabbits breeding at random. Humans are not even wired the same way sexually as mammals.

Even the libertines promoting the notion of “anything goes” are realizing such animal-like existence in a civilized world is ridiculous. So we now try to settle in society what we should have settled in our souls; sexual harassment, sexual abuse, children having children, rape, molestation and pornography. Are people really freer and safer now than they were before the sexual revolution? I doubt that the average woman walking across a parking lot at night or a coed trying to navigate her way through the sexual wilderness of a college campus would say that we are. The first level of all ethics is respect. What has happened to respect in the last 40 years?

The first principle of morality is to “do no harm.” Maybe it is time to start asking that about our sexual behavior. Am I going to get hurt here? Is my partner going to get hurt here? Will I hurt my family by my behavior? Will I betray others with this action? The medical profession has been saying it for years; the first principle of ethics is to do no harm. Maybe it is time we start asking that question about our sexual behavior. I am encouraged at the sense of responsibility, especially among the younger generation of our time; it’s coming back and I rejoice in it.

**Fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness is grounded in relationship.** A banner hanging in a college dorm expressed it like this: “All we want is love and all we get is sex.”

What we really long for is love and understanding, consideration and compassion, loyalty and constancy, integrity and trustworthiness. That is why commitment is so essential to a meaningful sexual relationship.

Over 5.5 million people are living together these days outside the bonds of marriage. They not only include young singles on their way to marriage, but divorcees who are extra cautious about remarriage, and a growing number of senior citizens who cannot marry for financial reasons. Wherever we finally land as a society on this issue, this much we already know: those who try it to see if they like it, when it comes to marriage, have an even higher divorce rate than those who do not. Relationships grow in the fertile soil of commitment and deteriorate on the rocky roads of fear and distance. Therefore, commitment is an essential part of relationships and that is why we ought to take the risk of making serious, lifelong commitments.

**Fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness is an expression of our spirituality.** Our spirituality and our sexuality are vitally connected. There is a mystery here; something more than meets the eye. Scott Peck says the sexual and spiritual parts of our personalities lie so close together that it is hardly possible to arouse one without the other. C.K. Chesterson put it this way, “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.” Lewis Smedes put it this way, “Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside.” Back when I used to do a lot of marriage counseling, David Mace was my hero. David

tells about a client who said, “My husband and I always have prayer before we make love.” “I was curious,” says David, “so I asked her what they said.” “Well,” she replies, “we relax in each others arms and my husband says, ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.’” May their numbers increase! To understand the vital connection between our spirituality and our sexuality is a link that the Church needs to help people make.

### **OUR SEXUALITY IS EMBRACED BY GOD’S GRACE**

Our scripture lesson today takes place in the Temple courts where the Pharisees drag in a woman caught in the very act of adultery. The story is laced with all kinds of questions like “Where is her partner?” and “How exactly did you catch her in the very act?” Nevertheless, the Pharisees demand a ruling regarding the Law of Moses and when they kept on questioning him, Jesus replies, “*If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*” They go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus and the woman are left to settle the matter. What is happening here?

- 1) Even the Law of Moses required the man to appear, so the case is contaminated from the start.
- 2) Sin is no respecter of persons. That is why Jesus said we need to deal with lust as surely as with adultery.
- 3) If the inner thoughts of a man were written on his forehead, he would never take his hat off.

Sexual sins are as forgivable as any other failures in our moral Lives. “*Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.*”

The Bible makes no distinction between sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. Paul says in Colossians “*Put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, lying and put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*”

As I was surfing the Internet looking for sermons on this text, I discovered a sermon delivered by a colleague of mine in which he said, “Sexual sin is different and in a sense worse than any other kind of sin.” While I respect my friend, I just can not find that in the Bible. We ministers who preach grace need to be careful less we practice judgment.

Romans 8:1 says, “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ, the law of the Spirit set us free from the law of sin and death.*” Whether you are suffering from real guilt, imagined guilt, or just a vague shame about your identity, may you be set free in Christ today.