**Marriage Core Seminar**

**Class #8: Sex in Marriage**

**I. Introduction**

When it comes to sex in marriage, it’s hard to imagine a topic that’s at the same time more awkward and more important.

*Awkward* because of the way our culture has distorted ideas of sex; *awkward* because sex between husband and wife is personal but not exactly private—we all politely pretend sex doesn’t happen, and at the same time are happy to celebrate someone getting pregnant and the birth of each new baby!

But at the same time it’s *important*. Sex has the power, when perverted, to capture and destroy lives, and I’m not mainly thinking about STDs—but about addiction, disappointment, adultery, and more. And *important* because it stands at the center of the experience of marriage.

So this morning I’d like to answer one key question: “what is sex in marriage?” And then we’ll examine some common challenges to sex being what it’s supposed to be.

So then first,

**II. What is Sex?**

This may seem obvious, and perhaps not appropriate material for church. But I’m convinced that many Christians have not adequately answered this question, which is why it’s so hard to think rightly about sex, whether you’re single or married.

Can anyone tell me what word older English translations used to describe sex? As in, Adam (blank) his wife Eve and she conceived and… [knew[[1]](#footnote-1)]. Right. Now, you may have wondered in the past why the Bible uses a euphemism like this. Well, the English translators used “knew” not because of squeamish sensibilities but because that’s the English translation of the original word. And I think there’s a wealth of wisdom that comes from the Bible using “know” to describe sex. Our culture often thinks of sex as recreation. Well, the Bible thinks of it as relationship.

Remember, sex is pictured in Genesis 2 by man and wife being “one flesh.” Sex is a picture of the union between husband and wife, and the word “know” is a beautiful depiction of that union. Not “Adam had sex with his wife” but “Adam *knew* his wife.” They were in relationship together. They were one flesh. Like we see in the Song of Songs, “My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.”

Let me share two implications to help explain this and then we’ll go a bit deeper.

First, if sex is a picture of union then there are as many different kinds of sex as there are aspects to a relationship. Sex can be passionate and hot, but it can be tender and gentle. It can be cautious and careful, or playful and adventurous; it can be serious and it can be light; it can be sleepy or it can be vigorous. It can even be sad. In that sense, sex is like a mirror, physically reflecting the union of marriage.

Second, since sex is a picture, it isn’t so much a solution to problems in a marriage, as it is a display of the state of your union (the problem of sexual temptation being an obvious exception)**.** More a *thermometer* than a *thermostat*. Too often, couples want to use sex to overcome a lack of intimacy, or to circumvent conflict. But the fact is, sex will display what’s really there. If a union is characterized by gentleness and respect, by understanding and intimacy, that’ll come out in its sex life. If a union is marred by selfishness, miscommunication and distance, then it should be no surprise if sex feels like that too. Our culture says that if you’re having trouble in your marriage, you should hop in bed and spice up the sex. The Bible says, if you’re having trouble in your marriage then sex will only exacerbate those difficulties. Hop *out* of bed and start talking. Seek to know and be known, and good sex will follow.

But this idea of sex as a picture of the union isn’t all that Scripture gives us. There’s one particular aspect of the marriage union that sex depicts especially well, the heartbeat of the union, that we talked about when we looked at 1 Peter 3 a few weeks ago. “Making vulnerability safe.” That’s the sweetness of marriage, that’s the most powerful way in which marriage shows off the goodness of God, and that’s at the heart of the sexual union. To see that, let’s open up for a few minutes to 1 Corinthians 7.

Verses 3-4. “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”

The first half—that the husband has sole authority over his wife’s body—would have been assumed in that culture. The second half—that it’s exactly the same for the wife—would have been explosively new.

Now, when I’m reading through this with a couple in premarital counseling, I generally ask, “so—does this mean that you have to have sex whenever your spouse wants to?” Which can lead to some confused conversation, and shows how little we really understand what sex is.

Let me give you a parallel example. My wife is a doctor. Now, let’s say a patient tells her something really embarrassing. Can she go off and share that with someone else? [No.] Because who controls the information? [The patient.] Right. HIPAA; in medicine, confidentiality is critical. On the other hand, I’m a pastor. Let’s say you want to tell me something really embarrassing about yourself, so you ask for me to keep whatever you’re about to say confidential. I can’t ever promise that. I can promise discretion—that I won’t ever use this information except in your best interests, out of love for you. But I can’t ever promise confidentiality[[2]](#footnote-2). Now in that situation, who controls the information? [I do]

You see, our world very much views sex like the doctor-patient relationship. I have authority over my body, and I give my partner access when I want, to the extent that I want. But what Paul describes here is the opposite. Like the pastor-member relationship. When I got married, I handed the keys to my body over to my wife. *She* has authority over my body, Paul says. Why would I do such a thing? Because I know she loves me.

Do you see how vulnerable this makes us? And where vulnerability is protected by love, it’s wonderfully safe. Beyond that, *sweetness* in marriage, as we’ve been saying throughout this class, comes from vulnerability, made safe by love. I’ll repeat that. Sweetness in marriage comes from vulnerability made safe by love. So is the dynamic of 1 Corinthians 7 scary? You bet it is! But it is also the secret to a sweet marriage, and to sex as God designed it.

The differences in marriage of Genesis 2—differences not just of personality but of authority and role, as a husband accepts his role as leader and a wife as helper—they make marriage feel vulnerable, especially for her. Yet when vulnerability is held in trust, marriage is wonderfully sweet. Sex, as we see here in 1 Corinthians 7, is the centerpiece of that safe vulnerability. Or, to use the language of Genesis 2, in sex we are “naked and not ashamed.”

That means that what Paul describes here in 1 Cor. 7 is an entirely different creature than what our world refers as “sex.” Worldly sex is only so vulnerable, which means it can only ever be so sweet. Christian sex in marriage throws caution to the wind and hands the keys over, because vulnerability is protected by love. There is nothing more vulnerable than sex. And in marriage, when that vulnerability is held in trust, there is nothing sweeter or more delightful.

If you’re married, ask yourself: do you do this? Do you look out for yourself in your sexual relationship, and expect your spouse to do the same? Or are you thinking about what your spouse wants/desires/needs in sex, seeking to be the guardian of their self-interests?

This is, of course, exactly what we see in the Song of Songs—the *priority of this self-giving love that celebrates, delights in and cherishes the beloved*. And what we notice when we read this amazing love poem, is that before we ever get to physical intimacy, the lover and his beloved have spent much time learning about and delighting in each other, and then lavishing those insights on each other. Song of Songs 1:15, *“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are like doves. How handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant.”*

The sad truth though, is that for many men, emotional and spiritual intimacy is not a necessary precursor to physical intimacy. Which means so many men have no idea what sex can really be. The goal of sex isn’t mere sexual gratification. ***It’s to give expression to the secure love that is the marriage union.*** Keep the two tools of 1 Peter 3:7 in mind, understanding and honor. Understand her, study her, so she feels known by you. And honor her—so she feels cherished and desired by you. And then pursue that all day long—from the way you speak to her over the breakfast table, to your interaction in the middle of the day via phone or e-mail, to the way you serve and attend to her at your reunion that evening. Touch her mind and her heart before you ever touch her body[[3]](#footnote-3).

Of course, a wife needs to match that, in two ways. First, even though a wife is more vulnerable than her husband by virtue of her position in the relationship, that doesn’t imply that there’s no vulnerability for him. She can use these same tools to make the vulnerability of sex safe and delightful for him. Second, as his leadership makes marriage to feel safe, she can respond by entering further into what he’s created for her—delighting in following him, trusting him, relying on him. Anticipating and looking forward to intimacy with him as the Beloved does in the Song of Songs. “*All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him*.” (SoS 3:1) That’s the language of desire, of anticipation, of longing.

So that’s what real sex is—a picture of union. And it’s something that can *only* be experienced in marriage because only within the safe walls of commitment is its vulnerability ever truly safe. But of course, even in marriage, we can mess this up. So in a moment I’ll start walking through five challenges to this kind of sex. But before we get there, are there *any questions?*

**III. Challenges**

First challenge is **Shame**. For too many, the marriage bed is crowded with hauntings from the past, things we did that we’re ashamed of. Those words at the end of Genesis 2 sound wonderful—and so out of reach. “naked and not ashamed.” Oh if only I *were* that innocent, you think. But I’ve spoiled everything.

Enter the gospel of forgiveness, right? Christ came to bear our sin and our guilt *and* our shame. 1 Peter 2:6, “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” If there’s something you’re ashamed and you’ve never sought forgiveness from your spouse, you need to do that. In addition, I hope that what we’ve seen already today also helps you escape shame for past sexual sin. As I said, married sex is an entirely different creature from what the world calls sex. Sure they may both have the same mechanics. But what happens inside the safe walls of a marriage that’s committed for life—this self-forgetting, completely vulnerable, completely safe core of your marriage—is something wildly new in marriage, no matter how many times you had what you called sex before marriage. And it’s something that grows with marriage.

Second challenge: **Embarrassment**. Some of us feel embarrassed by sex, like it’s a necessary evil, or something we’re not supposed to want much. Some people, years into marriage, haven’t learned to enjoy sex because they’ve never thought it was important to enjoy sex. But remember that *God* created sex. Before sin entered the world. God in his kindness made chocolate to taste good, sunsets to be beautiful, sex to feel good. Why? To point us to him! Think about how 1 Timothy 4:4 applies to sex.

“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

Paul’s talking about marriage here. Everything created is good—and is to be enjoyed. And that enjoyment, when received with thanksgiving, is part of how and why we worship. Do you thank God for sex? Sex should drive you to worship, as you see a new dimension of God’s good creation—married sex—that you’d never before been able to appreciate. And as you experience new dimensions of married sex—5 years in, 10 years in, 30 years in—that you’ve never experienced before.

Of course, embarrassment doesn’t just come from bad theology; it can also come from our imperfections as human beings. That’s where we need to remember that when the Bible describes desire and attraction in marriage, it uses imperative language, not aspirational language. In other words, desire—even sexual desire—isn’t something you look for; it’s something that’s commanded of you. Listen to the words Proverbs 5 gives to young husbands:

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the life of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. (v. 18-19)

Not, “look for someone who intoxicates you with her love” but “see that wife of yours? Be intoxicated always in her love.” Imperative, not aspiration.

Attraction isn’t mainly something you start with on your wedding day; it’s something you cultivate. Yes, I was attracted to my wife when we were dating. But how much more now that I’ve seen her beauty and loyalty to me in moving around the country, raising a bunch of kids together, walking through hardship, and so on. As you learn to appreciate the things about your spouse that God sees in them, they’ll become more beautiful. Not “well, she’s falling apart on the outside but beautiful on the inside.” Just “she’s beautiful.” Like we saw in 1 Peter 3.

A few years ago, a story in the Post caught my eye: a man whose wife hired a photographer to take some racy photos of her, airbrush out her flaws, and presented the album as a gift to him. He wrote the photographer a letter that they published. I think it makes this point beautifully:

When I opened the album that she gave to me, my heart sank. These pictures…while they are beautiful and you are clearly a very talented photographer….they are not my wife. You made every one of her “flaws” disappear…and while I’m sure this is exactly what she asked you to do, it took away everything that makes up our life. When you took away her stretch marks, you took away the documentation of my children. When you took away her wrinkles, you took away over two decades of our laughter, and our worries. When you took away her cellulite, you took away her love of baking and all the goodies we have eaten over the years. I am not telling you all of this to make you feel horrible, you’re just doing your job and I get that. I am actually writing you to thank you. Seeing these images made me realize that I honestly do not tell my wife enough how much I LOVE her and adore her just as she is. She hears it so seldom, that she actually thought these photoshopped images are what I wanted and needed her to look like. I have to do better, and for the rest of my days I am going to celebrate her in all her imperfectness. Thanks for the reminder.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Men especially—but wives as well—educate your taste for beauty. Love what God loves in your spouse, and as they age, they will become more beautiful. That’s how sex grows with marriage. That’s how sex thrives even as our bodies age.

Third: **Broken Trust**

The first two pitfalls I’ve discussed have been about protecting the vulnerability of sex. But remember, vulnerability must be safe. If you want to improve your sex life, grow in your trust in each other. That will do far more for your delight in the bedroom than any book on sex you’ll ever read.

I hope you see from the passages we looked at earlier why broken trust is so damaging to sex in marriage. When vulnerability no longer feels safe, your whole marriage will suffer—but nowhere will that be more apparent than in sex, where you are at your most vulnerable.

This is what we must keep in mind when we consider infidelity. Hebrews 13:4, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexual immoral and adulterous.”

Infidelity destroys marriage because it destroys trust. And that also helps us understand what *makes* for infidelity.

I’m not just talking about adultery. The standard of trust is that for you, “sex” is only about your spouse. Any interest or desire beyond that will damage trust in your marriage, and so anything beyond that is sin. That has implications for what you’re willing to watch (whether or not it’s technically pornographic). What you’re willing to read (that perhaps describes the spouse you so desperately wish you had). What you daydream about. How you dress. There’s so often the subtle temptation that if we’re not satisfied, we go somewhere else to find what we want. Very practically, if you’re married, do you need someone in your life to hold you accountable for a whole-hearted desire for your spouse?

If there’s broken trust in your marriage, you won’t fix it by jumping into bed, no matter how good the sex. Honestly, the sex probably *won’t* be that good, if trust has been broken. Instead, address the broken trust, seeking and finding forgiveness, and moving toward reconciliation.

And that’s why in a good marriage, sex gets better over time. There was a University of Chicago study of sex in the mid-90s that looked at who in America was most satisfied sexually. Those who are young and adventurous and free? No: it turns out that the most sexually satisfied in America are married couples in their 50s with one life-time partner[[5]](#footnote-5). That is *so* contrary to what our culture says, isn’t? But so consistent with the Bible’s view of sex. Sex gets better with time—because over time, you’ve seen more of life together and you’ve had decades to build trust. That’s what makes vulnerability to be safe, and sex to be sweet.

Incidentally, wives are typically much more sensitive than husbands to how trust is doing in the marriage. Not always—but normally. So if that’s your marriage, husbands, I hope you value that early-warning system. Don’t think, “come on—what’s wrong with you, I wanted to have sex tonight” but “Wow—*I* wasn’t thinking we had issues to deal with, but I guess we do. Let’s talk.”

Fourth: **Selfishness**

I’ll be brief here because in many ways, this is a repeat of what I’ve already said. But know that selfishness in your sex life is like a nuclear bomb going off in your marriage. In the most vulnerable, most sacred part of your life, you’re destroying trust by doing the opposite of 1 Corinthians 7. Using those keys your spouse gave you, not for their good, but to get what you want.

Selfishness in sex can look like using sex as a weapon. Using it to manipulate, withholding it to punish. That’s a quick path to destroying any sweetness in your sex life together.

Selfishness in sex can also be wanting sex without any regard for having children. Scripture is quite clear that a key purpose for marriage is to have kids. If someone’s not open to having children, they shouldn’t get married.

Selfishness in sex can even seem positive—like pursuing your spouse’s pleasure. You quickly learn that in marriage, pursuing his pleasure, or her pleasure, is more fun than pursuing your own. Which, selfishly, can turn sex into a pursuit of your own ego. Be wary of the many ways selfishness can disguise itself in sex.

And let me take this opportunity to remind us of how evil, and yet how real, marital rape is. If your wife says no, you never, ever, ever force yourself on her. When talking about our sexual lives in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul writes that “every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body…you are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (v. 18)

You are a Christian, which means you have no right to be selfish. And there are few places where selfishness will have more profound consequences than in your sex life.

One last challenge:

**Busyness**. Listen to what Paul says after those verses we read in 1 Corinthians 7: “Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

*Except*…*perhaps…by agreement…for a limited time*…you see how many qualifications Paul has. A married couple should be having sex regularly.

Now, remember that different seasons of life may present different challenges in having sex. You just had a baby. You’ve got small children. One of you is deployed. You’ve gotten old and sex doesn’t work like it used to. That’s when we must be gentle and understanding, tender and caring, rather than selfish, as we discuss what’s going on.

But it’s important to ask, why aren’t we having sex as much as we used to? As I said earlier, sex isn’t a very good thermostat, but it’s an excellent thermometer. Busyness is almost never the real reason sex isn’t happening. What’s going on in marriage that’s led you to desire this less? That’s a question you *must* answer.

**IV. Conclusion**

As we conclude, let me try to wrap this into a few application points.

*For those who aren’t married*

* Use this material to shape your expectations. This is what sex really is—what’s most pleasurable and satisfying. Be wary of influences you take in, from movies to your own thoughts, that tell you anything else.
* Look for a marriage partner, not a sexual partner. I promise you, the best sex comes from the best marriage.
* Use this to help you see through all the false teaching about sex that you’re immersed in each and every day.

*For those who are married*

* Desire the real thing. The more you focus your desires on sex as a picture of a healthy marriage, the more you will find the delight and satisfaction that God intends in your sex life.
* Remember that sex is a lifelong project. Like fine wine, it will get richer over time as the trust in your marriage gets richer.
* Build a marriage that is vulnerable, and where vulnerability is safe. *That* is the path to the sex life of your dreams.

Let’s close with some of the final verses of the Song of Songs that describes all this so beautifully. Starting in 5:8, “Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” – She’s leaning on him because they’re old. This is the testimony of a lifetime of marriage. “Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

That’s the love we want. Dependent and sweet. Safe and strong. Invincible. The very flame of the Lord. And *that* is what we build in marriage.

*Any last questions?*

1. “Lay with” is also used in Scripture. If you get that answer, ask for the other main term, which is “knew.” Both “lay with” and “knew” are accurate translations of the Hebrew words used to describe sex. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Why not? Two reasons: first, because sometimes someone will tell a pastor something he needs to get help to address (like a suicide threat). But also, because the ultimate authority under Christ for determining who can represent him as a member of the church is not the pastor but the congregation (Matt. 18:17). So if someone tells a pastor that they’re in unrepentant sin and refuse to repent, he cannot keep that information to himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phrase is from C.J. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/10/16/husband-to-photographer-who-airbrushed-wife-you-took-away-everything-that-makes-up-our-life/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert T. Michael, *et. al*., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1994), p. 1, 131; and Edward O. Laumann, *et. al*., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 364, table 10.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)