**Man and Woman in Christ Core Seminar**

**Week 6 – The Meaning of Sex (PB)**

In her book *Rethinking Sex, a Provocation*, the Washington Post columnist Christine Emba described her experience as a 20-something Washingtonian, intentionally abstaining from sex.

“Despite my perpetual virginity, my non-sex-having twenties were full of sex, even if I wasn't the one having it. Countless brunch conversations revolved around my friends' experiences with the men and women in their lives and their processing of what every moment and movement meant. I was goggled at whenever I revealed my uneventful celibacy to a new friend and was frequently (and often reproachfully) lectured on how I was "missing out." ***What I heard again and again was a contradiction: Having sex was a marker of adulthood and a way to define yourself but also, the act itself didn't really matter.*** Good sex was the consummate experience but a relationship with your partner was not to be expected. It was nearly impossible not to indulge your desires, and extended celibacy was a state near unto death—yet I could and did say no and was clearly still alive.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Emba rightly puts her finger on the modern paradox: **Sex means everything. Sex means nothing.**

Sex seems to be everything because sex seems to be everywhere. From song lyrics to television shows to advertisements for everything from cologne to cheeseburgers, you’re not crazy if you feel like you’ve been trained to believe that sex is more special, more significant, and a source of more perfect pleasure than any other thing you could possibly do.

And yet in other ways, sex means nothing. The act itself has been totally disenchanted and deregulated in the modern world. It has no inherent value beyond what consenting adults assign to it. Consent is actually *all* that counts. Even our laws illustrate this paradox: sex is of *ultimate* moral importance so far as consent is concerned, and of *no* moral significance apart from it.

The Bible affirms what we all intuitively know. Sex ***means something***. Consider what the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:18:

“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.”

Sex is a profoundly deep mystery. Because of this, sexual sin is uniquely corrosive to our sense of God’s presence. Whether married or single, our sexuality ***means something***. And with greater understanding can come greater stewardship of the sexual powers God has created us with.

We’ll break the class up into 3 sections this morning. First, what is sex for? Second, what is my sexuality for if I’m not married? And third, lessons and takeaways.

1. **What is Sex For?**

Historically, Christians have said sex is for marriage, children, and … with some caveats, pleasure.

* Marriage (Unitive)

God designed sex to unite two people into the lifelong union of marriage. Genesis 2:22 says

22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman ***and brought her to the man***.

From there the two become one flesh. The diversity of man and woman becomes union. The uniting of ***bodies*** seals the uniting of ***lives***. That language of the woman *being brought to the man*is repeated other times in the marital stories of the patriarchs. Look at Genesis 24:67:

“Then Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her.”

Note there how sex *constitutes* the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah.

Jonathan Leeman puts it this way: “To make bread you mix flour, water, and yeast, and then heat it. You get bread. How do you get marriage? You mix sex with a public commitment.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

To say that sex has a unitive aspect to it is to say that sex is the way our bodies say “yes” to one another. In a marriage, sexual intercourse gives reality again and again to the promises made by marital vow. Sex is a regular renewal of vows with the language of our bodies.

In all of this, Christians can say that sex is meant to have an aroma of Christ’s uniting love to it. As Christ gave himself *freely, totally, and faithfully* to unite us to himself, so Christians promise in marriage to again and again give themselves *freely, totally, and faithfully* to one another.[[3]](#footnote-2)

This is the deeper logic behind the Bible’s prohibition on sexual relations outside of marriage. Because sex is meant to be the body’s way of speaking a total yes to another person, sex outside of marriage contradicts the *free, total, and faithful* love it was made to communicate.

So Paul would say in 1 Corinthians 6:16,

Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”

Sex needs a covenant built on the faithfulness of two persons, unlike the one described here. Sex needs commitment. And it needs that commitment because of its intrinsic power to ***unite***.

While our culture does not see that sex needs commitment, it does see sex as powerful, and it does see sex as requiring consent. For sex to properly reflect its unitive dimension there must be equality and mutual agreement. As obvious as that sounds to modern ears, it’s only that way because of millennia of Christian influence.

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 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. 5 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. (1 Cor 7:3-5)

It is difficult to overstate how revolutionary this passage is against the backdrop of the ancient world. No one would have disagreed with the start of verse 4. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.” But then he says, “Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” The two are ***equals*** in the marriage bed. Each belongs to the other. And as equals there is to be mutual consent there as well. In verse 5, Paul says sexual relations can be abstained from in marriage only *by agreement*.  
  
We can be thankful for the ways in which our culture has caught up to the Bible’s vision for equality and consent. But the Biblical vision isn’t just a mere consent. It’s consent ***and covenant***. It needs both because sex is unitive. Sex is for marriage.

* **Children (Procreative)**

Second, sex is for procreation. One reason we know intuitively sex means something is that of all the kinds of differences in the world between people — differences in size, temperament, skin color, gifts, etc, only sexual difference is capable of bringing another human being into existence.

The unitive and procreative goods of marriage are held closely together in the Biblical narrative. Look at Genesis 4:1:

Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.”

*Knowing* in Hebrew is often used as a way to describe sexual relations. Adam doesn’t just know about Eve. He doesn’t just know some of her interests, her dislikes. He doesn’t just know her personality type or her favorite color. No, he knows her in such a way that it leads to generation … “and she conceived and bore Cain.” Union, and procreation. Knowledge, and offspring.

Begetting offspring in our likeness is one of the chief ways humanity images God. Consider Genesis 5:3,

“When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.”

As God had made Adam after his own likeness, now Adam fathers a son in his own likeness, after his image. In this we see that God’s act of creation provides a partial pattern in how men and women are to populate the earth. Out of the overflow of triune love comes the creation of Adam. And though in a way which only dimly mirrors that, out of the overflow of love between a man and a woman comes offspring.

Glen Scrivener puts it this way: “The filling of the earth mirrors the creation of the earth. It is loving union. It is face-to-face fellowship which, though intensely intimate, is outward-going in its fruitful creativity. The human family is to be made how the world was made - birthed out of love.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

We earlier reflected on Christ’s love being *free, total, and faithful.* But we can also add that Christ’s love is *fruitful*. In John 10:10, Jesus says

“the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Jesus’s love is *additive*. He loves, and *abundant life* is the result. Intimate love between husband and wife ordinarily follows this pattern. Love, knowledge… and then, with God’s blessing, children! Psalm 127:3 -5 says

“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!”

When man and woman give themselves wholly to one another, they give bodies which have written into them the potentiality to bring a third person into being. It is part of what they give and receive. In this way the procreative and unitive aspects of sex strengthen one another, and to completely sever one from another is to threaten both. As the Anglican ethicist Oliver O’Donovan put it, “this is a knot tied by God, which men should not untie.”[[5]](#footnote-4)

And so the Bible forbids not only sex which is not oriented towards union, but also sex which is *by nature* not oriented towards procreation, such as same-sex activity. This is the logic behind Paul’s words in Romans 1 on homosexual activity.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are *contrary to nature*; 27 and the men likewise gave up *natural relations* with women and were consumed with passion for one another…

These unique aspects of sex, the unitive and the procreative, are central to its nature and its meaning. But you’ll see on your handout a third, with a question mark.

* **Pleasure?**

Most in our popular culture, and most on the campuses I work on would say pleasure is the primary meaning of sex. They’d say, Pleasure → union → (way down the line) procreation.   
  
Are they right? I’d like to suggest no, and yes.  
  
First, no. Pleasure is not the point. J Budziszweski puts it this way,

“Certainly sex is pleasurable, but there is nothing distinctive about that. In various ways and degrees, the exercise of every voluntary power is pleasurable. It is pleasurable to eat, pleasurable to breath, even pleasurable to flex the muscles of the leg. The problem is that smellingis pleasurable even if I am sniffing glue, flexing the muscles of the leg is pleasurable even if I am kicking the dog. For a criterion of when it is good to enjoy each pleasure, one must look beyond the fact that it is a pleasure.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

But second, yes. The Bible absolutely affirms the pleasure of sex as well. Song of Solomon is an unabashed celebration of the sexual experiences and feelings of a man and a woman. They are looking forward to giving sexual pleasure to each other in ways that God created their bodies to enjoy. The picture in Song of Solomon is one of anticipation, ecstasy and delight. God wants sex to be rightly enjoyed and celebrated. Sexual pleasure is certainly a gift to be enjoyed in marriage and to thank God for.

It’s better to think of the pleasure of sex then not as the purpose of sex, but as a testimony to the pleasure of *union*. It is no surprise that many empirical studies have confirmed that women in particular report more consistent satisfaction in sex within committed and secure relationships.[[7]](#footnote-6) Sex is good because it ***embodies, signifies, and seals*** the total commitment of one to another that is marriage. ***When we want sex, what we most deeply want is fruitful union.*** Sexual desire is better seen as an inbuilt motivator to push us towards those goods we’ve considered, marriage and children.

Sex is for marriage. Sex is for children. And pleasure provides both a testimony to the goodness of these things and motivator towards using the sexual powers God has given us for the purposes he’s ordained.

I hope in reflecting on the meaning of sex you see something of how ***powerful*** sex is. Song of Solomon 8:7 captures it well: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” The desire for sexual union can be a powerful motive to mature, and to marry. It’s why Paul would say “But if [single people] cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (1 Corinthians 7:9)

Jonathan Leeman likened marriage to baking bread and mixing ingredients. Think about what happens, then, when we misuse ingredients. Suppose I tried to make bread with just flour and water. I’d get a mushy mess. Or suppose I tried to use flour, water, and yeast for something other than making bread, like cleaning the kitchen floor. Again, a mess.

What happens when I take sex, and I divorce it from life-long public commitment? Maybe I place it in a dating relationship, or I take it outside of my marriage? If I do this, I will make a mess. Why? Because I’m using the ingredients for a family and so making all kinds of indescribable connections and bonds. I’m drawing in my vulnerabilities and my inner-self and handing them to you, and asking you to be trustworthy with them, and I’m doing the same for you.[[8]](#footnote-7)

Sex is **powerful**, and understanding it wrongly can have devastating effects, effects that many of us know deeply. And yet, God knew what he was doing when he made us sexual beings, even those of us who are unmarried.

1. **What is my sexuality for if I’m not married?**

* **To make God more knowable**

The language and imagery of sexuality are the most graphic and most provocative that the Bible uses to describe the relationship between God and his people – both positively (when we are faithful) and negatively (when we are not).

Consider a book like Hosea, where sexual imagery is used to emphasize the severity of Israel’s unfaithfulness and yet God’s unwavering commitment to them. Or passages like Ezekiel 16 where idolatry is likened to acts of adultery and prostitution.

Time and time again in the Bible sexuality is the reference point for a metaphor for faithfulness to God or sin. ***It’s as if we need to be sexual creatures in order to understand the gravity of sin and extent of God’s love.***

So now, as a single person, remember this. The reason God gave you sexual desires is not to make your lives miserable. They exist instead to help you begin to appreciate God’s love for you, and to train you to be more sensitive to your own sin and need for him.

* **To make heaven more desirable**

As we considered earlier, the pleasures of sex are really the pleasures of union. This means sexuality has a purpose for all those united to Christ, not just those who are married. You and I both, if we are Christians, are united *now* to Christ, and the consummation of that union is coming soon.

Listen to Revelation 19:6-9

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reign. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

Sex is like a trailer for the new creation. The most perfect of marriages, and the most pleasurable of sexual unions, are but nothing compared to what will be on offer to all of us then. They are passing trailers that have been designed to grab our hearts and make us want to be at the wedding supper of the Lamb.

It’s also worth remembering that while sexual love reflects something unique, so does the love between brothers and sisters, between friends, between employers and employees, between partners in a cause. Budziszewski beautifully puts it this way:

“If manifold kinds of human love are needed to refract the manifold yet single love of God, then erotic love cannot do all that work by itself. One color is not the whole spectrum. Even so, the union of husband and wife mirrors a certain aspect of divine love better than any other love can. It reflects the union that the Bridegroom intends with his people, the final consummation, the Marriage that leaves nothing to be desired.”[[9]](#footnote-8)

That is the marriage you and I should *most* want. Our sexuality, now, though marred by sin and shame, is given to single people not as a punishment, but ultimately so that He would be more knowable and heaven be more desirable.

In summary, sex means more and less than we’re trained to believe. It means **more** than we’re trained to believe: it unites persons deeply and profoundly, and it creates new life. And over these realities, it is symbolic of our union with Christ. Sex is a big deal.

And yet it also means **less** than we’re trained to believe. Jesus of Nazareth lived the most fulfilled human life ever lived without it. So might some of us. It’s not a need like food or water. And as we just considered, it’s a trailer, not the feature film.

So what lessons can we draw from reflecting more on the meaning of sex?

1. **Lessons & Takeaways**

I’ll leave you with 3.

1. God’s commands are for our good.

I hope you see from this class that none of the prohibitions around sex or marriage in Scripture are made up from thin air. They are logical implications of what sex and marriage are ultimately *for*. It’s not uncommon today for social scientists who study sex in our modern world to discover trends that contribute to healthy relationships that Christians have been saying for millennia.

A few years ago, I built a very meaningful relationship with a non-Christian student at George Washington University. He was not religious, but had come to see the appeal of more traditional institutions like marriage and family. He was in a very serious relationship with another student, who was also interested in marriage. Even early marriage, like in college.

This student, we’ll call him Jake, asked me if I would do some counseling for them around healthy relationships and what it would look like to pursue marriage. I met with him and his girlfriend, who had decided that year to just share a dorm on campus and cohabitate. They knew I knew this.

Jake asked me, with his girlfriend (we’ll call her Sarah), what I thought they should do to set themselves up for a good marriage. Before I gave them my answer, I asked them a question:

Jake and Sarah: if you had to guess, are couples who live together *before* marriage, on average, better off or worse off *in* marriage?

They both ***confidently*** said “better off.” (Since then, I have asked multiple other students this question and every single time they have said the same thing.)

I said, okay, you’re not gonna believe this. I turned my phone around and showed them a study that had just been released by some researchers at Stanford: The headline: “premarital cohabitation consistently predicts higher rates of marital dissolution in the U.S.”[[10]](#footnote-9)

There are plenty of studies that say it. Jake and Sarah were stunned when I showed them that. It felt like a scene from one of those crime dramas where a piece of evidence is passed across the table the person being questioned assumed they didn’t have. They understood better why I counseled them later to stop living together.

Now, let’s think about Jake and Sarah for a moment. You know plenty of Jakes and Sarahs.

***Why do you think the fact that cohabitation before marriage leads to greater risk of unhappy marriage and / or divorce might be surprising in our culture? (Pause for answers)***

***Why do you think the correlation between cohabitation before marriage and divorce exists? (Pause for answers)***

God’s commands are *wise*. He has not restricted sex to marriage for arbitrary reasons. Though hard to believe by many, under close scrutiny, sexual activity being for marriage is best. It’s for our good.

1. Sex should not be “cheap.”

Largely due to the technological and cultural shifts Bobby outlined in the class last week, the “cost” of the social transaction of sex is cheaper than ever in the West. One of those technological developments was the pill. As Louise Perry put it: “When reproduction became a biological choice for women, fatherhood became a social choice for men.” [[11]](#footnote-10)  
  
Downstream from these changes, sexual access is easier than ever. It’s so cheap, in fact, supply seems to have outpaced demand. We are in the midst of what some researchers have called a “sex recession.” Supply is way up, demand is way down. The sociologist Mark Regnerus captures the phenomenon of cheap sex this way: “Sex is cheap if women expect little in return for it and if men do not have to supply much time, attention, resources, recognition, or fidelity in order to experience it.”[[12]](#footnote-11)

A culture where sex is cheap has incentivized men and women to attempt to detach emotion from sex, a task which is typically easier for men than women.

As a result, a culture where sex is cheap is not an advantageous one. It’s led to more children born out of wedlock, more single parents, more addiction to pornography, more unwanted singleness, and more rape and sexual assault.

The Bible’s vision for sex is a vastly more “expensive” one. Because of its power to bind and create families, all sexual activity is to be in the context of the lifelong covenant of marriage. Louise Perry realized this herself:

“The task for practically minded feminists, then, is to deter men from [casual sex]. Our current sexual culture does not do that, but it could. In order to change the incentive structure, we would need a technology that discourages short-termism in male sexual behavior, protects the economic interests of mothers, and creates a stable environment for the raising of children. And we do already have such a technology, even if it is old, clunky and prone to periodic failure. It’s called monogamous marriage.”[[13]](#footnote-12)

So what would a counter-culture look like where sex is expensive rather than cheap, and where monogamous marriage is promoted?

* It would require a culture where we hold one another, singles and married, men and women, to standards of holiness, and we come alongside one another to help each other in this area.
* It would involve men and women resisting forms of cheap sex such as one-night stands and pornography. To do this well requires de-stigmatizing the topic in trusting discipleship and counseling relationships so that men and women can be honest about struggles and receive the help they need.
* It would involve a culture that celebrates marriage and helps people grow into men and women who would be well suited for marriage, whether or not God gives them a spouse.
* It would involve promoting a vision of marriage that is about something more than merely a context for sex or romance, but one that is about a shared calling to procreate and fill the earth with worshippers.
* It would involve a culture where singles desiring marriage are discerning about use of online dating sites, which greatly minimizes the ability to learn information about a potential spouse from others and removes dating from some of the protective structures of the local church.
* It would involve a culture where men are encouraged towards chivalry, that “outdated” system of sexual ethics and social codes that expects more from men in terms of restraint and in using their physical strength for good.
* It would involve a culture where women are empowered to say no to advances from unworthy men, confident that they do not lack a family in the household of God.

1. God offers hope to the sexually broken

Remember where we started the class? 1 Corinthians 6:19:

“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.”

Sexual sin is uniquely corrosive. And the effects of sexual sin, either committed by us or against us, linger. And yet, God’s grace is more powerful still. God offers us warnings, and hope.

In just the paragraph before that one Paul wrote this:

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (Pause) 11 ***And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.***

Let’s pray.

1. Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Jonathan Leeman, “The Meaning of Sex,” accessed at <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/the-meaning-of-sex/> This is not to say that extra-marital sex intrinsically *requires* marriage, rather that it consummates the public commitment that is intrinsic to its covenantal nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Here we are drawing from Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story: Discovering the Divine Plan for Love, Sex, and Gender* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020), 116-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Glen Scrivener, *Reading Between the Lines, Vol. 1* (Leyland, UK: 10ofThose), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Davenant Press, 2022), 20. This does not lead O’Donovan to categorically reject use of contraception. He writes, “the sexual life of a married couple should be viewed as a whole, not in terms of distinct acts. As a whole, then, the married love of any couple should (barring some serious reasons to the contrary) be both relation-building and procreative; the two ends of marriage are held together in the life of sexual partnership, in which the couple live together. But it is artificial to insist that ‘each and every marriage act’ must express the two goods equally.” (93) We do not intend to bind consciences on the use of any form of contraception, though we would say that the burden of proof for use is likely higher than many evangelicals have unconsciously assumed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. For instance, see [here](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0003122412445802). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Leeman, “The Meaning of Sex” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex,* 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. M.J. Rosenfeld and K. Roesler, “Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution: A Reply to Manning, Smock, and Kuperberg,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 83: 268-279. For more recent discussion, see Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades, "Executive Summary: What's the Plan? Cohabitation, Engagement, and Divorce." Institute for Family Studies. Accessed at <https://ifstudies.org/reports/whats-the-plan-cohabitation/2023/executive-summary>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Mark Regnerus*, The Future of Christian Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)