

119

MINISTRIES

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One Flesh: Biblical Chastity, Marriage & Divorce

Part 1 - What is Sexual Immorality?

This teaching is the first in a four-part series that discusses the Scriptural instructions concerning sexual immorality, adultery, marriage, and divorce. This teaching addresses topics and uses terminology that parents may not want their children to be familiar with yet, so viewer discretion is advised. The first three teachings in this series will be laying the groundwork for what the Bible says about these subjects, and the fourth teaching will be addressing many common questions that people have. With that being said, let's begin.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul states that sexually immoral people will not inherit the kingdom of God and instructs the church at Corinth to “flee from sexual immorality.”

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

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, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

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.

Other translations, like the King James version, use the term “fornication” rather than “sexual immorality.” In this teaching series, we will use those two terms interchangeably. So, what does Paul mean by “sexual immorality”? How do the Scriptures define what is sexually immoral? Why is this so important? And how can we flee from this kind of sin? Let's open the Scriptures and take a look.

Godly Sexual Conduct

Before we define sexual immorality, let's first define sexual morality. What is the Godly way to conduct ourselves sexually?

To answer this question, we should first establish that God wants people to have sex.

Genesis 1:27-28

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

There is, of course, only one way for people to "multiply." This verse shows that, from the very beginning, God intended that people would have sexual relations. Throughout history, some religious teachings have arisen that promote celibacy, that is, they teach that people should not have sex at all, but this is a false teaching that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

1 Corinthians 7:1-5

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 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. 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.

Here, Paul states that "each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband," and that these husbands and wives should not "deprive one another," which means that they should not deprive one another of sexual intercourse. Paul is describing the proper arrangement, a marriage, inside of which sexual relations are not only permitted, but also encouraged. This marriage relationship was set up in the very beginning by God himself. In Genesis 2, God made a woman, Eve, as a "helper" for Adam, and after he brought her to Adam, he said this:

Genesis 2:24

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

So, we see that God arranged a system, a marriage, in which a husband and wife would "become one flesh," which means to engage in sexual relations. Other scriptures expand upon this concept, and reveal that marriage is a sexually exclusive arrangement; that is, that a man should only have sex with his wife, and a woman should only have sex with her husband.

1 Corinthians 7:4

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.

So, married people should have sex with each other, and not with anyone else. But what about unmarried people? Who can they have sex with? Paul answers this at the beginning of this chapter:

1 Corinthians 7:2

But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Paul says it is good for men and women to get married, so that they will not be tempted to engage in sexual immorality. This implies that having sexual relations when you are not married is sexual immorality. In this verse, Paul is agreeing with a principle concerning sexual behavior that we find in the Torah—that is, the law that God gave through Moses. Here is one of the commandments from the Torah that expresses this principle:

Exodus 22:16-17

If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

We will explain this command in detail in just a bit, but the thing to notice for now is that a man cannot just take any woman he pleases and have sex with her. There is a marriage process that a person is expected to go through before engaging in sexual relations. This is the same idea that Paul expresses when he says, “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” So, then, what does this marriage process look like? How does one go about getting married according to the Bible?

Biblical Marriage

To understand Biblical marriage, we need to understand some things about society in ancient Israel—that is to say, we should understand how marriage was viewed by the people that the Bible was originally written for. In Israel, a father was responsible for the material well-being of his children (1 Timothy 5:8). A father was expected to provide for his daughter until she was married (Genesis 38:11). Once she was married, her husband would take on the responsibility of providing for her material needs. This transfer of responsibility from father to husband was done by way of a marriage contract.

Typically, the husband-to-be would pay a bride-price to the woman’s father as part of the terms of that contract (Genesis 29:18). Once the two parties agreed on the terms of the marriage contract, and the bride-price was paid, the man and woman were considered to be *betrothed* (Deuteronomy 28:30). Being betrothed was similar to being engaged today: the man and woman were committed to be married, but just hadn’t gone through the wedding yet. Traditionally, on the night of the wedding, the marriage would be *consummated*, that is, made complete, when the husband and wife had sexual relations for the first time (Genesis 29:21).

The most critical part of this process was the betrothal, the marriage contract. The daughter was her father’s responsibility, and a man could not just come along and take her away from her family. An agreement needed to be made where the father released his daughter from his care before a marriage could take place. As his daughter’s protector, it was the father’s responsibility to see to it that she was being given into good hands. This is why the father had to be paid the bride price if a man slept with his daughter without first betrothing her:

Exodus 22:16

If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife.

It might look like this is a shortcut that a man could take to get married: just sleep with a woman, and then pay the bride-price to her father after the fact. If that were the case, there would be no need to get betrothed at all. However, the next verse shows that this was not the case. The man who tried to do this actually had no right to marry the woman. It was still the father's choice whether she would be married:

Exodus 22:17

If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

In this situation, the father could collect the bride price, and still withhold his daughter from becoming the man's wife. The reason he could do this is because no prior agreement, no betrothal, had been established between the two parties. Since there was no betrothal, the father was still the one who was responsible for his daughter, and the man who slept with her owed him damages for violating her. And this was a substantial sum of money: the bride-price for virgins was fifty shekels of silver (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). It's unclear exactly how much money that was at the time, but it was at least half a year's wages (Code of Hammurabi 273-274), and possibly much more than that (Genesis 29:18).

So, we can see that it was the marriage contract, the betrothal, that made a marriage Biblically legitimate. A man needed the consent of the woman's father in order to marry her, and to take on the responsibility of caring for her. A Biblical marriage began with a betrothal agreement between the man, the woman, and the woman's family.

What does this look like today? Does God expect men today to pay a "bride-price" in order to get married? Do women need to have permission from their fathers? We address some of these questions in detail in part 4 of this series, but for now, we can say that marriages between believers should typically involve consent from the family of the bride. Some families may require a bride-price, while others may not. In Christian weddings, it is still tradition for the bride's father to walk her down the aisle and to announce that he is giving her to the groom, so modern marriages largely maintain the spirit of the Biblical model. Whatever the specific terms of the marriage may be, as believers, we should be getting married before having sex.

Sexual Immorality

Once a man and a woman have been married, they are Biblically free and encouraged to engage in sexual relations with each other. However, sexual relations *outside* of this marriage structure are considered sexual immorality, or in Hebrew, *Zanah*. This behavior is sinful and should be avoided. Here are some examples where the Scriptures condemn this kind of behavior:

Deuteronomy 22:22

If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

In part 2 of this series, we will see that sleeping with a married woman is called *adultery*. In this verse, we can see that this sin is very serious; in fact, the Torah prescribes the death penalty for committing it.

Deuteronomy 22:23-24

If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Here we see that sleeping with a betrothed woman—a woman who is committed to a man, but not yet married—is considered just as bad as sleeping with a married woman. The Torah prescribes the death penalty for this as well. Verses 25-27 of this chapter explain that if the woman was raped, then she was not to be punished, but the man who raped her was still put to death. For more detail on these scriptures, see our teaching: [Answering Atheists: Marrying a Rapist](#)

In these next two verses, we see two more condemnations of extramarital sex:

Leviticus 19:29

Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18

None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD [YHWH] your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD [YHWH] your God.

Prostitution is the practice of charging money in exchange for sex. Cult prostitution was a practice in which a person would engage in prostitution as part of a religious service. (For more on cult prostitution in the Ancient Near East, see Herodotus: *The Persian Wars*, book II, pp. 250-253, translated by A.D. Godley, Harvard University Press (Cambridge 1920); see also The Code of Hammurabi, sections 178 & 179). Both practices are forbidden by the Scriptures. It's worth pointing out that the prohibition of prostitution implies that extramarital sex in general is not acceptable. After all, if it was acceptable to have extramarital sex, then what would be wrong with charging money for it?

Here's one more verse, just to drive the point home:

Hebrews 13:4

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

It's clear, then, that a marriage is the proper Biblical system inside of which sex is permitted, and sex outside of this marriage system is considered sexual immorality. However, there is another component to sexual immorality, and that is that there are some sexual practices that are Biblically forbidden whether a person is married or not. These practices are called *Ervah* in Hebrew, which means "shameful nakedness," and they are described in Leviticus chapters 18 and 20.

Most of these forbidden practices are what we today would call *incest*, that is, sexual relationships with close relatives. Here are some of the people that the Torah forbids having sex with:

- With your mother (18:7) or another wife of your father (18:8)
- With your sister or half-sister (18:9)
- With your granddaughter (18:10)

- With your step-sister (18:11)
- With your aunt by blood (18:12-13)
- With your aunt by marriage (18:14)
- With your daughter-in-law (18:15)
- With your sister-in-law (18:16)
- With your wife's daughter or granddaughter (18:17)
- And, you may not marry your wife's sister while your wife is still alive (18:18)

In addition to sex with close relatives, sexual relations with the following people are also prohibited:

- With your wife while she is menstruating (18:19)
- With the wife of another man (a.k.a. adultery) (18:20)
- With another man, if you yourself are a man (a.k.a. homosexuality) (18:22)
- And, with an animal (a.k.a. bestiality) (18:23)

Again, not even being married to any of these people made having sex with them permissible. In part 4 of this series, we will examine some of these prohibitions in greater detail. For now, we should understand that disobeying any of these commandments was a very serious mistake. Leviticus chapter 20 describes the penalties that were imposed on someone who violated these standards of *Ervah*, and in most cases, the penalty was death.

Both *Zanah*, that is, promiscuous sex, and *Ervah*, that is, forbidden sexual relationships, fall into the category of sexual immorality. The Greek word that encompasses all of these sexual indiscretions is *Porneia*, which is the word used in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

1 Corinthians 6:18

[Flee from sexual immorality...](#)

(For evidence that *Porneia* and its variations refers to all of the categories of sexual activity that are forbidden by the Torah, see John 8:41 (extramarital sex), 1 Corinthians 5:1 (incest), Revelation 2:14 (cult prostitution), 1 Corinthians 6:15 (prostitution), and Hebrews 13:4 (adultery).)

Why Does God Care About Sex?

The existence of all of these commandments about sex demonstrates that our sexual behavior is important to God. But, why is this? Why does God care so much about our sexual conduct?

One reason is that sex produces children. It is not right for a man to impregnate a woman and then leave her to care for his child all by herself. Having a marriage system ensures that men will take responsibility for the consequences of their sexual behavior. Furthermore, children by and large are much happier and healthier when they have two parents caring for them, rather than only one. Confining sex to marriage is the best system for both women and children.

However, children are not the only reason that sex is important to God; after all, sexual behavior that does not produce children is regulated by the Bible as well. This is because sex is more than just a physical act; it is also considered a spiritual union between two people. Just like YHWH wanted his physical temple to remain physically pure, he also wants his spiritual temple—that is, the body of Christ, the people of God—to remain spiritually pure. Paul explains it this way:

1 Corinthians 6:13-20

...The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 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.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Our bodies are like temples to God, and we need to dedicate them to God’s service. This means obeying God’s rules about how we use them, including his rules concerning sex. It is critical for our sake that we do so, because otherwise we will miss out on being part of God’s kingdom.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

...Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

If you’ve committed sins of this kind, and you’re wondering if you can be forgiven of them, you can. Yeshua paid the penalty for our sins, and if we confess our sins and turn away from them, then we will find reconciliation with God. As John wrote,

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

For a more in-depth explanation of how we can obtain forgiveness from our sins and walk in righteousness, we recommend watching our teaching series, “[What is the Gospel?](#)”

How Can We Obey God?

Even when we acknowledge that God wants us to avoid sexual immorality, the urge to have sex is still one of the strongest motivations that we have, and sometimes controlling that desire is much easier said than done. So, what are some things we can do to help us obey God’s commandments concerning sex? What are some practical steps we can take that will help us to “flee from sexual immorality”? Here are three suggestions.

First, don’t seek out loopholes in the law. The Bible does not precisely define what constitutes “having sex,” and so some people may see that as a license to do anything and everything besides whatever they personally consider to be sexual intercourse. However, even though the Scriptures do not explicitly spell out what is or is not considered sex, they do make it clear that this kind of attitude is wrong. To seek out ways to technically get around the law is violating the spirit of the law, that is, it defeats the law’s purpose. God wants our desires themselves to ultimately align with his own. Jesus—or, Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—explains it like this:

Matthew 5:27-28

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If we constantly desire sexual immorality in our hearts, then we are not aligning ourselves with God's will; we are not being "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). If we really desire to obey God, then we have to change the way we think about sex. We have to understand that God created sex and marriage for us, and our sexual behavior is not only a means to gratify our body's desires, but it is part of our service to him (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). If we are actively seeking out ways to go "right up to the line" of what we know is wrong, without "technically" crossing over it, then we are not in the right frame of mind, and we need to change our attitude in order to truly obey God.

The second thing we can do to help us control our sexual conduct is to get help from other believers. In particular, the elders in your local congregation, or wherever you have spiritual fellowship, can offer you encouragement, wisdom, and accountability that will help you stay on track. While it can be embarrassing to confess our sins and struggles to other people, it is ultimately beneficial for us. Part of the reason that there is a body of believers at all is so that we can help each other walk in righteousness. As Paul teaches:

Galatians 6:1-2

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

If you know some mature brothers in Christ (or, if you are a woman, mature sisters in Christ) who can help you to overcome your struggles, know that God provided them for your benefit, and you should accept his blessings and make use of their help. If you don't have any spiritual fellowship, we recommend that you find some as soon as you can. There is no reason to bear all of your burdens alone. One good resource to start looking for other believers is our fellowship finder, which can be found on our website (<https://www.119ministries.com/resources/fellowship-finder/>). Sometimes fellowship can be difficult to find, but we would urge you to keep praying and searching. As David wrote, God

Psalms 102:17

...regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer.

The third thing we can do is to take Paul's admonishment literally when he says to "flee from sexual immorality." Paul's words bring to mind the story of Joseph, found in Genesis chapter 39:

Genesis 39:7-12

And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

Here, we see that when Joseph was given the opportunity to commit sexual immorality, he did not stay in the situation; he did not rely on his ability to control himself and withstand the temptation. No, he literally ran out of the house, not even hesitating long enough to bring all of his clothes with him. We can learn from Joseph's example by refusing to give ourselves the opportunity to commit sexual transgressions.

If we do find ourselves in a compromising situation, we can leave it immediately. If we have a friend, a coworker, or a social group, whether in person or online, that puts us in these kinds of compromising situations, then we have to be willing to abandon those people for the sake of obeying God. Sexual sin is a difficult challenge to overcome, and if we continually put ourselves in situations where we have to exercise extreme self-control, then overcoming it becomes next to impossible. But, if we are doing everything we can to help ourselves overcome it, then it is not impossible at all; in fact, God tells us that it is "not too hard" for us (Deuteronomy 30:11). If we truly want to keep our integrity and to honor God, we should not put extra obstacles in our own way. So, when we are presented with an opportunity to be sexually immoral, we can flee from the situation *before* the temptation becomes too strong for us to resist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, God has standards for our sexual conduct. The Bible says that we should get married, by making a betrothal agreement between a man, a woman, and the woman's family, before having sex, and that we should not make perverse marriages, like those with relatives or with people of the same sex. God cares about our sexual conduct both because it produces children, and because sex is a spiritual as well as physical act. Though it is difficult, we can overcome our desire to commit sexual sin by changing our attitude toward sex, by seeking help from our spiritual brothers and sisters, and by fleeing from situations that give us the opportunity to sin. Sex is a blessing from God, but it can become a curse if it's misused. If we obey God's instructions, then we can enjoy all of the benefits of sex, but suffer none of its potential curses.

In part two of this series, we are going to take a closer look at adultery, and discuss, in-depth, some of the spiritual applications of the Scriptures that mention sex and marriage. We hope to see you there.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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