

*And the Big Deal About Sex Is...?
1 Corinthians 6:15-17
Vineyard West Side
April 23, 2006*

SLIDE 1

We have 2 Sundays before our move to the Emily Dickinson School. And I wanted to wait to start a new series of talks until we actually get into our new Sunday meeting place. So that gives us a couple of Sundays to touch on a couple subjects that I've been meaning to talk about for a while. One of the subjects, which we'll address today, is this whole issue of waiting till we're married to have a sexual relationship with someone.

My aim today is to carefully explore some of the reasons why it makes sense to wait till we're married to make love.

This is not an easy subject to chat about. And I totally understand that we might not all be in the same place on the subject of sex before marriage.

I'll be honest: It took me some time to see some of the thinking on this subject. I didn't wait till I was married to begin sexual activity. What happened with me is that I became a follower of Jesus when I was 27, so like a lot of people I had already had sexual relationships by my late 20s.

And even after I had connected with Jesus at 27, I struggled mentally with this idea of waiting till marriage to make love.

So, it took a while for me to understand some of the thinking here. I've basically done the whole journey. Before I came to know Jesus, I thought waiting was just silly. Something only religious fanatics would do. Then, after plugging into God, I was compliant but a little bit skeptical. Then it began to make sense. And finally -- this is where I am today -- I actually like the idea of waiting. I can see waiting as a big positive. Something you'd actually *want to do*, and not something you'd feel you *had to do* out of some sort of religious observance.

But what I think the best thing to do now is cut to the chase and go right to *the* reason that followers of Jesus often give when they counsel waiting till marriage to sleep with someone.

The basic thought process goes something like this: Sex has a very big impact on the couple making love. It's way more than a physical act. Sex affects a couple psychologically and physically. And it also has a spiritually aspect, which means it even impacts our spirit. Sexual relationships do something to our entire personhood.

And making love can really bind two people together in a way that's almost unbreakable - - psychologically and spiritually. And *because* it acts as a very intense glue between two people, *the thinking goes* that sex works best in a relationship where two people are committed to each other for the whole of their lives -- i.e. marriage.

In fact, sex fits marriage perfectly. Marriage is a relationship that can bear all the responsibilities and consequences that come with sex.

In fact, marriage is the relationship where sex can be "done" to the fullest. That's why making love is usually better for people in marriage than out of it. We don't know that till we get married. Before we're married, sex can feel amazing. I totally concede that. One reason people sleep together before they're married is that it feels incredible. But it's actually better in marriage. It's sort of like this.

[Play guitar unplugged.] That sounds pretty nice. I could strum away for a long time and it would be very enjoyable. If I didn't know anything about electrical amplification, I'd think it was great. But look at what happens when I turn the sound on. That's a much bigger sound experience. Sex in marriage can be a much bigger experience, if there's harmony in the marriage, which is another sermon entirely.

So, the basic thought process is this: There's something about sleeping with someone that is way more than a physical act.

And most people -- regardless of what they think about God -- would not quibble with that. One of the reasons we see a lot of sexual stuff in our culture is that people fully understand that it's not just physical.

And lots of people will readily agree that having sex with someone does imply the need for commitment in a relationship, because sex changes the whole nature of a relationship between 2 people. We see that a lot in movies or on TV. For example, let's watch a clip now and look out for what the Cameron Diaz character says to Tom Cruise in this scene from *Vanilla Sky*. The background to this is that CD and TC have had a brief sexual relationship.

SLIDE 2 [clicking to this slide will play the movie clip -- do not click on the image]

SLIDE 3 [click when the movie clip is over]

I played that so we could hear Cameron Diaz say: *Don't you know that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not?*

Now, I guess the problem with showing *that* clip is that I am using someone who is clearly deranged to make a point. So let me now quote someone who had the one of the most insightful brains ever. And I am talking about the apostle Paul. This guy was able to comment with amazing insight on a whole range of important subjects. And one of the things Paul had helpful insights on was sexual relations.

At one point, Paul was writing to a church in a large and important city called Corinth, which had a hyper-sexualized culture. Sex was part of the dominant Corinthian religion. There were special prostitutes up at the temple that people slept with. Sexual activity was widely practiced outside of marriage. And it was basically a religion to many people.

And when people in Corinth started to follow Jesus, some of them had a hard time sort of shaking all that off. And Paul in one of his letters felt that he'd better address this. And in his letter Paul clues the Corinthians in on why it makes sense to wait till marriage. Paul writes this to the church in Corinth:

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^{1Co 6:15} Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

^{1Co 6:16} Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."

^{1Co 6:17} But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Paul says, "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body." Paul is basically saying: It is not a great idea to be sleeping with prostitutes *because* even this seemingly casual act of having intercourse with a paid partner has an impact that goes way beyond the physical. And he supports his point by saying: "Look, guys, we know sex has a big impact on people, because God gave it to us as a gift for marriage."

The phrase we see here [point up]: "The two will become one flesh." is from a passage in Genesis about marriage. So Paul is telling us that love-making -- this profound act of becoming one -- is given by God for marriage.

PAUSE

And this is the key insight Paul brings to the table: He recognizes that outside of marriage, sex still affects people in a very big way, because it makes two people "one." And it makes them "one" in ways they may not always see and in ways that we may not always understand. It is physical, psychological and it's spiritual. The whole personhood gets impacted.

And Paul is clever here, because if there was one thing the Corinthians prided themselves on was their spirituality. They thought they were the most spiritual people in the Greco-Roman world. And here Paul is saying: "Guys, the most spiritual thing you can do at the moment is cease these inappropriate sexual relations. Because stopping them will make it easier to become one with this Jesus that you've just started to follow. You're wowed by Jesus, so stop all the prostitute stuff -- and then experience the happiness of being spiritually united with Christ.

So Paul's insight is that sex is a big deal because it is infinitely more than a physical act -- no matter how casual the act.

But here's the *skeptical* response I always had. It went something like this.

Look, I understand that sex is way more than a physical act. I even see the need for a committed relationship. I think it's very important to love someone if you sleep with them. But if I am deeply in love with someone and I don't want anyone else, why shouldn't we just start having sex -- to celebrate our love and bind us closer together? Why the need for marriage?

Well, now, I wanted to humbly submit four possible reasons why it doesn't make a great deal of sense to have sexual relations before marriage. *And the first is this:*

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1/ Sex can make break-ups much more difficult than they need be. (x2)

Let's say we're going out with someone and the sex is great and we feel we're very much in love -- and then our partner dumps us. Or we feel we don't want to be in the relationship anymore.

The special bond that sleeping with each other created is now broken -- and the pain level could be very high. If I look back at the relationships I had, the ones where I was sleeping with someone were much more painful when they came to an end, than the ones where there was no sex. In fact, the pain was so unbearable that I now wish I'd never been in those relationships -- it outweighed anything good that was in them. I attribute that now to us separating the "oneness" that Paul said is created by sleeping together.

But when people get married, they generally commit not to break up. They commit not to break that powerful oneness.

OK, here's a second reason:

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2/ Having sex before marriage can cloud our judgment when we're picking a spouse.

If we bring that oneness that Paul talks about into a relationship through sex, we might suddenly feel: Yes, this is man or woman I want to marry.

At certain times when I was with them, I thought I wanted to marry the girls I slept with. It just seemed right. But I now see that they were totally unsuitable. I now realize that I didn't really want to. And somehow, God rescued me from making the wrong decisions. Sex had clouded my judgment.

And so, if we don't have sex when we're dating, there is a greater chance that we will see more clearly and more quickly who is right and who is wrong for us, in terms of marriage.

But let me just make a huge caveat while I am making this point. I am NOT saying that people who had sex with their future spouse before they got married are with the wrong person. I am not saying that at all. God takes great care to find all people the right spouse. He's bigger than our relationships.

My point is that sex before marriage makes it harder to see who is right and wrong for us.

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3/ A third reason why it doesn't make a great deal of sense to have sexual relations before marriage is that sex before marriage with someone who wasn't our spouse can cause unnecessary interference in the sex life with our spouse.

The oneness that Paul talks about can interfere with the oneness of marriage. It just does. God can intervene and overcome that interference, but it can be difficult while we wait for God to complete the process.

Lots of people go to marriage counseling because they haven't been able to shake off memories and experiences from past sexual relationships. God can definitely overcome this -- please don't hear me saying this is something that can't be dealt with. But why bother going through it if you don't need to -- that's my point!

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4/ I think a fourth reason why it doesn't make a great deal of sense to have sexual relations before marriage is that it dishonors the giver. It dishonors God.

What exactly do I mean by: It dishonors God. Well, I think sex is an awesome gift from God. It is incredible that He has given us something as powerful as sex to enjoy. He knows we might misuse sex, but He gives it to us anyway. He gives us this gift, despite the risks. That shows us God's generous heart. How much He wants to bless us.

And as with any type of really great gift, we dishonor the giver if we don't use the gift as the giver intended.

Say, for example, Dan over there gives me a beautiful Renoir painting -- a real one. He was a couple, I think. And I love it. I really enjoy this painting. But I leave it in the window to show people I have it -- and it stands for days in the bright sunlight, or I lend to people and I forget who. I sort of dishonor Dan, because I am mistreating the gift. I might still really love the painting, but I am not treating it correctly.

And it's the same with sex. It is an amazing gift -- it's a sign of God's grace and desire to bless us that we have it. And we can honor Him, the giver of this great gift, by using it as He intended -- as something to bring a husband and wife untrammelled joy..

That's why Paul says in our passage today: ^{1Co 6:15} Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

Never dishonor the giver, Paul is saying.

So, what might be some practical tips that might help us wait till marriage to have sex?

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1/ The first one I'd counsel is this: Use temptation as an opportunity to let God mold us. One of the classic traps is to whine about how sexualized our culture is, and struggle grimly as we try and resist temptation. But we know from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that there was a culture that was way more sexualized than ours. And Paul had no problem with asking them to wait till marriage.

And so much depends on how we respond to temptation. It will happen -- lots of times. But we can sort of turn the tables on temptation and use it to ask some questions about ourselves that might help us grow.

In practice, that means that if we constantly find a certain type of sexual temptation to be very strong, let's stop and say: "Hmmm, why is it that I am getting tempted so acutely and so frequently by *that*. What is in me that needs God's healing?"

Say, someone is making a habit of hitting on women when they're out -- it's just something that always seems to happen. We can ask: Why do I need this type of intimacy? Ask God -- and he will show us what's going on. And He will often be very keen to take us down the path where we get healing. He'll use temptation!

So let's turn the tables on temptation and use it as an opportunity to let God mold us and create freedom in our lives.

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2/ A second tip is to remember that sex is not just about intercourse. Other sexual acts can be very intense and they also can create that oneness that Paul talks about. Intercourse is guaranteed to do that -- big time. But anything that leads to sexual arousal between two people will bind us in ways that far more than physical. And when we apply that to real life, it would seem sensible to stop with kissing. That's a good cut off point.

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3/ One last tip to finish off with is this: Experience the power of accountability. If we start to date, ask someone to regularly enquire how things are going with temptation. Say to a good buddy: "You know, it's OK for you to check in on me from time to time. I won't be offended if you do." Paul, in our passage, is being like an accountability partner for that whole church

Again, accountability is something that sounds so dreary. It sounds like work. But my experience is that when two people get together and be accountable, a real powerful freedom and even joy is released. God definitely shows up and blesses tough conversations with His presence. God loves it when we're vulnerable to others, showing our weaknesses. And I love to think that lots of us have relationships where we feel safe confessing our missteps and looking for help -- and enjoying the fruit of doing both those things.

OK, so those are just three things to think about as practical steps to help us wait till marriage to have sex. But let me just end with this today.

I once knew a father -- he had daughters. He had a faith in Jesus but he once said that, if any of his daughters was not a virgin when she got married, he would not allow her to wear white on her wedding day. And that always bugged me. It seemed to be completely opposite to everything that I was learning at the time about Jesus' blood washing us clean of our sin.

And my misgivings were completely confirmed when I heard a story that Jackie Pullinger told. Jackie has for most of her adult life worked with gang members, drug addicts and prostitutes in Hong Kong. .And she tells a story about how a very old prostitute, who's been on the streets for decades and been on drugs for a very long time, connects with Jesus. She is freed from that lifestyle. She meets a man -- over 70, like her -- and they start to date and decide to get married. And Jackie describes this 70-year old bride, her body covered in needle marks, coming down the aisle in a white dress -- pure and ready for her husband.

And when I heard that I was like "Ah ha! Don't let anyone ever say that our sexual missteps can't be forgiven and washed away by God." Yes, sex is special -- it has a power that few other things have -- but sexual sins are just as forgivable as any other. And that means we can always go to God and ask Him to cleanse us and forgive us.

And as we do that, we find it a million times easier to live the life of freedom and joy with Jesus that is promised by Paul in the last verse from our passage.

SLIDE 12

^{1Co 6:17} *But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*