

Sex and the City of God: Part I**by Dr. David D. Swanson, First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, Florida**

Have you noticed lately, as I have, that sex shows up in just about everything we read or hear? It seems like every time I turn around, I am getting bombarded with yet another sexual reference or some kind of innuendo. When Leigh and the kids were out of town for a week this summer, I ventured out to Publix to buy some basic male food staples, namely peanut butter, Twinkies and breakfast cereal. When I got to the check out counter, I was amazed by the number of magazines that had a feature on some element of sex or sexuality. It was everywhere. In fact, I was so amazed that I went back two days later and purchased a few of them just so I could show you. Look at these: GLAMOUR “Our 7 Best Sex Secrets EVER, plus How to Feel Sexy at 20, 30, and 40”; BAZAAR: A barely covered, very pregnant Britney Spears; COSMO GIRL: (for teen girls) “The New Virginity Code: Are you or Aren’t You?”; COSMOPOLITAN: “What Guys Notice” (and I don’t think they’re talking about football rankings) plus “Sex Kitten Makeup – Tricks to Make you Irresistible” (there’s an admirable goal – being a sex kitten – watch out for that litter box); GENTLEMEN’S QUARTERLY: “I Was a Phone Sex Addict”; SELF: “Make Sex Sizzle” plus “Get a Hot Body”; ESSENCE: (primarily for a Black audience) “Uncensored Sex Report: Real Guys tell you what they want in Bed”; and here’s one aimed at the Latin American community – MUEVELO – the entire cover is in Spanish, but as I looked at it, here’s an article on “Fantasias Sexuales”. Now I don’t even speak Spanish, but I’m pretty sure I know what that means.

You should have seen the look on the check out girl’s face when I bought all these. After she had rung up about the fifth one, she said, “Pretty interesting reading material.” I kind of shrugged my shoulders and said, “Well, I know it looks funny, but I’m a pastor - this is sermon research.” With that, she gave me one of those looks that said, “Yeah, and I’m Laura Bush.” Then, as if to test me, she said, “What church?” I said, “First Presbyterian downtown – we’re on TV at 9:30 on Sundays – if you tune in in two weeks, you’ll hear what I have to say about all this.” So, to my check out girl at Publix, if you’re watching, I hope you enjoy the message!

Am I right? It’s everywhere, isn’t it? We have become a society that is consumed by this one area with an ever-increasing willingness to accept promiscuity and immorality. The result, of course, has become a distortion of what our sexuality is all about - a distortion that affects our attitudes, opinions and behaviors - a distortion that is trickling down into the lives of our children. Teenagers today are becoming sexually informed and expressive at far younger ages than ever before. They are dressing more suggestively and engaging in sexual activity because, according to Time magazine, teens say “as long as you’re not having intercourse the rest doesn’t matter.” Not only is it affecting us as families, but now it is affecting the larger context in which we live. Canada now allows same-sex unions as does the state of Massachusetts. Many states are debating whether or not to accept such unions. Some are pushing for a constitutional amendment which defines marriage as between a man and a woman. The Episcopal Church has elected its first openly gay bishop. And in the midst of a sexually confused society, where has the church been? Strangely quiet. Quiet, in many respects, because the church has not wanted to sound offensive in the ears of a changing culture. However, I do not believe that the church can remain quiet in these confusing times. Therefore, this morning and next week, I will be speaking to the issues of sexuality in our culture.

As always, we turn for answers to the Word of God, and in particular, to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul founded the church at Corinth, living there approximately 18 months before departing around year 51. About two years afterward, he began to get reports from the household of Chloe regarding division in the church and alarming information about sexual immorality. He also received a letter from the Corinthian church asking a number of questions stemming from the clash of their beliefs with those of their surrounding culture. You see, the Corinthians had a very high view of freedom and a very low view of the human body. Their catch phrase was "I am free to do anything." Thus, those who believed themselves wise and enlightened could do whatever they wanted. This was compounded by the dualistic approach they took to human existence. They saw a human being as half body and half soul, or spirit. The spirit was the important thing. The spirit was the essence of the true "you" – the "you" that would live into eternity. The earthly body was just a carrier. Epictetus said, "I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse." Since the body would eventually be discarded, what you did with it didn't matter. If you were hungry, you fed it. If you had a sexual appetite, you fed that, too. Give the body what it wants - satisfy its needs - or so the feeling went.

I wonder if any of that sounds the least bit familiar to us today? We, too, are living in an age where there is great emphasis placed on human rights and freedoms. There is an almost universal acceptance to the idea that if something is OK to you - and any others involved - then it's morally OK. Thus, what we are seeing is an increasing willingness to satisfy whatever our physical desires may be without regard to outcomes or consequences or moral standards. I'm free to do what I want to do with my body. If I want to have sex with whomever, then why shouldn't I do that? I'm free. As long as the other person approves, what difference does it make? When you study this text, 21st century America looks very similar to first century Corinth, and it is exactly to these issues that Paul speaks God's Word of truth. Thus, as we seek to find secure footing about sexuality in these very confusing times, what does God teach us through Paul?

First, contrary to popular belief, your body DOES matter. Your decisions about your body matter. Paul begins in verse 12 by quoting to the Corinthians their own catch phrase, "Everything is permissible for me" or "I am free to do what I want." However, he turns it around and says, "BUT...not everything is beneficial." Yes, we may be free, choosing agents able to decide what we want and when we want it, but Paul raises the idea that within that freedom may be something that calls us to a higher standard - a standard determined by what is true or right. And where does that standard come from? It comes from the significance of the body God has given us. Paul says in verses 13-14, "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us, too." What's he saying? He's saying your body matters. You are not a dualistic separation of spirit and flesh, but a unified whole. What happens to your body is happening to you. What you choose to do with your body happens to you. It is not separate. It is not insignificant. In fact, your body is going to be RAISED. What do we affirm each time we say the Apostle's Creed? "I believe in the resurrection of the body..." It is not just your spirit that goes on, but your body. When Jesus came up from the grave, he appeared to the His disciples in glorified form. He had a glorified body. When Peter, James, and John were on the mount of transfiguration, they saw Moses and Elijah with glorified bodies. When we go to heaven, we go with a body, albeit in glorified form. As such, the human

body is to be respected and honored. Psalm 139 reminds us, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made...." Ephesians tells us, "You are God's workmanship." Yes, when sin entered the world, your body became limited. Your body is not perfect, but neither is your spirit. Together they are decaying, and when we enter eternity, it is together that they will be redeemed.

Therefore, because our bodies are going to be raised, Paul says we need to be careful that we do with them only that which is beneficial - only what is right and good according to the standard set by the One who made them. The way you use your body must be for more than mere self-indulgence. Corinthian men were given almost complete latitude in their sexual practice, including sex with prostitutes and children. Why? Don't you remember? In their mind, it was just their body. It didn't matter, so why not gratify it? We think indulging our sexual appetites is fine, whether it be via pornography or extra-marital sex or pre-marital sex - and why? Because our attitude is, "It's just sex. It's just our body. It doesn't really matter." Well, it does. Your body is going to be raised. Therefore, we are to honor it by how we act - how we dress - how we present our physical form - and by how we engage it. Our theology of the resurrection of Christ informs how we view our physical existence. If you don't get that, then you won't understand why your body matters. However, if you do, then hopefully you will begin to live with more care and attention to how you use and present your body.

Second, not only does your body matter, but while you are on the earth your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. In other words, your physical body, in a very holy and mysterious way, becomes the dwelling place of God. Paul writes in verse 15, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself?" Then in verse 19, he says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" What's he saying? He's saying that when you come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, literally you become joined with Him - members of Him - filled by Him. A union has taken place between you and God. Verse 17 says, "He who unites Himself with God has become one with him..." Thus, spiritually and physically - not separate, but together - we are one with Christ. Now, stay with me, because this is where our spiritual understanding of sexuality runs completely contrary to the culture. This is why sex is NEVER a purely physical act. If we are one with Christ, then whatever else we join ourselves to, we are also joining Christ to, which is why marriage is such a holy gift. It is not just two, but three. In Genesis 2:24, which Paul also quotes here, God tells us that a man and woman will leave their families - and the two of them shall become "one flesh." In the plan of God, spiritually and physically, they become one. It is the beauty and glory of marriage. The physical consummation is the outward sign and gift of all that God has done to join two together. It is why our male and female bodies have been created as they have - so that we may be joined as one by this wonderful, pleasurable gift involving not just us, but the Spirit of God who lives within us. Richard Hays wrote, "Sexual intercourse cannot be understood merely as a momentary act that satisfies a natural urge. Instead, it creates a mysteriously real and enduring union between man and woman."

When all those things come together and God's design is fulfilled, that's when marriage becomes an awesome reality. However, what happens when we deny that? What happens when we live as Christians in the absence of this understanding? We have sexual relationships with people and, in effect, join ourselves to them - and join Christ to what is unholy. Paul says, "Shall I take the members of Christ (those who have union with Christ) and join them to a prostitute? Never!" The late Lewis Smedes, a

professor at Fuller Seminary for many years, wrote in his book *Sex for Christians*, “No one can really do what the prostitute and her customer try. Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside.” You cannot separate your spirit from your body, which is why people who have been sexually promiscuous find themselves feeling so empty and hungry for love. They are leaving bits of their spirit all over the place without actually being truly joined to another as Christ has designed. Do you see the difference? Sex is not a purely physical act. It is a physical and a spiritual union given to us by God through His living presence in us. When He is absent or ignored, we counterfeit the gift and corrupt its expression for our own benefit - and we are reaping the consequences of such action in every element of our society. If we want to make lasting social change in regards to our sexual morality, we must win the hearts of people to Jesus Christ. We are joined with Christ and, therefore, called to only join ourselves to that which is holy and right - our partners in marriage who also are committed to the Lord Jesus.

Third, and finally, your body belongs to THE LORD. This is where things get a little difficult because this is where Paul addresses our demand for personal rights and freedoms. He says in verses 19-20, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.” This is where all talk of sexual freedom and physical autonomy ceases. The language here is that of a slave and his or her master. The slave, once living in captivity, has now had his freedom purchased. Someone has laid down the cost for that freedom, and now the bonds of slavery are loosed. Paul writes in Romans 6:18, “You have been set free from sin AND have become slaves of righteousness.” Brothers and sisters, here’s the reality: When you came to Christ, you were literally pulled from a pit from which you could not save yourself. I don’t have time to go into a theology of sin, but we were destined for death and hell, and in that moment of suffering and dying and rising, Christ lifted us from that place and made us free. However, we are not then allowed to go and live as we choose. Because our lives have been purchased, they are no longer our own. This is where our faith flies in the face of our cultural emphasis on personal freedoms in our world. We are free in Christ, yes, but we are still slaves to righteousness. We are not free to do as we choose, but we are free to glorify God with our bodies.

Therefore, we are not free to invent our own standards separate from God’s Word. Men, you are not free to use your body in any way you see fit. You are not free to use pornography. You are not free to sleep with any woman who is not your wife. You are not free to engage in swapping partners even if your wife were to allow it. You are not free to engage in homosexual behavior. Men, you are not free to go out and satisfy your sexual lusts simply because you want to nor are you free to ignore the child that resulted from your desire to satisfy your physical needs. You are not free to be a dead beat Dad. You are, in Christ, a slave to righteousness and He has control over your body, not you. You are instead called to glorify God with your body.

Women, you are not free to ascribe to the popular cultural myth that you are in control over your body - that you have the right to “choose” what you are going to do with it. You don’t. It’s not yours. God, in Christ, has purchased your body, therefore, He is in control of how you use it. You are to glorify Him by its use, not merely choosing what is most convenient to you. As such, you do not have the choice that our culture thinks you have when it comes to unwanted pregnancy. If you choose to engage in an act designed to create life, you must be prepared to receive the potential life which may result. If not, don’t

have sex. A life that is conceived for whatever reason has value that transcends the means by which it was conceived.

Brothers and sisters, I know this is contrary to what you hear - and perhaps even to what you right now believe - but we are NOT free to do what we want. We have been purchased at a great price. As a result, what we do with our bodies is no longer under our control, but His - and the only thing - the only parameter God gives us as a guide is this: What will bring Him honor and glory?

In closing, let me say this: We are all guilty of sin. I am not pointing the finger here, but trying to lead us to a foundation for understanding our sexual expression. God's grace is always present through His cross if we will allow it to work. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* that Hollywood recently turned into a movie. At the end of the story, Aslan is put to death, but is raised back to life. When he encounters the children for the first time, they are overjoyed and he says, "The Queen's knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little farther back, she would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

This has been tough subject matter this morning and it won't get any easier next week. However, I want you to hear that no matter what your choices have been up to this point, the power of the risen Christ is that which can enter your life and cause death and sin to work backwards - cracks and splits can be healed and choices redeemed. Nothing can extend beyond the grasp of God's grace and love for you. As we think about our sexually confused world, remember that when Christ comes to live in you, He give you a new nature - a spiritual nature that tells you your body is important and we are to honor it by how we use it and how we present it - a nature that tells you that you have been united with Christ and as such you are not to join yourself to anything other than what is holy and pleasing to the Lord - a nature that even tells you that your freedom in Christ is NOT to do whatever you want with our body, but to glorify Him with it. These verses are the foundation of our understanding of sexual expression, and we will only begin to experience transformation in this area when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us towards obedience. Amen.