

Sexual Ethics

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, well good to see you this evening. As Corrie says, I'm Neil. I'm one of the ministers associated with St. Columbus. I lead a church plant from St. Columbus called Cornerstone in the Morningside area of Edinburgh. We're looking through the book of Proverbs now and try to work out how do we live life with wisdom. The Bible doesn't give us rules for everything in life. There's so many things where we just need to be wise about choices we make, decisions, behaviour, so forth. And surely one of the places in life that we feel the need for wisdom most is when it comes to issues relating to sex. Because we live in a culture that's saturated with sexual imagery and sexual ideas and sexual messages and so navigating that does require an awful lot of wisdom for us as Christians. And if you're not a Christian then you too probably think, well, you've got questions about sex and sexuality and the Bible can help you also, I think. Think out wisdom in that area of your life and show you the goodness of the gospel. And this is nothing new, of course, is it? We read some ancient Proverbs from Proverbs chapter 7 where the idea of the adulterous is put out there as a picture of sexual temptation. And here's this idea of sexual temptation. It's in the street, it's in the marketplace. Sexual temptation is at every corner lying in wait. Sexual temptation takes hold of us, kisses us with bold face, says to us, come.

We face sexual temptation in lots of different arenas of life and we feel the pain of sexual brokenness in life as well. When we turn aside to sexual temptation or to sexual sin, then we become victims laid low by the power and the sorrow and even the shame of our own sin. And into that situation we're glad to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks with hope and with healing. I'm going to start by reading you an extract from this little booklet here. So this book is called sexual addiction, freedom from compulsive behavior. So I'm going to point you to a few resources tonight. And this is from the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, CCEF. If you go on to their website and just Google, you'll find a lot of really helpful resources. So this is a booklet by a guy called David Paulson. He says, have you ever thought or said anything like this? I've tried to stop so many times, but I still end up in front of the computer surfing websites. Or I want to be faithful to my spouse, but other sexual partners are so available. I know it's wrong, but I just can't seem to stop myself. Accountability, prayer, avoiding situations, cold showers. I've tried everything, but I still fail. Is there any hope for me? I know I need to get help, but I'm too ashamed. I thought only men struggled with pornography, but I spend my way too much of my time in erotic romantic fantasies. So this is the world that we inhabit, a world of sexual sin, sexual fantasies, pornography, sexual temptation and sexual brokenness. I'm going to speak about sex from three aspects for a while this evening. One is about sex and intimacy. That's where we're going to start, intimacy and sex. And then we're going to talk about sex and sin. And then we're going to talk about sex and the gospel. So that's kind of the direction of travel that we're going to take. So let's start with the whole idea of sex and intimacy. Intimacy is the most profound expression of relationship that we can have. Intimacy is about close familiarity with another person and a deep friendship. And it's within that kind of intimate relationship that God frames sex for us. Intimacy speaks first of all of the relationship that we can have with God. God created us so that we would enjoy close familiarity and deep friendship or intimacy with him. God wants to draw us into a near loving, familiar, familial relationship with him. God knows you and knows who you are and God wants you to know him also. And that whole idea of knowing and being known is central to the whole concept of intimacy. So think about why God might ask you to pray. Now we believe God knows everything. So what does He need you to tell him? Well, not much. There's nothing he doesn't know. So why does God want you to speak to him? To tell him the stories of your life? Why does God want you to talk to him about your day, your struggles, your challenges, your temptations, and your failures? Well think about it this way. You've got a five-year-old child and they've just started at primary school and they

come home every day and at the end of the day you sit down with them, you make them a little cup of juice and give them some chocolate biscuits and crisps because you're a good parent and you tell them what happened at school and they tell you how they've learned some letters from the alphabet and you listen and you hear them and you give them time to speak to you about the alphabet and which letters they've learned. Now you listen not because you don't know the alphabet but you listen because you prize intimacy with the child. You want to hear their stories. You want them to talk about their day. You want to know them and you want to know that they know you as well. So you're trying to create a relationship with your child of close familiarity, friendship, where they feel safe to tell you everything about who they are and what's going on in their life and that's what God is asking for from us. Real openness and honesty of communication. So intimacy requires two things. It requires openness, good communication that we tell God what's going on in our lives even if it's a broken thing or a hurting thing or a failure or a struggle and God is also looking for us in that relationship exclusiveness. Relationships, intimate relationships require exclusivity. God tells us in the Bible he doesn't want us to have any other gods. I've got four children. I don't want them to one day come home and tell me that they've ditched me because they found a better dad. I want to be their dad and I value the intimacy of that relationship and the exclusivity of it and it is the same in married relationships that spouses need to feel exclusivity because that creates a secure intimate relationship and environment to feel safe, secured, valued and loved. So the idea then is that God creates intimate relationships of trust and familiarity and that marriage is one particular subset of those kind of intimate relationships. So there's the most important intimate relationship of all, the relationship we have with God and then there are many other kinds of important intimate relationships, familial relationships and friendships and marriage is a subset of those kind of relationships. So this sermon, the outset of it, I want to say this, that we began singing a song, How Great Thou Art and to have Jesus is the one thing that really matters above everything else. So St. Augustine said, He who is Christ in all the world has no more than He who is Christ alone. He who is Christ in all the world has no more than He who is Christ alone. So if you have

Christ, you have everything you need to be a complete human being. So you may be single tonight and I want to tell you if you're single that married people are no more complete than you are.

[9 : 27] Being married doesn't make me a more complete human being than you because you're single. What makes me complete is having Christ. And I also want to say this, that celibate people, people who are not sexually active in any way, are no less complete than people who are sexually active.

That's not where we find our completeness, our wholeness, our identity as human beings. He who is Christ has everything. She who is Christ has everything. So that's the relationship that needs to be built and nurtured above everything else. And we'll come back to that, we'll kind of circle back to that at the end as we come to think about sex and the gospel. So we've got sex and intimacy, the intimacy of our relationship with God and then marriage is a subset of that kind of friendship as one particular expression of intimacy. Married people are people who are deeply familiar with one another. They know one another's story as well. They've learned to listen and hear from one another. We don't just hear new things from our spouse every day, in fact, spouses repeat themselves a lot. But that's okay because we're building familiarity. We're building trust. We're hearing one another's stories again and again because we need to tell each other those stories to create an environment of security, togetherness, unconditional love, total acceptance and unbreakable commitment. And that unbreakable commitment, that lifelong commitment, is the moral context for sex according to the Bible. So we all believe that sex is a moral act, that some sex is good and some sex is bad, that there are some sexual acts that ought not to happen. So we all believe sex is moral. In our culture, generally speaking, moral sex is the idea of consent. That's the key idea. If there's consent, it's moral. For us, though, it's not consent, it's the lifelong commitment. That's the context that God gives for moral and ethical sexual relationships. So we've got the intimacy of the human relationship with God, a subset of that, the intimacy of the marriage relationship, and then as a subset of that, we've got the intimacy of the sexual relationship. So it's within the marriage context, one particular aspect of marriage is physical intimacy or sexual intimacy. And that God always expects that the intimacy of sex is built on the prior intimacy of marriage. And that's really important because for sex to work well, it requires familiarity, trust, acceptance, companionship, affection, kindness, security. Sex is an outward connection that

reflects a deeper inward connection. And in that context, sex is a good, wonderful and great gift from God to be treasured, a celebration of the most profound human intimacies. So sex and intimacy belong together under God and within the marriage context. Let's think about sex and sin next. So here in Proverbs 7, as we've seen already, there's this very clear idea of the power of sexual temptation and the devastating effects on us of sexual sin. Here we have in front of us in the book of Proverbs, in many different places throughout the book of Proverbs, chapter after chapter in reality. There's this picture of sex that's been corrupted by sinful and selfish desires. So sex within the context of marriage is beautiful and good. But taken out of that context, it becomes hurtful and destructive. Sex out with the context of marriage is a violation of love.

Our responsibilities as human beings are calling, our commandments from God are to love God and love others. And the command, the responsibility to love God and love others well is violated by sex outside of marriage. It's putting a selfishness and a greed before the need and the well-being of others. Now I understand this is a difficult thing for many of us because we live in a culture that glorifies and idolizes sex. And we do this with lots of things, don't we? We take something that's good and we turn it into a God. We fashion it into an idol. And so there are lots of people who now see sex as the thing that makes their life worth living. They worship sex, they root their identity in sex. They find their worth in their sexual attractiveness or their sexual conquests or their sexual prowess. Sex saturates the media, the internet, some of the most popular websites in the world are porn. Gratuitous sex and soft porn is commonplace on TV shows and in the tabloid media. Is this a sign of a sophisticated and enlightened culture? No.

It's a sign of a decaying culture, unreflective ruled by its appetites. Now if we live in a sex-saturated culture, it's a little surprise then that many of us have sex-saturated imaginations and sex-saturated desires. And the issues of sexual temptation and pornography and illicit sexual thoughts are just as likely to affect Christians as non-Christians. Becoming a Christian doesn't give you a get out of jail free card or an immunity card against sexual struggles.

[16:01] And every human being is broken sexually with unfulfilled sexual desires or with sexual guilt or other sexual problems. So it's real for all of us. We're not immune as Christians.

We don't need to be shocked by that, we don't need to be pretty shabby about it because it's a real issue for lots of people. Porn, masturbation, sexting, affairs, sleeping with people, going to prostitutes, these are real problems even for Christians. Sexual sin is a big problem for both sexes. But men in particular in our culture seem to have succumbed to the allure of solitary erotic experiences and pornography. So there's a really big issue that's pervasive in our culture and destructive of healthy sexual use. So I want to say to you this, God is serious when he forbids adultery. God is serious when he forbids promiscuity and extramarital and premarital sex. God is serious when he warns against sexual fantasies.

God is anti-porn. Whether it's the hardcore porn found in dodgy websites or the soft core porn of the Game of Thrones, God is against it. Because they go against the moral fabric of the world that God has created. They're an expression of rebellion against God, his love and his goodness. It's taking what God has given and using it as an expression of our love of self rather than our love of him. And when we take God's good gifts and use them to love ourselves rather than to love him and love others, then we become broken and guilty as people. So sexual sin, pornography and all the problems that go with that are real. But sexual sin is not just a problem for single people, is it? Many married men view pornography. Married people have affairs. Married people are unfaithful. Pornography is destructive of trust and communication in marriage. Many people destroy their marriages by sexual transgression. And in the end, it tears the family apart. So a good biblical understanding of sexual sin is important. A normal and good desire becomes an outsized abnormal desire. The Bible's got a special word for those kind of desires. It calls them epithemia. Desires that have become too big, too obsessive, too overwhelming, too controlling.

And so the normal desire for sex in our culture has very often been channeled in such a way that it takes control of the imagination, the thoughts and the longings that most people have. They have a disproportionate impact on us, on our imagination, on our viewing habits, on our behavior. And the more space we give to these thoughts, the more we indulge these desires, the more they take over and dominate our thought patterns. And then they begin to express themselves into our actions. So desire gives birth to sin, we're told, and sin gives birth to death. So we may think there's nothing wrong with the way we think about certain things or certain images that we look at. But God wants to say to you, really, you are sowing a lot of harm into your life. Patterns of thinking, patterns of

looking, patterns of seeing, patterns of understanding, patterns of behavior that will begin to take more and more control over your thought world and your life and change who you are, alienate you from God, make you ashamed and guilty, ruin your life spiritually and begin to demean all your other relationships. So where does this take us? Well, we begin to look at people in a much more sexualized way. If you live in a porn saturated world or a porn saturated culture or if you've got a porn saturated mind, then you will begin to look at everybody in a pornographic way. Jesus defined adultery in the Sermon the Mount as saying this, I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. The way we look is moral, Jesus says it counts. Job, the book of Job says, I've made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman.

So porn leads us in sexual fantasies and sexual sin leads us to look at people in a sexualized way. Porn, sexual sin allows us to ignore the abuse and suffering of others because, believe me, porn is exploitation. If we pay for porn, if we access porn, we contribute to the profits of human trafficking and slavery. Clickbait is used in the media, on the websites, on your phone and in lots of other places, clickbait is used to manipulate your behavior and create revenue for porn companies. In the long term, you're going to damage your potential for loving and fulfilling relationship. Men especially who use porn a lot, in the end no longer even want to pursue intimacy with other real people in face-to-face relationships because life becomes simpler if it's just you, your computer and your porn. And so you are going to become more and more inadequate for real, sustained human relationship. And ironically, if you use a lot of porn, you will enter marriage with a comically tragic misunderstanding of sex. And that, ironically, will prove to damage your ability to enjoy a real and fulfilling sexual relationship with a spouse because, believe it or not, porn sex is not real sex. It's a fiction. It's a dream, a fantasy sold to you to exploit you and manipulate you. And if you let yourself think that pornography reflects the reality of loving sexual relationship, you're always going to struggle to form loving sexual relationship in your marriage. So that's sex and sin. Just want us to move on a little bit more positive, hopeful ground perhaps for a few moments to talk about sex and the gospel. There is a lot of suffering around sex and a lot of guilt around sex in our culture. It's not the unforgivable sin. You mustn't make it that to yourself and you mustn't make it that to others. Thief, greed, lies, a lack of Sabbath rest and idolatry are given as much weight in the Ten Commandments.

[23 : 54] So don't feel despairing about yourself if you struggle with sexual sin or temptation. That equally don't just accept that it's inevitable, that it's just the way you are or that sexual sin is normal. But none of us in this area are without hope. The gospel offers hope and the gospel offers healing. So what can we say to offer hope? What can I say to you tonight if this is a real issue for you and even in your life, where you're hurt or where you're struggling? Well, I want to say this. First of all, there is a relationship that can transform your problems with sex. A long term relationship with Jesus will really help you with your sexual struggles. Because when you ask Jesus for help, He comes with mercy, but He comes with firmness to change you. So ask Jesus for help. Pursue your relationship with Jesus.

That long term relationship is the foundation of all human intimacy and happiness. Secondly, I want to say this, that direction of travel matters as much as the distance traveled.

In other words, looking at this way, sanctification is a process over time. None of us becomes holy and perfect overnight. But we want to be growing in godliness, changing in character, traveling in the right direction. So in all our struggles with sin, there are times when we will fail and we will fall. That's true of all kinds of sin, including sexual sins.

So you may never want to sin in a certain way again. You may promise yourself. You may promise others. You may promise your spouse. You will never sin in a certain way again. And then you do. You're crushed. You're dismayed. You feel worthless. You feel hopeless that you've given into this sin again. Well, in those situations, you don't lose sight of the cross and you don't give up hope, because it's the direction that you're going in that decides your destination. So you may not win this battle all at once if it's an area of real struggle for you. But you can take small steps in the right direction. It's the direction of travel as much as the distance traveled that really matters. What are some small steps in the right direction? Repent more quickly when you've fallen to sexual sin of any kind.

Want more of God and His grace and ask for that. Be more honest and accountable about your behavior and less secretive and stealthy. Try and battle more strongly against thoughts, desires

and behavior that is wrong. Change the way that you deal with certain stressful situations because there are often stresses in our life that lead us back to repeat patterns of sin. So try and change the way you relate to those stresses. Is there a desire in the frequency of this sin? A decrease in the desire or the frequency of this sin? Are you more aware of the negative impact of your sinful behavior on others? Do you desire to love others in a more godly way? These are small steps in the right direction. So you may not win the battle all at once, but are you going in the right direction? Thirdly, I want to say look for reasons why you fall in places or times when you are vulnerable. Understand your behavior. So I'm going to read you a little bit from this booklet again by David [27 : 43] Paulson, Sexual Addiction, Freedom from Compulsive Behavior. So he talks about Tom. Tom is a single Christian man in his late 30s who's struggling with pornography and masturbation since he was a teenager. He tried all the right things, accountability, memorizing scripture passages, exercise, cold showers, prayer, involvement in ministry, but he still struggled so he came asking for help. I asked him to keep a record of when he was tempted.

He said to me, I always know when. It's usually on Friday night. It's my temper tantrum with God. At first glance it seemed that his big struggle was with a sexual addiction, but here he was talking about anger at God. Where was that coming from? He said, I'm tired and lonely on Friday nights. I think about my single friends and dates and my married friends with their wives and I feel sorry for myself. I get angry at God because I think he owes me a wife and I don't have one. So by 9 o'clock the temptation to sexual sin is overwhelming and I give in. Tom's fight with sin had focused on just one thing, his struggle with pornography, but underlying that struggle was Tom's anger at God, self-pity, envy, his desire to be married and a hugely significant issue, his operative belief that God owed him a wife.

Tom's desire for a wife had become what the Bible calls a lust of the flesh, a desire that dominated his life. Tom's lust for a wife fueled his self-pity, his anger at God and finally his escape into pornography. So you see here's one man, he's got a problem with one kind of sexual sin, underneath it loneliness, self-pity, bitterness. So understanding those problems helped him to deal with that problem. So if you've got a problem, try and speak to someone or look at it in a way that helps you understand why is this a problem for me. And if you can deal with the sin beneath the sin, often that's a great way of making progress. What else would I say? Fourthly, go to God. When you stumble, when you fall, what's your natural tendency? What did Adam and Eve do in the garden they hid from God?

When we stumble and fall often, we want to hide from God. We turn in on ourselves, we feel ashamed. Don't turn away from God, don't turn in on yourself, turn to God. He's your hope, he's your help. If you tell yourself anything else, that's a lie. God is always your hope, always your help, always your refuge. So put on Christ, fill your life with Christ, close yourself with Him. Don't just avoid the darkness, fill yourself with light. Talk to God, tell Him how you feel, what your struggles are, what's going wrong. Listen to God, let the Bible speak into your life and your situation. Live in community, you're not alone, you're part of a family. You can have great intimate relationships, profound intimate relationships with other beings within the body of Jesus Christ. You need their care, their prayers, their company, their time. You all have a duty to each other to build loving, solid, real relationships, rather than just relationships where you're using others for your own gratification. You need real, solid, loving relationships where you serve each other, where you're accountable to each other and you need pastors, friends, spouses that you can speak to. And then I want to set you, get a new and a better vision. Sexual sin starts in imagination.

[31 : 34] That means we need to reimagine. We need to disconnect certain thought patterns in our head and start putting things together in a new way. You need to reshape your thought life. You need to work to replace wicked thoughts with good and holy and pure ones.

So there's a quote that David Paulson's got in that book about this idea of a better vision. He quotes a French person called Antoine de Saint-Éspulé who says, if you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders.

Instead teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea. This is what God does for us. He gives us a vision of something better than our dark self-centered imagination. He gives you a vision of a life that's lived as it's meant to be in true intimate relationship with Him and authentic loving relationship with other. A God who promises help for those who are imprisoned by their desires, dark thoughts and passions. Thomas Chalmers called this the expulsive power of a new affection. If your heart is

owned and governed by a disordered love, how do you conquer that disordered love? You allow a greater love to take hold of your heart and drive out that disordered love. The great love, the expulsive love, is our love for God. That means we need to hear the Gospel again and again and again, preach the Gospel to ourselves and to one another, to hear that there is good news, that we are loved eternally and forever through Jesus Christ, that we are loved at the cross in the most costly and wonderful and extravagantly, and that the most fulfilling thing any of us will ever experience is to be loved fully and freely and wonderfully by Jesus Christ.

So let's leave it there. I think I'd ask the guys to pop a slide up maybe. Right. If you've got your phone or you take notes, take a photo of that slide for somebody else because obviously you don't need it for yourself. But I do want to encourage you to take hold of good resources, okay? So it's worth doing this, either for yourself or others. So there's lots of good stuff in the Gospel and Life website, good article by Keller, Gospel and Sex. This little booklet, sexual addiction, David Powleson, CCEF, and then Manage Matters by Winston Smith, who also worked for CCEF, super helpful book on managing relationships. So I think we're going to put something on the website or out in the church mail this week as well, with a little email about this and linking you to some resources and so on. And I would really urge you, if you have a problem, speak to somebody because there's no point in struggling alone. Nobody's going to be shocked or surprised or amazed, but there's no point in facing these dark things on your own and just living with a sense of shame. So you have very good pastors in this congregation, very caring people that will respect your confidentiality but will minister to you well in your brokenness. So don't feel that you have to struggle alone in this regard. You get Corey, you get Derek, you get Katrina, you've got Louise, even me, lots of people who are willing to love you and help you in this regard. So I'm going to pray, sing our last song. So thanks for your patience on this topic. Lord, thanks so much that you give us hope and brokenness, healing in the hurting places of life. Lord, we've all got our unfulfilled longings or disappointments, our sense of shame and the guilt that we might carry, things we've done wrong, thoughts that we've entertained, people we've wounded and hurt, betrayals, all kinds of sadnesses, all of them connected in some way to our sex and sexuality. Lord, please do bring hope and healing into those hurts, into those dark places and give us a much better vision of who we can be as people and how we can live and may that vision for all of us centre on Jesus Christ. Amen.