

Setting Sexual Boundaries

Want to know one of the very best ways to act like a Christian? It is sex. If ever there was a time and place to be distinctively Christian it is in 21st century America in terms of our sexual behavior. Not that sex is anything new. Good and bad, sexual behavior has been around since the Garden of Eden. It's just that we live in a generation where the emphasis on sex is pervasive. To be sure, pornography has been around for all of history, but not the Internet. And promiscuity is certainly nothing new, but it was not promoted on television.

I've read the statistics on what people are doing wrong but I'm not going to repeat those statistics here. And, it is true, I can tell you the consequences of immoral sexual behavior from disease to divorce and from disappointments to depression. But instead, let's focus on what we as Christians can do that is right. After all, the reason we behave like Christians isn't mainly to avoid herpes; it's primarily to honor God. So, let's talk about sex from a Christian perspective.

God loves sex. It was God's idea from the very beginning. So, as Christians, when we think about sex it should drive us to think about God. When we are attracted to someone of the opposite sex it's because that's the way God designed us to be. When sex feels good it's because God is the one who thought up those feelings. In fact, sex is one of the ways that we live for God and it is one of the ways that we can worship God.

Let's go back to the beginning. The powerful distinction of male and female and all the sexual wonder of it is part of the creation story. Genesis 2:22-25 tells us:

Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;

she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Try to imagine the wonder and splendor of Adam and Eve seeing each other for the first time. They were obviously very much alike. Both were thoroughly and completely human. But they were also very different. Their bodies were naked and beautiful and attractive and sensual and designed to become one flesh. It was magnificent. It was powerful. It was sheer joy. There was no shame. There was no embarrassment. And when they were sexually joined together God was delighted. Genesis 1:27 and 31 tell us, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . . God saw all that he made, and it was very good."

Since creation, sexuality has been one of the premier defining features of who we are. Yes, we define ourselves by language, race, age and a host of other aspects but there is no aspect of

who we are that defines us more than gender. The Bible even uses gender descriptions for heaven, so the gender that we have now is the gender we will have for eternity in heaven.

Sex is an integral part of our identity whether we are babies in the nursery or aged in the nursing home, whether we are single or married, whether we are celibate or sexually active. It is part of who God created us to be. That is why our sexual roles and practices are so important. It is also why sexual abuse is so damaging.

Too often we equate sex with the physical union of two bodies, but actually sex is much more than that. It's the way we dress. It's the pitch to our voices. It's the way we walk and the way we think. How we behave sexually is woven into all of life and is at the core of how we act like Christians.

Sex is one of the ways that we live for God and it is one of the ways that we can worship God.

It is because our sexuality is so very important that we as Christians dare not relegate it to a separate silo in our lives. Frankly, that is a problem. Some Christians insist that Jesus Christ is the Lord of their lives—except for sex. They believe, pray, tell the truth and seek to live for God in everything they do—except for sex. It is as if there is one room in their lives that has a locked door to keep God out. But, it doesn't work that way. Our sexuality and our Christianity are all wired together.

Because our God-given sexuality is so important and powerful God has given boundaries to protect us from its dangers. Of course, sexuality is not the only area of our lives that needs protecting. Life itself is powerful and is a God-given gift. So God has put boundaries against assault and murder. Property is protected with a boundary that forbids theft. Truth is protected with a boundary that forbids lying.

Some of the sexual boundaries are spelled out in great detail in the Bible. For example, in Leviticus 18:6-9:

“ *No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. . . .*

“ *Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her.*

“ *Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father.*

“ *Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.’ “*

The list goes on and the list is long. With a few exceptions the vast majority of modern Americans would agree to and live within these boundaries. In fact, much of the biblical list of prohibitions is codified into our criminal legal system.

The point here is that there are boundaries to sexual behavior. Almost everyone has boundaries. The question is who sets those boundaries; is it us or God? Christians believe that God created us and our sexuality, that he knows best, that sex was his idea from the very beginning. Therefore we trust him to set boundaries for our own good as well as for his honor.

In 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 we are admonished to:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 tells us:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.

We also read in Ephesians 5:3-4:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

Now, if someone is not a Christian I suggest enjoying God's sexuality because it is very good. But I also suggest staying within God's sexual boundaries for your own good. Even if you are self-centered rather than God-centered, living within God's sexual design is smart and a good thing to do for your own health and happiness.

But for those of us who are Christians the approach is very different. If we have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and declared our allegiance to Jesus as our Lord then our goal is to please him, not us. We choose to honor him and make him look good with all that we do. Even if it is hard, we choose to act like Christians in our sexual choices and behavior.

Acting like a Christian will depend on our situation. For someone who is single it means abstaining from sexual intimacy until marriage. It is choosing not to live together before marriage. It is not hooking up even when everyone else seems to be hooking up.

For those who are married it means remaining faithful even when attracted to someone else. It means giving yourself sexually to your husband or your wife, seeking that other person's joy and satisfaction more than your own satisfaction. It means that sex is an expression of intimacy rather than a path to intimacy.

For all of us, regardless of age or marital status, it means that we worship God with our bodies and with our sexual activities and that we consciously avoid immorality.

What happens when members of a sports team cross the line in terms of sexual behavior? It makes the whole team look bad. What happens when a politician behaves in a way that is grossly immoral? It makes the whole country look bad. And what happens when a Christian's behavior is sexually immoral? It makes Jesus Christ look bad. As Christians we want to make Jesus Christ look good!

There are hundreds of practical ways for us to act morally as Christians. Let me give you a half dozen to start the list.

Number one, be careful what you drink. Researchers report an overwhelming connection between alcohol consumption and immoral sexual activity. From teenagers losing their virginity to a casual friend to baby boomers committing adultery with a co-worker chances are very high that alcohol or drugs are involved.

If you want to act like a Christian in sex, be careful what you drink. Ephesians 5:15-18 says:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Number two is to restrict pornography. Easy access to pornography has become a curse of our generation. Internet pornography has become the crack cocaine of sexual addiction. While there are many issues involved in all of this, pornography is essentially selfish. It lacks the intimacy with another person that sex is designed to be all about and makes sex all about self and self-satisfaction. For Christian men who are among the one-third of Americans who access Internet pornography and have become addicted—get help. Tell a friend. Talk to your wife. See a counselor. Join a support group. And, if you are not addicted but are at risk,

Sex is an expression of intimacy rather than a path to intimacy.

buy a computer filter; put your computer in a public place at home; switch to an ISP service that restricts access. If need be, get rid of your computer. Restrict pornography.

Third on our list is to dress modestly. Think through the sexual implications of the clothes you wear and the makeup you put on. Certainly, be attractive. Celebrate your physical beauty. But don't be provocative. Don't intentionally attract sexual attention. Don't purposely trigger someone's lust. Don't take it as a compliment when someone says you are really hot or your outfit is sexy. If in doubt, go to a Christian of the opposite sex and ask that person what they think of what you wear. And, if in doubt, wear something else. 1Timothy 2:9-10 says that women should *"dress modestly, with decency and propriety . . . with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God."*

Number four is to set sexual limits in advance. Ask God to help you set sexual limits in advance—

before going to the prom, before the business trip to Las Vegas, before signing up for cable TV. And don't play the word games to rationalize immoral behavior. Saying that intimate sexual activities are not really sex is way beyond Christian sexual limits.

The truth is that most of us are not very good at deciding sexual boundaries in the heat of passion or in the face of temptation. So do it in advance. Decide what is right and write it down. Ask for God's help to stay within his limits in sexual behavior.

Number five is to keep speech moral. What we say is a window into our souls and an expression of our faith. Don't speak obscenities. Don't repeat immoral jokes. Don't turn God's good sex into crude immorality. Philippians 4:8 tells us:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, that's what you should think about.

Number six is to start over. If your sexual behavior has been less than Christian, if you wanted to be a virgin on your wedding day and you're

not, if you never wanted to get hooked on pornography and now you're addicted, if you hate unfaithfulness but are involved in an extramarital affair, if you swore you would never live together before marriage but you have already moved in . . . start over. Tell God you were wrong and you are sorry. God will forgive and will give you a fresh opportunity to act like a Christian in sex. If you have started over before and messed up—start again. If you have started over a hundred times and feel like a failure—go to God, ask for help and start all over again!

A few months ago a man came to visit me with an amazing story. He grew up in a non-Christian religion. In fact, when he went off to college at a large mid-western university he had never met a white Protestant Christian in his life.

The first day of school he walked into a freshman class and saw an attractive young woman sitting by herself in the front row. He sat down next to her and introduced himself. She told him her name and explained that she was a born-again Christian. He didn't have any idea what that meant or why she would say such a thing. It was like meeting someone for the first time who said she was allergic to asparagus.

But he pursued her and they became friends. Months later they were in her dorm room studying and he pushed her down on the bed. She immediately reacted, pushed him away and told him off in no uncertain terms. She made her relational and sexual boundaries clear in words that left no room for misunderstanding.

I have to hand it to him. He was a quick thinker. He told her she totally misunderstood what had happened. He didn't mean anything sexual at all. He was stunned and offended that she would think such ill of him. He flat out lied!

Then she did something that took him totally off guard. She believed him. She apologized for what she had said and for accusing him of sexual advances that he said he did not intend. She asked for his forgiveness.

He walked out of her room and down the hall and he told me, "For the first time in my life, I realized I was a sinner." He saw the contrast between who he was and the way he behaved and her stunning purity and righteousness.

That 18-year old coed acted like a Christian. And if she can do it, we can do it, too.

The rest of the story goes like this. Through her influence he came to Christian faith. He graduated from the university, went to law school and got his law degree, became professor of International Law at one of the largest universities in the United States. He was very successful. But, then he left that job. Today he's a pastor . . . and he married that girl!

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm