

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
John Crosby
July 13 & 17, 2011
Building Blocks of Faith: God-Ordained Sexuality
1 Corinthians 5:1-10; 6:9-20

On Monday, Steve (Worship Leader) led a memorial service for a young man taken too early, his family grieving. Just yesterday Sara (pianist) led a service for a lady who is 101 years old—just think of all that she saw in her 101 years. We get to do that here together but the idea is that what we experience here is supposed to go out *there*. Often it just turns into a little talk; so as I was listening to the offering music, I thought it would be a good idea if I asked you to start by closing your eyes and resting with me just for a second, that God, not John, but God might have something to say to you today. (*pause*)

So many words in books, on billboards, computers, TVs, movies, parents, kids—words all the time. I pray that in these next few minutes some words may be like seeds that don't bounce off our brains but sink into our hearts. Nothing clever, Lord, just words from You. So may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

People struggled to hear words right after Jesus died and was raised from the dead. A group of people tried to follow Him out into this Roman world that was all around them, trying to remember what He said and imitate the way He lived and listen for His voice still speaking. They gathered in little clusters much, much smaller than this all around the Roman Empire. As they learned how to live lives that were very different from the way the Romans and the Greeks and the Jews were living, the way they kept in touch with each other was to write letters back and forth. We are going to look at one of those letters today from the apostle Paul who had started a small church in a house in Corinth, a city in Greece.

When I say Corinth, think Vegas—really. Corinth was Vegas on steroids. We think because we are modern, sophisticated, technological people that we invented sexual freedom or that old-fashioned people were prudes and didn't understand what was going on but Corinth was Vegas on steroids. They, literally, had turned prostitution into a state-run religion. Thousands and thousands of people every day went into the temple to worship sex and it was in that atmosphere that the early followers of Jesus were struggling to live not the way they used to live but the way they were supposed to live. That certainly has nothing to do with us today but let's just pretend that we don't struggle with sexuality. Hear the Word of God from Paul to Vegas, that is, Corinth, chapter 5:

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?...

⁴ So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

You can bet nobody slept through that sermon. They wanted to know what was going on.

⁶ Your boasting is not good....

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

Clearly Paul is not saying, “Anybody who messes up you should not eat with.” That is not what he is talking about. He is talking about *unrepentant* folks, people who continue to do these kinds of things and say, “That’s all right. I’m a Christian. I’m free to do anything.” He is not talking about us sinners. He says,

¹³ God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

In the next chapter Paul refers back to this idea.

¹² “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything.

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

Two thousand years later the more things change, the more they stay the same. It is a good thing that the modern church, the Presbyterian Church, doesn’t struggle with sexuality. It is a good thing we don’t have a culture anything like Corinth where there was a whole different kind of sexual ethic in the culture than there was in the church. It is confusing. All around us are different sexual ideas. On the right there are conservative fringe movements like Promise Keepers and promise rings and vows of chastity while the rest of the culture graphically shows kids that sex is about hooking up or about friendship with benefits. We say to kids, “Oh, no, kids, sex is different.” It *is* different from that, right? But a lot of times you say, “That’s really just for the kids. When you become an adult, rules change, right? As long as we care about each other.”

What I’d like to do is to talk a little bit about all of that and begin with the notion that there is a difference between sex and sexuality. Sexuality has three different parts to it. There is sexual behavior: what you do with your body. There is sexual orientation: to whom you are attracted or not attracted. And then there is sexual identity: the way that our being created male or female affects all of life through the lenses we were given. Sexuality is a huge thing, and sexual behavior is just a small slice of the pie we will discuss today.

I'm going to start out by asking, when I say the word *sex*, how does that make you feel? What images does that bring to mind? How does the word *sex* make you feel? If you are a teenager, it makes you think about Hollywood stars or supermodels. If you are a middle-aged man, the word *sex* makes you think, tuck in your stomach. If you are a honeymooner, one of you is going to be thinking about intense pleasure and the other of you is going to be thinking "awkward." If you are a young woman and you hear the word *sex*, often you will think unattractive. Interesting word—unable to attract. If you are a single guy and you hear the word *sex*, sometimes you say, "Never." Sometimes you think guilt. If you are a six-year-old boy, you hear the word *sex*, and you say "Yuk." If you are a widow, you think loneliness. If you are teenager or a 20-something, 30-something, 40-something, 50-something, 60-something, 70-something, 80-something guy, when you think *sex*, you think horny. If you are married, often you think about being held or intimacy or awkwardness. If you are young and you've got a young family and they are running all over and you are so tired, you can barely keep your eyes open and somebody says *sex*, you say "What? Again? Really?" And that is just the guys!

I don't think we ever really figure out *sex*. I don't think *sex* is something that is figure-out-able. It is different in each stage of your life, but it is always powerful. Grandparents and great-grandparents still struggle hugely with sexuality. Whether you are male or female, whether you are between 11 and 101, whether you are single or married or divorced, a widow, a parent, a grandparent, for almost all of us, *sex* is so different from what we see on TV or in the movies or what kids fantasize about—but we live in a sexualized culture.

We started with this building block idea, that we ought to have a sermon on gay marriage, gay ordination, gay *sex*, and it quickly became apparent, we could not do that because that is such a small part of sexuality. It is an important part and we need to deal with it, but how can we talk about that before we talk about human sexuality? Homosexuality gets the spotlight but, if we are honest, it is hardly in the lead as a sexual issue of tension in our society. For instance, 53% of all marriages end in divorce. Infidelity is cited in more than half of divorces. More than 10% of the couples in this room will experience huge pain and the consequences of infertility. One out of every six American women is a victim of attempted or completed assault in her lifetime and most often by someone she knows. There is a \$57 billion pornography industry in the United States, with revenue more than the combined revenues of all the professional football, baseball, or basketball franchises, or the combined revenues of major networks. On the web, 25% of all search engines are porn-related and 38% of all downloads are pornographic. Those are statistics, but if you want to think about the impact of *sex* on our culture, think about what it does to women and the pressure on them to look a certain way, to dress a certain way, to respond a certain way whether they are in their eighties or they are eight years-old. This is a sexualized culture. How did we get here? I think it depends a lot on what *sex* means.

My theme is that the world has lied to us. It has lied to us in two ways. First, the world has lied to us by saying that *sex* is a simple pleasure and all of us deserve to be pleasure-filled. Second, the world tells us that a life without *sex* is unfulfilled. I think those are two of the big messages in our society today. The first thing we need to figure out is what *sex* means so I'll begin with a tiny, mini course in sexual ethics.

There are **five different ways people look at *sex***. [Taken from Dennis Hollinger's wonderful book, *The Meaning of Sex*, Baker Books.] First, there is **naturalism**. Naturalism is a philosophy often used by people who do not believe in God. It is taught in school. Naturalism, Lord Russell. Naturalists would assert that *sex* is just an animal drive because we are animals and that it

needs an outlet. It is not something of which you should be embarrassed or ashamed and there is no right or wrong as long as you don't hurt anybody. That is naturalism.

At the other end of that scale is **asceticism**. Ascetics are often associated with the church. They are the ones who say, "Sex is necessary, but it is not as good as spiritual life." The body is somehow not as good as the soul." That leads to a climate where people are embarrassed to talk about sexuality or admit how strong this need is. I think that outside of food and sleep, the sexual drive may be the strongest drive in our lives. Ascetics say that it is wrong or that it is not a good thing. May I just tell you, that is not a *Christian* idea. This is an infection in Christianity from the Greek culture. Remember the Greeks were strong when the Church started. Greeks believed that the soul was good and the body was bad. Anything you wanted to do with the body, go ahead because it the body was going to die anyway. Concentrate on the soul. That duality infected the Church, which started to say, "Chastity or not having sex is more spiritual than having sex." That continued all the way through the life of the Church through the Middle Ages and grows and grows with the celibate priesthood until you get to the Reformation where it is not like they rediscovered sex, but they said, "No!" As you look at the story, that is not what sex is about and the people who rescued sexuality. I know this sounds weird, but they were the Purists, an earlier form of Puritans. They were the ones who said, "This is part of the Christian life. It is central to it."

The third way that people view sex is the most popular on the planet because there are far more people in Asia than there are here. That is **Eastern**. They would say whether it is Confucianism or Hinduism that all of nature is one. There is one great soul and sex is one of the ways that we unite with that soul and come alive spiritually; therefore, there are no sexual taboos. Sex is part of the spiritual quest and it has no intrinsic value outside that expression.

The fourth view of sexual ethics is the most pervasive in our culture and that is **humanism**. Humanism is not a bad thing but there are Christian humanists and secular humanists. The humanists would look at sexuality and say that the end result of sexual tradition ought to be self-actualization. Humanism is about coming alive to your human potential, self-actualization. Frankly, self-actualization often turns into self-absorption or narcissism; sex becomes defined as two people who are trying to enrich their individual experience.

Here is what I would like to ask you. When you think about sex, what is your reason for doing it or not doing it, thinking about it or not thinking about it? Is your view from a naturalist, an ascetic, an Eastern, or a humanist perspective? I think your viewpoint hugely determines how you are going to live. The problem is, of course, that philosophy usually stays in the classroom. But we live in the real world, so we need to remember that I said that there were *five* ethics for sexuality. The fifth view is **Judeo/Christian**. This comes out of the story of God as told to the Jews and the Christians that sex is a great gift from God. It is a good thing that God sets it within the larger story, and it starts at the very beginning, Genesis.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image...."

¹⁸ The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."

²⁷ ...male and female he created them."

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number...."

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Then Adam and Eve turned from God. They became aware that they were naked and they put clothes on themselves. God said, “You are cursed,” not “I curse you.” But, “This is the effect, the consequence, of what has happened. Your sexuality is broken. It is no longer reflecting the you and Me. Now the man will have power over the woman. The woman will bear children in pain, and this will be a sign of your brokenness.” And then Jesus comes.

So what is the Christian story of sex? It starts with the idea that God said it is not good for man to be alone and He created them male and female and,

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

Christianity is the most materialistic of all the religions. We believe that God is in the dirt. God created us and all of life. This physicality is something loved by God. We are not supposed to love things but love the God who makes material things. Second, we believe that we are made in the image of God and part of that is this relational intimacy—that we are to know and be known. Third, we believe that we are fallen. We are broken people. We are not bad people but broken people. We hardly have to talk at all about the idea that our sexuality is broken because everybody will agree we are *all* broken. Fourth, the story of God is about redemption.

When God comes to show us how to be rescued and how to live a different life, He does not send an email. When God comes to show us a new way, there is no website. There is no letter. There is no postage. There is a person, a man walking around, flesh and blood with tears in His eyes and joy in His heart. He says, “This is how you should live.” The incarnation shows that God wants to redeem our bodies and give us hope while we wait. This great gift from God, sex, is intended to be the way that marriage is consummated. It is a sign that the two become one, male and female. Sex is a sign of how we are to create children in that covenant of marriage. It is supposed to be pleasurable for us to be together and we believe that biblical sexuality is one expression of loving intimacy.

The Hebrew word most often associated with sex in the Bible is *yadah*. *Yadah* in other places just means *to know*, but when people have sex, *yadah*. “The man *knew* the woman.” Adam knew, *yadah*, Eve and she conceived a baby. In other words, right from the start, sex was about knowing the other person not just their body. A friend of mine gives a marriage seminar where he talks about *yadah*, and he says we need to *know* one another more than just body to body, skin on skin. We need to *know* each other. Men, it is not just about sex. It is about *knowing* the other person. I bet some of you men don’t even know your wife’s favorite flower. There is a story about a guy who was asked this question and he said, “I do know. Gold Medal All-Purpose flour, right?” Another man committed to celibacy right there!

We are supposed to know one another. Genesis says, “They were naked and not ashamed.” They allowed somebody else to know them. It is not just intimate but scary to expose ourselves body-wise. “Oh, please, no.” To expose ourselves to somebody body and soul is a very transparent, very intimate, and very scary process. That is why God says it happens inside the marriage. But the lie of the world—sex is a simple pleasure we all deserve all the time—is a lie, and it is not simple at all. It is about much more than pleasure and we don’t all deserve it. And the second lie is like it—life without sex is unfulfilling. If you are single, if you are young, if you

are widowed, if you are divorced, if you are older and not able to have sex—for any one of these reasons—you should not believe the lie that your life is any less fulfilled.

Into that steps the Christian community. The church needs to speak to our children and each other and it needs to live out what I could call transforming sexual choices. The first of these is that **we need to model, to show that sex is not the key to a fulfilled life.** King Jesus is the key to a fulfilled life, all the way every day. This modeling needs to start young because our kids get bombarded with so many of these other messages. We talk about this tons with our adolescents here. Every year our ninth graders have a retreat called “Sexy.” The purpose of the retreat is to talk about sexuality. I don’t get up and lead this retreat. Who wants to hear their grandfather talk about sex? Young women and young men who are still single talk about sexuality and their faith and the battle that it is. A young couple comes in to talk to them in language ninth graders can understand about what it is about and what happens if you mess up and how you can do better helping one other. We need to do that at every level in the church.

The second thing a community needs to do is to show people who struggle with sex that **we are not alone.** If there are 600 people in the room, there are 600 people who struggle with sex. I had a guy come into my office who said to me, “I’ve never told anybody about this until now, but I struggle enormously with pornography. I’ve been going to see a psychiatrist about some problems in our marriage. My psychiatrist said that I need to tell my wife.” The man said, “I can’t do that. You know my wife. What would happen if I told her?” So we talked about this thing that had taken over his life and prayed together and talked again. He ended up talking to his wife, but she had found out three years before and didn’t say anything to him, and it had created a sore in their marriage. This guy came back to my office and said, “I can’t tell you what a freedom it is just to have the truth out there, but I need help.” So I talked to him about a small group of men in our church who have struggled with pornography over the decades and meet to talk about it. He started to meet with them. It was “You, too?” and “Us, too!” “We pray for each other and we help each other.” Those guys have health-ified this man’s marriage. This guy was at an earlier service and when I told this story, out of the corner of my eye I saw her putting her arm around him. We need to be that kind of a community, one with each other. But it is not always about porn. Not at all. As you age, sex changes. We need to be able to talk about that with each other, too.

Then the third point is “Hey, are you guys having as much fun as I am?” **We need to be a community that talks about sex in ways that show we are not prudes but we also do not worship sex.** We are in this together for a God who loves to give us a great life. I got an illustration of this from my daughter. I can say this because she is living in another country right now although, she is still probably rolling over going, “Ohhh, he’s telling the story....”

When she was in high school on a bus returning from a Student Ministries summer trips out West, her friend in the seat next to her falls asleep. My daughter is leaning back and, because she is a teenage girl, she is aware that two of the neat guy counselors are sitting behind her. She starts to hear them talking and then she really wants to hear them, because they are talking about sex. She leans sideways and hears the one say, “Can you believe she was wearing that! She wanted me to rip it off, man. Come on! The way they dress, it kills me.” And

the other one is saying, “We know we are not supposed to do that.” He says, “Yeah, I know I’m not supposed to do it. I believe this Jesus stuff but, man, it’s so hard. What do *you* do?” The other guy says, “Well, you know, I went to Upper Room a couple of weeks ago, and heard

Vickman (Upper Room pastor) stand up there and say, 'I was a virgin when I got married. It can be done. Real men don't!' and I said, 'I'm going to try to live like that.' "How do we do that?"

By now you could have shot Maggie and she wouldn't have been able to stop listening. The guys are talking about what they do and they agreed they are going to talk to each other and pray for each other and work on this but they are not going to be Goody Two-Shoes. One of the guys says, "You know what I'm doing now? I see these girls and I go *wow!* And then I go '*whoa!*'" He said, "So I've got this rubber band around my wrist and when I go '*whoa!*' I snap myself." The other guy says, "Dude, you've got a hole in your wrist." And he says, "Yeah, it's hard when they dress like that but..." And then they went on and talked about football.

I know that story because my daughter couldn't get it out of her mind and she told her mother, and her mother told me. I wished so much that I knew who these guys were because I would have gone up and said, "Well done! Hang tough! Let me help! Come on! *When* you screw up, not *if* you screw up, when you screw up, let's talk about what happens next. Well done because you are having an effect on my daughter!" My daughter told the story and said, "So, Mom, I don't want to dress skanky." I didn't even know what that means but it made her want to do her part in the idea that real men don't and real women don't.

We want to be a community that shows that sex is not the key to a fulfilled life. Jesus is. But sex is great. We want to show that we are not alone but we can only do that when we are honest. We want to show that we are not prudes but we don't want to worship the wrong gods. I want to end with this: a real community would say, "This is not the end of the story." Paul says to that same church in Vegas, Corinth,

⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Best line in the Bible coming up next.

¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

For some of you, this message has been just another weight on your back and you need to hear, "...and such were you. But you were washed..." God will want to wash you today and He will want to cleanse you and forgive you and walk with you to an even slightly better future. That would be better, wouldn't it? "Such were some of you..." Paul said, "Kick that guy out of the church." Are you going to do it? Are you going to take this stuff seriously? "Kick him out for the destruction of his flesh." The great thing about 1st Corinthians is that there is a 2 Corinthians. Paul writes again to these people the next year. This is what he says in 2 Corinthians, chapter 2.

⁴ For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. ⁵ If anyone has caused grief,

he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. ⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him....

⁹ [I wrote you] to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone you forgive, I also forgive...in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

We have seen another one of his schemes today. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I want to be a part of a community of broken, grace-filled, being redeemed, sexual beings who love the bodies you have given us and delight in the beauty of others and who want to see this gift of sexuality as something that can enrich the intimacy of our lives. I pray that You will give us courage to say *no* when it is hard to say *no* and to say *yes* when it is hard to say *yes*. I pray that You will give us endurance when everybody else is going the other way and making us feel like losers. I pray that You will give us grace again and again and again and again to wash us clean, to give us a fresh start. And I pray, Lord God, that You will give us great joy, joy that is deeper than any sexual experience, joy that is stronger than any pleasure of our bodies, the joy that comes from Your great love for us because

³⁸ ... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And all God's children said...

All: Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.