

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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John Crosby  
Proverbs: Warnings  
Proverbs 5:1-5; 6-6**

There are two ways to read the Bible. You can pick and choose, take those parts you like and slide over those parts you either don't understand or don't like. The other way a friend of mine modeled is to go through the Book, all the way through it, hard parts, good parts, and try to hear God's voice speaking to you. That's what we are trying to do this summer, listen to God speak to us, even about those things we don't usually talk about like sexuality. I've read a lot of sermons and done a lot of reading for this because I wanted to make sure that I understood how to best talk about sexual temptation. It's an awkward topic, too, in the sense that many of us don't know how to address the issue.

One of the authors I read was John Ortberg. Great sermon. John said his family never talked about sex. He remembers his own father saying they just never talked about it. John never saw his grandparents kiss, never saw any public display of affection in all of their lives together. John's dad said, "They never told me anything about sex until I was leaving to go to college." He was leaving home and his entire sex education was as he was at the door, going away to college for the first time. His grandmother stopped him and said, "Johnny, there are bad girls at college." John said his father was thinking, "Where do I find them? How do I meet them?" Because we don't talk about it, the voices of our culture get louder.

That is not the case of the Bible. If you were to look at the three or four biggest themes of the Book of Proverbs, you would see that they talk about how to trust God, like Rich talked about last week. How our words matter, how relationships are important, what our work life is like, and the idea of sexuality and temptation. The first chapters of Proverbs are a dialogue of two women trying to woo a young man. The first young woman is the voice of God, saying, "Come over here. I will keep you safe. I will make you wise." The other woman is the voice of sexual temptation saying, "Come over here. I will give you a great time." Wisdom and folly. This is not only a metaphor. It's a reality. Solomon may have been the wisest person in life, but he fell repeatedly to sexual temptation and knew all about it.

Now let me address just one issue. We said we would try to talk about how to read the Bible each week. This week I'd like to address the idea that as you read the Book of Proverbs, almost all the images about temptation are where women are seducing men. The reason for that is not that it reflects all of society but that the Book itself is addressed to young noblemen and the King and the others in his court are saying, "This is how you avoid disaster." But even though the images of temptation are female, this applies to women as well men and people of all ages in all stages of life. I'd like to start there because I think some of you are going, "Boy, this a good sermon. I wish my grandsons were here." There is a sense in which we need to be talking about sex far before kids are able to participate in sex. If you are younger here today, wait till tomorrow. It will stare you in the face. But even before that, kids need to hear about sexuality

because they are bombarded with it all of their lives by the world that wants them to act very differently. Many of you are single and day in and day out, you constantly face the idea that everybody else gets to do it at home. “I am so lonely. How will I ever . . . ?” And this temptation is strong.

Single people think that this is an issue for them and not for married people, but married people know better, don't we? We know that sexuality in marriage is incredibly complex, that our relationship itself doesn't mess sex up but it makes it far more complicated. Between the pressures of time and energy, and the children, and all the little fights that you have, sexuality becomes hugely complicated. But surely older people are past this, right? Not a chance! Our bodies may change. Our circumstances may be different but older people know that sex has always been at least as much about what happens in our minds as what happens with our bodies and you have learned some things that desperately need to be heard by other people. How will you able to communicate that? As a matter of fact, I should say, how will you be able to communicate that as important work? My sense is that if you are here today, you would probably agree that there is a God, that God probably does care about sexuality, and you are trying to be a good person in this area. Every single one of us will walk back out to a sex-soaked world, connected to ideas about sexuality, self-worth, body type and image, and fantasy. What would God say to you who are fighting the good fight?

Probably the two places where those who follow Jesus are most at odds with our culture are in the way we spend money and the way we treat our bodies. From the very beginning, the followers of Jesus had been countercultural in those two places, against the popular sayings of the culture. Frankly, the church has not done all that well in the area of sexuality. In many ways, we have sounded like *just say no* is our mantra, ignoring the idea that sex is designed by God. It is part of what God looked out at in Genesis 1 when He said, “That's good,” and when He looked at human beings, male and female, and said, “That's very good.” But the church has not always taught us about sex well. Philip Yancey writes,

Between the third and the tenth centuries,

that's when the church started to be the leader of society,

the church issued edicts to forbid husbands and wives having sex on Thursdays, because that was the day of Christ's arrest; then Fridays, because that was the day of His death; then on Sundays to remember the saints; then eventually the church said, because there was suspicion about sexuality, no sexual relations between husbands and wives during the 40 days of Lent; and then during the forty days of Advent; and then during the 40 days of Pentecost.

Yancey says they added so many fast days and holidays to the list that he figured at one point, if you followed church rules, there were only 44 days a year available for marital sex. Some of you hear that and are thinking, “Golly, that sounds like a nightmare.” Others of you hear that and think, “Golly, where do I get one of those calendars?” That is not God's intent. God did not put Adam and Eve on the 44-day-a-year plan. The contrast is in Proverbs, chapter 5.

**18** May your fountain be blessed,

an explicitly sexual reference,

and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. **19** A loving doe, a graceful deer--may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

I am sure that if I had heard that preached in Catholic Mass when I grew up, I never would have left, but I didn't hear that. The wisdom of Proverbs is that if you are married developing your intimacy to the fullest extent possible, that is what God wants and it is not separate from being spiritual. Proverbs shows us that sex is not just for the young. I love this old story. There is an elderly couple lying in bed one night, and the wife is restless and dissatisfied. She turns to her husband and says, "Honey, remember when we were young and we were lying in bed. Every night you would hold my hand." He grumbles a little bit but he reaches over and grabs her hand. Then she says, "Remember when we were young and first married, you used to snuggle up next to me in bed." He grouches a little bit but he rolls over and snuggles up to her. She says, "Remember when we were young and we were in bed, you used to nibble on my ear." At that he throws the covers away and gets out of bed. She's hurt. "Where are you going?" she asks. He says, "To get my teeth!" My wife is a lot younger than I am. She thinks that joke is a lot funnier than I do.

There is so much that one generation can teach the other about sex. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. If that means, you've got to go get your teeth, go get your teeth. We desperately need to hear this. The Bible teaches that human beings are not just bodies. One of the euphemisms for sex today is hooking up. Put part A in part B. Just hook up. Body on body. We are spiritual beings. We have souls. They are not disconnected from our bodies. They are not just disposable units that our souls will leave someday. What happens to your body affects your soul. Sex inevitably is a spiritual experience whether you acknowledge it or not. God designed it that way, and I believe that there is something in almost every human being that understands that. That's why hooking up is such a lie. You don't just hook up and detach because in sex, your body makes promises. Intimacy is not just touching somebody's body. It is as close as one human being gets to touching another person's soul. That's why Scripture reserves sexual intimacy for husband and wife in the bonds of marriage in a lifelong covenant. Proverbs says, "If you're not married to someone, keep your hands off their soul." That's weird for our culture to hear. It's so countercultural. We would say, if you do it, it doesn't mean anything. It just makes you feel good.

I have couples in for counseling probably 20 times a year to do wedding premarital counseling. And every time I say, if you're living together, why are you getting married? If you are getting married, why aren't you living together? And many of them are. I say, well, what difference does marriage make? The guy goes, "That's what I've been trying to tell her. I love her just as much without the piece of paper. It's just a piece of paper."

As I've thought about that, I wondered if that works in other contexts. Some of you are in management. At the end of the month, try not paying your employees and then when they come to complain, tell them, what's the big deal about a paycheck? It's just a piece of paper. We can work together without a piece of paper. Or those of you in education, if you are at the University of Minnesota, wait till commencement and then don't give anyone a degree. When they whine about it, tell them, what's the big deal about a diploma? It's just a piece of paper. We can learn together without a piece of paper, right? If you just wanted a piece of paper, you could have gone to the University of Wisconsin. Or I'm sure this will never happen to any of you, but the

next time a police officer writes you a speeding ticket, rip it up and throw it back at him. What's the big deal about a ticket? It's just a piece of paper. I can drive without a piece of paper.

I can love without a piece of paper. Marriage is not just a piece of paper. It's a promise. "I won't leave you." I want to say that I realize that many in this community are single. You are seeking hard to honor God with your sexuality in a world that makes it incredibly difficult. The pressure is relentless. You may start to feel after a while, "I must be crazy. The rest of the world is going in the opposite direction so fast and it takes so much work, so much prayer, there is so much loneliness, so much frustration, I must be crazy." I want to say, no, we want to say to you on behalf of a loving God, you are not crazy. Fight the good fight. You are not crazy. To seek to follow Christ with your body with your choices is a noble thing and pleasing to God, married or single. I pray that this a community where you feel safe and honored and celebrated and embraced, and I just want to say on behalf of our church to all the single people here, you are not crazy. The temptation is real. As Laura said to the kids, all people at all ages are tempted. Proverbs talks about that. Again, this picture that Proverbs 7 uses is about a woman, but it could equally be a man or a woman talking.

**15** So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you!

Temptation looks for us.

**16** I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. **17** I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. **18** Come, let's drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love! **19** My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey.

**21** With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. **22** All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose **23** till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

That's temptation. If you want to see what temptation looks like, I can show you in 87 seconds what temptation looks like in our day and in our age. This is what it looks like.

*[Video shown.]*

So what looks like harmless, everyday, workplace flirtation, all of a sudden is exposed as the desertion of your wife, and the way that that happens is little step by little step by little step. When you allow yourself to start living in fantasy, it becomes destructive. One time in small group we were talking about a friend who had had an affair and another guy in the circle said, "I just don't see how this happens." Laura said, "This doesn't just happen. We make choices." That's what Proverbs 7 is talking about. The woman is painting a picture of how wonderful life would be if he just gave into desire.

That's how it starts. Thinking about how good it would feel. What might happen if . . . . I wonder if . . . . I've seen this happen too many times. Emotions start to get invested where they shouldn't be. It's a series of little steps. You write notes. You hope to have a casual meeting that's not a casual meeting and you realize you're looking forward to seeing this person. You get an emotional charge out of a compliment beyond what is healthy. You start telling each other

things that you are not telling your spouse. Little secrets. Little everyday thoughts. Already dishonoring a covenant that you made, if you keep going, it will put you on the road to disaster. Proverbs says this picture is a fantasy. The fantasy ahead of time is nothing like the reality experienced on the other side. Proverbs make crystal clear the potential of sexuality to do damage. Proverbs 6,

**27** Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?

No!

**29** So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.

Whoever does so destroys himself. Two of the most gifted ministers I know had their careers ruined, not by any affair that they had but when they broke off the affair, when they said, "No, this is wrong. I've got to stop doing this." They went back to their wives and the jilted women reported them and ruined their careers. Can a man scoop fire into his lap? No. The first one was in his 70s and he said to me, "John, I feel like I've fallen at the end of the race and this is all they'll ever say about me." When Laura and I heard about the other one, we were with another couple and both of the women started to cry. Laura turned to me and said, "If it could happen to Gordon, it could happen to you." I've lost track of the number of phone calls and anguished letters and painful meetings that I've sat through because people listened to a fantasy.

Proverbs warns by the bitter experience of Solomon, "If you walk down this road, there will be wounds and guilt and regret, damaged families and hurt children, disrupted lives, shattered friendships and seared consciences. It's not worth it." If you're in pain of some kind, maybe the pain of a hard marriage (I know that can be unrelenting), or maybe the pain of feeling rejected or unloved or isolated, having an affair is not the answer to your pain. And it's not just about an affair. It's about being sexually cold as a punishment. It's about refusing to talk about it. Some of you have been there, and some of you almost certainly *are* there or are on the way. Proverbs is clear that it is like an ox going to slaughter, like a deer in the noose, like a bird in a snare, it's death. If you're on that road in a relationship dishonoring God with your sexuality, however that happened, break it off. Write a note. Make the call. Say the word. Tell someone else. Do it today for your sake, for God's sake, for all the pain and death down that road.

This is what Proverbs means about being wise sexually, and it is not just about saying *no*. It's about putting guard rails in your life so that you will know when a speed bump is leading you toward danger. It is about developing good friends you can tell the truth to even when it's tough. I want to finish with another piece of wisdom and it's for all of you wherever you are spiritually, whether you are married or single, whether you are young or old, and it's from Jesus, the master teacher. He is teaching though the Old Testament and He gets to that part where it says, "You shall not commit adultery." Then Jesus says,

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery. 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart [Matthew 5:27-28].

What's Jesus after? Well, He's talking about righteousness, that is, right living, the right way to

live. He goes through different areas of life including sexuality, but Jesus knows that people get legalistic and superficial about doing the right thing. We make a little checklist and check off, I haven't done that, haven't done that, haven't done that. I must be okay. There were religious types in His audience then, there are religious types here who think you can divide the human race into two categories. There are the people with problems with their sexuality, the adulterers. Then there are people who don't have sex the wrong way, they are the righteous ones. They are the spiritual ones. Jesus is trying to get us past all that so He said, "You've heard it said, 'Don't commit adultery,' but that can give the idea that some people are messed up and others are healthy. So I say to you, even people who look and have lust in their hearts . . . ."

Now Jesus is not saying, you shouldn't look at attractive people. That's not it. He's talking about mismanaged, mishandled, misdirected sexual desire. Jesus is saying, even people who have never outwardly committed adultery are broken and fallen and have junk inside us. All of us need the help of God. All of us need the grace of God. That's what offended His Jewish audience back then. They said, "No, no, no. We've got the laws. If we keep the laws, we are good. If we break the laws, we're bad." Jesus is saying, "We are all broken in need of grace."

If Jesus were to come here today and stand right here and say, "Anybody who lusted this week, anybody who engaged in behavior or thought anything that was sexually inappropriate, anybody who lusted in their heart, is going to die in the next ten seconds if they are still in this room, the room would be empty." You'd all go through the windows. I'd be standing here talking to myself. Well, really, people, I'm a minister . . . . Like the minister said, "I have a word from the Lord. 'All of you who have been lusting in any way, your tongue will stick to the woof of your mouf.'" All of us, *all* of us, are broken sexually. Jesus' point is, if you think you are sexually perfect and have no need to repent because you have avoided committing physical adultery, think again. We are all in the same boat, all marred by the fall. The good news is, God has enough grace for everybody.

Now I want to end this by talking through a list so you can see if anything applies to you, if you have been hurt or damaged in any of these areas:

- Maybe you are tempted, you haven't done it, but you are tempted to escape from your spouse by fantasizing about somebody else.
- Maybe you are jealous of somebody more attractive because our society makes the attractive thing such a matter of idolatry.
- Maybe sometimes you find yourself flirting, relating inappropriately to get fed emotionally in ways that are not healthy.
- Maybe you got pregnant outside of a marriage or paid for an abortion.
- Maybe you have difficulty with lust or pornography. Maybe it's a movie. Maybe it involves a computer.
- Maybe you just find yourself watching stuff on TV that moves you in a wrong direction.
- Maybe you see somebody who is really experienced in intimacy and you feel so alone and so tired of being good that you are tempted to get bitter or resentful.
- Maybe you get judgmental toward others who keep messing up.
- Or maybe someone hurt you deeply in a real way in the past and because our sexuality runs so deep, it has left you scarred and with anger and pain.

Well, when you come to Jesus, you have come to the right person. This is not a community where some people are healthy and other folks are messed up. The funny thing is, church ought

to be the place where we talk about grace the most, especially the area of sexuality because when we don't, it leads people into hiddenness and burden. We are all sinners needing grace.

We are about to celebrate Communion. It is interesting to think about the people that came to that first Communion. People with all kinds of sexual histories and problems and failures kept coming to Jesus and Jesus never got embarrassed. Jesus never turned anybody away. He never gave up on anybody, and He will not give up on you. That's the good news. That's God's wisdom about sexuality. As we come to the table, let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I know that some of my friends have been tempted already today. Some people sitting here are fearful of what's happening in the lives of people they love. Some are angry or unforgiving about what's been done to them. The pain of loneliness for many here tempts them to do the wrong thing and the idea that we are better than others, tempts us all. Lord Jesus, we need Your grace. Please come and turn this bread into your Body and make this juice Your Blood so we can be washed clean. May your Body and Blood give us the strength to live the way You want us to live and love others the way that you want, that we might not be self-righteous prigs or trapped by sin but loved by a Savior. In His Name. Amen.

Credit:

I did more reading than usual for this sermon and want to honor:

Craig Barnes, President, Princeton Seminary

Derek Kidner, Proverbs

Tremper Longman III, How to Read Proverbs

John Ortberg, sermon on Temptation for much of the illustrative material and flow

Ray Ortlund Jr, Wisdom That Works

Chuck Swindoll, Living the Proverbs

*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.*