
CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS

1 Introducing Christian Sexual Ethics

Introductory Questions

1. Why should I take this class?
2. Who are the teachers?
3. How is this class organized?
4. What is expected of me as a student?
5. How long are the sessions?

In this teaching, I want to establish that Christian sexual ethics are biblical sexual ethics. We've learned what's right and wrong from many sources: parents, schools, churches, friends, TV, Hollywood, social media, etc. Sadly, these sources often conflict with each other, generating a great deal of confusion. For this class, we'll use the Bible as our standard and authority. We won't spend time explaining our reasons for believing the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative, since that would take us too far afield from our focus.¹ Rather, we're presupposing the Bible's inspiration:

2 Timothy 3:16-17

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Even if you don't accept the Bible as God's definitive revelation, this class can still help you understand where a lot of people are coming from when it comes to these difficult and controversial issues. For example, a 2014 Gallup poll² found that three out of every four people in the United States see the Bible as the "inspired word of God" in some sense. Multiple sources report that more than a quarter of Americans believe the Bible should be taken literally. So whatever your views of the Bible are, this class will help you understand how many of us think about sexual ethics.

In America today, we have two major worldviews competing for acceptance: naturalism and creationism. These meta-narratives diverge right from the start when they tell the story of human origins. Although I realize hybrid forms exist, I want to present each of these in their starkest forms for contrasting purposes.

Creationism: you are the *imago Dei*.

From this perspective humanity is the crowning act of God's creation. Rather than speaking us into existence like every other creature, He formed us from the dust and tenderly breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. God places incredible value and dignity in our species.

Psalms 8:3-9

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? 5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the

¹ For reasons why the Bible is trustworthy visit restitutio.org/apologetics

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/170834/three-four-Bible-word-god.aspx>

heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Naturalism: you are an accident.

You are the accidental byproduct of time and chance. Some proteins happened to swirl around in a puddle in just the right way so that the first single-celled, self-replicating organism emerged. Over time, organisms made mistakes in copying their genes, resulting in mutations. Detrimental mutations reduced the chances of reproduction, ensuring an upward climb towards complexity that culminated in the human race. William Lane Craig offers the following account of how naturalism leads to nihilism:

“Man, writes Loren Eiseley, is the Cosmic Orphan. He is the only creature in the universe who asks, “Why?” Other animals have instincts to guide them, but man has learned to ask questions. “Who am I?” man asks. “Why am I here? Where am I going?” Since the Enlightenment, when he threw off the shackles of religion, man has tried to answer these questions without reference to God. But the answers that came back were not exhilarating, but dark and terrible. “You are the accidental by-product of nature, a result of matter plus time plus chance. There is no reason for your existence. All you face is death.”

...If God does not exist, then both man and the universe are inevitably doomed to death. Man, like all biological organisms, must die. With no hope of immortality, man's life leads only to the grave. His life is but a spark in the infinite blackness, a spark that appears, flickers, and dies forever...For though I know now that I exist, that I am alive, I also know that someday I will no longer exist, that I will no longer be, that I will die. This thought is staggering and threatening: to think that the person I call “myself” will cease to exist, that I will be no more!

...And the universe, too, faces death. Scientists tell us that the universe is expanding, and everything in it is growing farther and farther apart. As it does so, it grows colder and colder, and its energy is used up. Eventually all the stars will burn out, and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. There will be no light at all; there will be no heat; there will be no life; only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever expanding into the endless darkness and the cold recesses of space—a universe in ruins. So not only is the life of each individual person doomed; the entire human race is doomed. There is no escape. There is no hope.”³

Likewise, Tim Keller writes:

“If this life is all there is, and there is no God or life beyond this material world, then it will not ultimately matter whether you are a genocidal maniac or an altruist; it won’t matter whether you fight hunger in Africa or are incredibly cruel and greedy and starving the poor. In the end what you do will make no difference whatsoever...Ultimately, everything we do is radically insignificant. Nothing counts forever.”⁴

³ Williams Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life without God,” presented April 11, 2001 by the Veritas Forum at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, subsequently published by Reasonable Faith, reasonablefaith.org/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god, accessed January 17, 2017. Available on YouTube at youtube.com/watch?v=fOIWRiC3vQ

⁴ Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking 2016), pp. 66-7.

Thus, your creation theology is a major key to how you view sexual ethics. Broadly speaking, the four main ways of approaching sexual ethics are:

1. Animalistic: give in to instincts and impulses, regardless of what society says
2. Socially constructed: accept the mores of a given culture
3. Ascetic: pleasure is inherently evil; sex is dirty; deny bodily pleasures
4. Biblical: God is the designer who invented pleasure and gave us boundaries

In this class, we'll explore the fourth category. In order to begin doing that, we'll need to spend some time thinking about how God feels about pleasure before considering what boundaries He has graciously given us for our own good and His glory.

2 God of Pleasure

Psalm 16:11 – The original plan was for man to be forever in God’s presence with fullness of joy and pleasures forever.

21:1-6 – God originally designed man to be joyful with gladness in His presence.

36:5-9 – God still wants His people to drink of the river of His delights. With Him is the fountain of life.

Genesis 1:26-30 – The first thing God told man to do was reproduce, obviously including sex, and then to eat.

2:18-25 – God’s plans for man and woman were to be married, blessed....

1:31 – Sex and eating God declared to be good, and there was no need for rules and restrictions to control the desires within Adam and Eve because they had perfect sinless minds.

2:15 – Work was also designed to provide pleasure.

Proverbs 5:18 and 19 – Sex in marriage is for pleasure.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 – Enjoy life with the woman you love.

3:12 and 13 – Work is a gift from God. Sex, eating, drinking, and work are for our pleasure.

Song of Solomon 7:7-12 – I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.

1 Corinthians 7:1-5

Genesis 3:1-ff

Adam and Eve enjoyed spiritual contentment because they had a pure relationship with God. God created them in His own image that included pure godly love. They longed for God, and He longed for them and enjoyed a mutually satisfying relationship of love. However, the love relationship was ruined with sin, but the longing for Yahweh remained within. In their fallen state, they no longer realized the craving or desire that remained in them was for God. Everyone is born with the same void in his or her heart, the longing for a loving relationship with God. Failing to acknowledge the craving within is for God, mankind has ever since tried to fill the void with the pleasures of the flesh, but in actuality it only served to expand the chasm. The pleasures of the flesh became the lust of the flesh.

Ephesians 2:1-3, 4:17-19 – Mankind lost his moral compass because he lost God. The good pleasures of the flesh were not designed for ungodly people who are prone to extremism and uncontrollable cravings without the sense to discern right from wrong and when enough is enough.

The fall of man and the sinfulness that followed have necessitated boundaries because that which was originally intended for pleasure now gave way to sin. The Scriptures provide clear boundaries on bodily pleasures. Sex is limited to the marriage bed; eating is regulated by bodily needs; alcohol is consumed in moderation; work has limits such as the Sabbath day. Adultery, gluttony and drunkenness, and over work

or laziness result when we fail to realize the cravings within are for a love relationship with our Father God.

God's presence is where we find the fullness of joy, pleasures forever, joy with gladness, river of His delight, and the fountain of life. Immoral sexuality broadens the abyss between God and self which ensures sadness, misery, destruction, and in the end, eternal death.

Bodily Pleasures

By Sean Finnegan

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and put the two first humans in a garden. After surveying His creation and declaring it good repeatedly, the first fact that displeased God was that Adam was alone. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Once the Lord formed Eve and Adam called her “woman,” the Genesis narrative states:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Gen 2:25).

God’s mandates in the Garden of Eden (Eden means pleasure, by the way) were not “remain celibate,” “eat only tasteless grains,” and “submit.” Rather, God’s commands were “be fruitful,” “eat freely,” and “have dominion.” God so loved His first two humans that He wanted them to reproduce and fill the new world with many more people. The earth was not an exercise in testing people for some other realm, but a home for His own crowning achievements to delight in and rule over. Although He forbade eating from one tree in the garden, the rest of them were for their enjoyment—their pleasure.

The God of Genesis is more an Epicurean than a Stoic. He does not design bodies without pleasure sensors but instead squeezes onto the human tongue 10,000 taste buds. He does not make reproduction an onerous or bland affair but loads human genitals with thousands of erotogenic nerve endings. In His extravagant kindness, He engineered eating and intercourse to give us pleasure and then commanded His first two humans to engage in both. It’s no wonder the first two chapters of Genesis declare creation “good” seven times over. The second chapter of the Bible concludes with two humans, in a garden of Pleasure, totally naked, who are commanded to have sex, eat fruit, and rule the world.

Not only does God’s design of the body shout to us that He engineered us to experience pleasure, but the Law He gave Israel on Sinai likewise indicates His penchant for enjoyment. Consider the holy days built into the Law of Moses: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Although the Day of Atonement was a single day of fasting and repentance, the rest of these were multi-day celebrations or festivals. The Feast of Unleavened bread followed on the heels of the Passover meal when families roasted lambs, enjoyed wine, and told stories of God’s deliverance from Egypt. The rule for the rest of the week was no working other than preparing food. The Feast of Weeks commemorated the first fruits of the harvest. According to the Mishnah, the festival was “accompanied by a large celebration, in which pilgrims gather in the towns of their district and go as a group with their ripe produce to Jerusalem. There they are greeted by Levitical singing and celebration.”⁵ The Law of Moses was for an agrarian society and built into the rhythm of the farmer’s calendar times of worship that coincided with times of rejoicing. Although sometimes Christians misinterpret the Law as some terrible straightjacket strapped onto the people of God until Christ could free them from it, in reality, it was a way God provided to connect with Him by taking time out from the

⁵ Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period: 450 B.c.e. to 600 C.e.* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 573.

monotony of their toil. In antiquity most people worked every day, but God's chosen ones worked only six days a week. The seventh day they took off to rest and enjoy the fact that they were no longer slaves in Egypt when they had to labor relentlessly. The Sabbath was a day separated off from the rest of the week to take a break and connect to the Creator.

Beyond the created order and the holy days instituted in the Mosaic Law, the Scriptures contain quite a few statements endorsing pleasure. Although the Bible is sometimes stereotyped as prudish or anti-sex, it does not shy away from the topic, nor does it prohibit physical pleasures. The following texts ably illustrate this point:

Prov. 5:18-19
Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love.

Eccl. 9:7-9
7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. 8 Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Eccl. 3:12-13
12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Sex, eating, drinking, and work are for our pleasure. Proverbs encourages young married couples to enjoy each other's bodies. After all, finding a wife is not a curse, but a gift from God (Prov 18:22). Far from forbidding alcohol, Ecclesiastes flatly affirms the goodness of drinking alcohol and eating food. Furthermore, it shows that even work itself is good: "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (Ecc 3:13; see also 8:15). The Law of Moses, once again, bears out these facts when it legislates the rules for military participation. The first year of marriage qualified a soldier for exemption from service, so that he may "be happy with the wife whom he has married" (Deut 24:5). Furthermore, if someone had just planted a vineyard, he was likewise excused from duty until he could enjoy its fruit (Deut 20:6). Wealth itself is not seen as inherently evil, but a blessing from God (Ecc 5:18-19). Even in the coming age, Isaiah speaks about a banquet involving fine wine and prime meat (Is 25:6; see also Mat 8:11; 13:29).

Perhaps the best book to look at on the subject of pleasure is the Song of Solomon. This elaborate collection of poems brims with sexual imagery. It does not disparage but extols sexual union and all the attendant buildup leading up to it. The book opens up unapologetically with the words, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine" (Song 1:2). For the author, wine is an obvious good, but the kisses of his lover are better still. By the time we reach the fourth verse, we read, "Draw me after you, let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers" (Song 1:4).

In one riveting scene, the woman awakes in the middle of the night with an intense desire to find her lover. She gets out of bed and begins searching through the city streets and squares. She encounters the night watchmen and inquires where he might be, but they are no help.

Song 3:4

Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go until I had brought him to my mother's house, and into the room of her who conceived me.

Later on we encounter romantic poetic descriptions of Solomon's lover.

Song 7:7-12

You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.

I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.
Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;
let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.

Such words as these would never be allowed in a Bible that was at its core against pleasure. Throughout the Bible marriage is the norm. Sure eunuchs and prophets like John the Baptist remained celibate, but these are exceptions, not the rule. The Bible celebrates weddings right from creation onwards. When Jesus went to a wedding, they ran out of wine. Rather than scolding them for their merriment, Jesus turned 120 gallons of water into wine—not just any wine—quality wine (John 2:1-11). In fact, the Gospels portray Jesus as someone who attended dinner parties often, consumed alcohol, and discouraged fasting. That his enemies called him a drunkard and a glutton is unthinkable if he was against all bodily pleasures.

Even so, the Bible does place clear boundaries on bodily pleasures. Sex is limited to the marriage bed; eating is regulated by bodily needs; alcohol is consumed in moderation. Take any of these outside of their boundaries, and we fall into adultery, gluttony, and drunkenness. Thus, unlike bacchic hedonism or the lechery of Mardi Gras, God reigns in the pleasures His people should indulge in to safeguard them from ruin. Many Scriptures⁶ convey the importance of restraining the flesh from its lustful drive, but too often

⁶ Heb 11:25-26; 2 The 2:12; 1 Tim 5:5-6; 2 Tim 3:3; James 5:5; 1 Corinthians 7

these New Testament texts are taken to the extreme of asceticism (when all pleasure is considered evil). When members of the church at Colossae fell into asceticism, Paul corrected them with the following words:

Col. 2:18-23 18 Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch?" 22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Furthermore, when some Christians in Corinth likewise began advocating celibacy, even within marriage, the apostle addressed them as follows:

1 Cor. 7:1-5 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." 2 But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul takes for granted that people are sexual beings who will fall into illicit behaviors if they cannot enjoy sex within marriage.

Christians today often react so strongly against the lasciviousness and lewdness of our own time that we tend to fall back into anti-social restrictions that ultimately besmirch our witness and exclude us from evangelistic opportunities. Rather than promoting Christianity as a holistic, fulfilling, joyous, and satisfying experience, we sometimes sell it short by portraying it as a restrictive religion that evacuates fun and enjoyment from the human experience. Christians don't dance, don't play cards, and don't listen to rock and roll. We feel guilty about eating fillet mignon, going on vacation, or living in a nice house. We abstain from sex unless for procreation, alcohol unless for communion, and film unless it supports a Christian agenda. Is it any wonder that outsiders take one look at us and run the other way?

Now, I want to be clear that I am not saying we should do whatever feels good. Biblical Christianity is not licentious; we certainly do have boundaries and limitations that hem us in. God has graciously put these in place to protect us and to encourage human flourishing, not stifle it. Imagine a tomato plant in the wild. It can only grow so tall before it bends over on itself. But, if a farmer comes along and stakes it—essentially limiting its direction for growth—the plant flourishes, growing much bigger and producing much more fruit. We have rules, but they are not to suppress us, they are to help us grow. Perhaps we need to loosen up a bit so we can spend time with non-Christians in order to share the gospel with them.