

MARRIAGE KILLERS

Marriage Killers: Sex and Intimacy in Marriage

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Sermon Series Discussion Guide

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It would be difficult to conceive of a more over-sensationalized topic in our culture than sexuality. The references to sexuality are not confined to the subliminal, but find their way into the public square on a regular basis. It is the target of political debates, comedy routines, song lyrics, magazine covers, and television commercials. What makes all of it so much more provocative is the strength of our natural and innate sexual desires. There are many consequences to our frivolous treatment of sexuality, but as it pertains to our marriages, the ubiquity of sexual messages serves to inundate us with unreasonable expectations, unbiblical attitudes, and an overwhelming sense of insecurity and shame. It makes that which was intended by God for sacred enjoyment something common and debased.

It is not hard to understand, then, how sex and intimacy somehow become divorced from one another in the process. As a result, we suffer the acquiring of baggage in this particular area of our lives and relationships. The unreasonable expectations turn into expectations that our spouse simply cannot, and sometimes should not, meet. Unbiblical attitudes result in destructive behaviors that poison the intimacy in the marital relationship until the sexual relationship is reduced to merely the physical act. Insecurity and shame tarnish the sense of trust and freedom that God intended to be enjoyed by a husband and wife in their sexual relationship. Where there is no trust and freedom, there is no intimacy. What remains is only the shell of what God intended, merely the selfish aim of having one's own needs met.

In his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, noted author and pastor Eugene Peterson discusses the biblical concept of sexuality and intimacy. He notes that throughout the biblical account, sexuality is always to be inextricably linked with intimacy, gentleness, and mutuality. Following that assertion, he bluntly notes that "if the sexual act is impersonal or harsh or forced, it is understood as a violation." The idea of violation has multiple implications. The most popular understanding is that it violates the rights and dignity of one's partner, which is most definitely true. However, there is a broader, more profound understanding of this violation. It is a violation of what God has designed sex to be because the sexual act has been stripped of the loving relationship between husband and wife.

The problem is that in the midst of all the exaggerated, hyper-erotic sexual images in our culture, many people have difficulty finding a model for what sexuality is supposed to look like. Thankfully, we are given an extremely clear picture of what it is supposed to look in Genesis 2 at the close of the account of God's creation of Eve. In reading through these few verses carefully, we discover exactly what God intends for the sexual relationship between a man and a woman to be like.

LEARN

Genesis 2 is actually the retelling of the biblical Creation narrative. The Creation narrative in Genesis 1 has an entirely different focus in that it magnifies the sovereignty of God over time, nature, and even nothingness. The Creation narrative of Genesis 1 is consumed with God's limitless power and His unique nature to create from nothingness and to bring order out of chaos. Genesis 2, on the other hand, retells the Creation narrative from the standpoint of God's design for and relationship with mankind. It is an entirely different perspective. The Garden of Eden is described with detail and revealed to be the place that God uniquely created for man to dwell. Dominion is given to Adam to name all of the other living creatures in creation, which carries with it the understanding that Adam was over them, not just to rule, but to protect and steward. However, in verse 18, God breaks a repetitive pattern established in Genesis one: for the first time, God deems something as not good. Being called not good refers to an incompleteness. What was deemed as being not good was the man being alone. It lacked something. All the other creatures had mates, but not Adam. So God creates woman from the side of the man. This is where the biblical picture of marriage picks up.

“The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and 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 because she was taken out of Man.’” (Gen. 2:22 – 23)

The writer of Genesis goes to great lengths to demonstrate the essentially unique character of the woman. If we read back through the Creation narrative before this point, we discover that all of the animals were created by God out of the dust of the earth. Adam was also created out of the dust of the earth. In fact, his very name, Adam, is a version of the Hebrew word for dirt. The woman, though, was formed from the rib from Adam’s side. Eve has the unique distinction of being the one creature in the Creation narrative that did not come from dirt, she came from the very essence of the man she was created for. When Adam sees her after awakening from his God-induced slumber, we read his first recorded speech. Immediately Adam recognizes that he and the woman are at the same time of the same essence and wonderfully different. They are compatible, not identical.

Moving in to **verse 24** we witness the first wedding explained:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24)

Their marriage falls in place naturally for two reasons. First, they were the only two people. Eve was created to be a mate for Adam. She was the solution to what God deemed as not good. Second, we know from the first version of the creation account that the God-given charge to the man and woman was procreate: *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it;”* (Gen. 1:28). Sex has always been a part of God’s plan for humanity. Bear in mind, this is all prior to the Fall of man that occurs in chapter 3. In God’s perfect plan for creation, the husband and wife have as a critical and indispensable part of their relationship to enjoy one another sexually.

Another extremely important part of this verse is the exclusivity with which the husband and wife are to enjoy one another sexually. The marital relationship is described using covenantal language. “Leave” and “joined to” (frequently translated “clings”) are words commonly used in the context of covenant fidelity. Further, the idea of leaving conveys the concept of severing ties with former familial obligations for the sake of a new higher priority. This is where “joined to” picks up. The former responsibility to a family of origin is replaced by a new family, whose importance exceeds that of the family of origin. The husband and wife are to cling to one another in mutual dependence.

The final part of this verse refers to the sexual union of the husband and wife. The wording “become one flesh” harkens back to verse 23 where the woman was taken from the man. When woman was created, one flesh became two. Upon their marriage, the union is restored. The entire concept screams intimacy and community. When the husband and wife unite in one flesh they quite literally become one flesh, both physically and spiritually. Their identities change because they are no longer defined by their individuality. They are a new person made up of the distinctives of both the husband and the wife.

The character of the community that results from their marital union is vividly portrayed in **verse 25**:

“And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Gen. 2:25)

This verse serves as both a statement of their condition as well as a commentary on the nature of their relationship. There is a tendency to sanitize the details in the Bible according to the social codes that we live in. Resist the urge to do that and simply read what the Bible says. They were naked and felt no shame. Adam and Eve were not robots devoid of sexual urges. Quite the opposite – Adam’s exclamation of excitement at seeing Eve in verse 23 is at a fever pitch! We are told three things about Adam and Eve at this point:

1. Part of their job description is to have sex according to God’s plan.
2. Adam is extremely excited to see Eve
3. They were naked and felt no shame.

It does not require a great deal of imagination to figure out what #4 on the list would have been. We read that and can get a little uncomfortable thinking about it. Adam and Eve did not have those inhibitions because they had yet to be tinged with sin. Instead, their union was characterized with transparency, community, and honesty. There was no deceit in them to shatter their fellowship. There was no degradation of one to the other. They were completely bare before one another in every conceivable way and it was a blessing to both. This is what God designed sexual intimacy to be. How do we know that? Because sin hadn’t entered the world yet; all things are in a state of perfection. This level of intimacy, trust, and transparency is what God desires for us in marriage, and we have been trying to get back to it ever since.

LIVE

There is a temptation to read the account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and respond by saying, “Well, that’s all great, but that was before sin and our marriage is eaten up with it!” The answer to such a temptation is that, while we do in fact live in a fallen world

and are ourselves sinners, Jesus Christ lived, died, and was resurrected to give us power over the sin that so easily entangles us. The apostle Paul quotes this passage of Genesis in his famous Ephesians 5 passage, in which he outlines the biblical roles in marriage for husband and wife. So how do we make this a part of our marriage?

First, we have to cleanse our understanding about what sex is. That does not mean that sex is impure in any way and that we should conform to some hyper-Puritanical morality in which sex is not spoken of or thought about. In fact, our course of action must be exactly the opposite. We must communicate with our spouse what we believe about sex. After all, it concerns them. Then, we have to hold our beliefs about sex up to God's Word and see how it lines up. If our view is different that what the Bible says about marriage, we have to change. The Bible isn't the problem.

The cleansing part of our understanding is two-fold. First, we acknowledge our current views of sex and look at how they measure up to the Bible. Then, we eliminate to the best of our ability, those influences in our lives that foster non-biblical attitudes about sex in our souls. Those influences shouldn't be hard to pick out. They either strip away the link between sex and marriage, view sex as a recreational activity, or objectify others in order to have sexual needs met. We replace those influences with a biblical understanding of sex. Sex is throughout the Bible, in both God-honoring and sinful manifestations, which help us to understand God's desire for our sexuality.

Second, we create a safe environment for our spouse. If the sexual relationship between a husband and wife is to be what God intends, the relationship has to be a safe one. That means that what happens in your marriage, stays in your marriage. You don't talk to your buddies at the ballgame about your relationship with your wife like she's an object. You don't group up with your girlfriends to talk about what your husband said, did, or suggested. God never meant for the marriage relationship to be for more than the husband and the wife. Keep it there. Why? Because if your spouse can't trust that you will keep whatever they entrust to you private and confidential, then you will never have intimacy in your marriage. Help your spouse to be unashamed in front of you.

Third, we become relentless servants to our spouses. Now, that may sound a little odd. What does serving our spouses have to do with our sexual intimacy? The short answer is everything. Intimacy of any kind, but especially in the sexual sphere, is predicated on selflessness. Selflessness removes the suspicion from our relationships and acts as fertile soil for the growth of trust. Selflessness is not manipulation to get what we want by feigning kindness. Rather, it is genuinely serving others out of the prompting of the Holy Spirit. When we serve, we are more Christlike. When we become more Christlike, our relationships are more apt to reflect the character of Christ – particularly our marriage relationship.

Finally, a word for those who are not married. There is a tremendous inclination to disregard all of this talk if you are not currently in a marriage relationship, or any relationship at all for that matter. Keep in mind the introduction of the guide in addressing the baggage that we bring into a marriage relationship. Every relationship you are involved in provides a multitude of crossroads to either make decisions that reflect God's intention for sexuality or to increase the baggage you take into your future relationships. Without doubt, there is pressure from every possible angle to adopt the world's view of sexuality. There is the threat of a relationship ending if sex is not a part of it. The fact that sex outside of marriage is so pervasive that to suggest purity as God intends can seem impossible due to the world's influence. There is the constant battle of your own desires that rages on. For those reasons and so many more, it is imperative that you cleanse your own understanding of sexual intimacy and re-align it with the design that God has for your sexuality. Whatever plan the world presents to you, God's is greater because sex is one of His great gifts.

LEAD

Small Group Leaders, the goal for this session is for the folks in your group to redefine their existing view of sexual intimacy according to God's intention for it. As you conclude your time together use the discussion questions below to guide your group through a discussion of what the world tells them their sexual relationships should be and God's plan differs so radically from that. Due to the nature of this discussion, please be extra sensitive not to force people to engage in the discussion – particularly if you do not know them well. As you close, pray over your group, asking God to cleanse their understanding of sexual intimacy so that what influences their view and practice is God's intention, not the world's permission.

1. What is your favorite television show? How was sex either explicitly or subversively portrayed in it the last time you watched it?
2. What stereotypes of the sexual relationship in marriage are you aware of? How do those stereotypes match up with Scripture?
3. In your marriage relationship as a whole (not just the sexual aspect), what would have the greatest impact on the trust factor? What would really increase the trust? What would quickly erode the trust? Does your spouse know that?
4. What were your beliefs about sex as a teen? How has that changed as an adult? Why?
5. How would you explain the importance of sex being confined to marriage to someone?
6. What would be the first thing you eliminated if you were going to change your understanding of sexual intimacy?

7. Here are a couple of questions to answer with your spouse in a private setting:
- a. What is the most important of the three application points for your marriage right now? Which ones would you add?
 - b. What can you do for one another to increase the feeling of safety in your relationship?
 - c. On a scale of 1 – 10, how transparent would you say your relationship with your spouse is?
 - d. How comfortable are you in discussing your sex life with your spouse? When was the last time you had that discussion?
 - e. How would you explain the difference between cleansing your understanding of sexual intimacy and removing passion from your sexual intimacy?

