

Sex sells. Sex sells anything – from clothing to cars, kitchens to computers – you name a product and chances are you'll be able to find an advertisement which uses some form of a sexual imagine, or a sexual connotation to convince you to buy it. Now *that* sex sells is indisputable. Marketers and advertisers wouldn't use it unless it worked. The key question is *why* does sex sell? 60 years ago having a scantily clad someone endorsing your product, making a sexual innuendo about the goods you were wanting to sell would have hurt sales. Now, it boosts them? Why?

Sex not only sells, sex is celebrated. There are parades, there are conventions where sex and sexuality is promoted, endorsed, encouraged. Sex sells, sex is celebrated, sex is normalised. To be human is to have sex – that's the message we hear, that's the air we breath in the world around us. Sure, when children are sexualised through the clothes they wear, or when they are made up as adults, there's concern, but only for a while. The lines of appropriateness or the limits of what is right they keep on expanding.

And in the midst of all this, we are called to live as Christians. We are called to live with Jesus as our Lord. We are called to live holy and godly lives. And we are called to proclaim and live out the gospel. And that's where things can get difficult for us.

For the church, Christians, are very often pigeonholed as being against sex. We are lumped with labels of puritanical, prudish, Victorian. And deep down some of us kind of wish we could just ignore the world around us –that us and our children wouldn't be assaulted with words and images and ideas which are so contrary to the holiness of life that we want to live. So we are tempted to retreat, we don't want to engage, we can drift towards an 'us and them' mentality.

Sometimes as Christians, as a wider church we feel that we can't talk about or challenge these things because that church has failed so spectacularly in the past. We can all think of high profile Christians who have sinned sexually, we know of scandals in the church, the unfaithfulness of ministers and pastors. And we can think how can we speak about these things?

There's of course another difficulty, and that is that we as Christians can take on too much of the worlds' views. We hear the arguments and they seem valid, we don't like to fight, we prefer peace, and so we can think – well, maybe we do need to be more tolerant, maybe we do need to rethink categories, maybe we do need to progress and develop.

We can do that as individuals, and it can be done, as in fact is being agitated for, at a wider, church wide kind of level. To the point where the church may change what it proclaims, and indeed what it says God proclaims in the area of sex and human sexuality.

On one hand a retreat against the world, on the other hand a taking on of the world's views, in the middle a difficulty to talk about it. And yet talk about it we must. For sex is not bad – sexuality is not something as Christians that we should avoid – indeed, it's very prevalence in the world that we want to see reached with the gospel means that we must be clear in our own minds about what is good about sex, what it is for, how we should think about it, and understand it. Let alone the fact that we ourselves, personally want to be thinking and behaving in the area of sex in a way which is obedient and pleasing to God.

Sex is not bad, it's good, and yet as we speak about it, we must realise that we're doing so with God's word which is, in many ways, totally contrary to the worlds. God's word will be opposed – it will be

misunderstood and mocked and attacked and maligned. And those who speak it, and those who live it, will likely be treated the same way.

So this morning we're going to open our Bibles and see the big picture of sex and particularly marriage from the beginning to the end, and then make a couple of broad observations about sex and our sexuality from that. Then next week we're going to look at the particular issue of homosexuality. Not because we want to make it an issue, but because it is an issue. It's a subset of human sexuality, and like anything we want to be gracious and godly and clear and loving as we speak and think about it.

In conjunction with that, we're going to have two evenings, this Thursday and next Tuesday where we we'll hear a little more about the state our church is in - that's on Thursday, and then talk about how we as a church can and must love and care for people who experience same-sex attraction. There will be an opportunity for questions and comments on both nights, and I do hope you'll be able to come along and join in.

But I do want to recognise up front that these next couple of weeks might be difficult for some of us to hear. Our sexuality is very important to us. It has the potential to bring us immense joy and immense pain. We're going to be speaking today about marriage, and that can be difficult to hear if you're not married, particularly if you want to be. If you're single, or widowed, or if your marriage has not worked as you had hoped hearing about marriage can be difficult. Indeed, even talking about sex can be difficult for some.

There will be people here who have fallen in sexual temptation and sinned, and who are living with the consequences of that. There will be marriages which are hurt and damaged by sexual sin. There will be people who have been the victims of sexual abuse, and for whom hearing about sex and its place in marriage will be difficult.

Friends, as Christians we start and finish with God's grace. We must remember his love and compassion, and healing and forgiveness, reminding ourselves that there is no sin, no pain, no memory that is so horrific, so great that it can't be brought to God and receive forgiveness, and healing and comfort. If you have sinned, there is forgiveness. If you have been sinned against, there is healing. For our God is a God of grace and love and hope.

We're going to start our overview of what the bible says about sex in Genesis and at the creation of men and women. The book of Genesis gives us two pictures of God's good creation in chapters one and two. And we can see a number of things about humanity from that.

First of all, our sex, male and female is not an add-on to who we are, but it is part of who we are. Look at Genesis 1 and verse 27 - people are created male and female. You can't be a person, and not be either male or female. That is how we have been created. Our gender is not something we choose, but something we have been made.

Secondly, a union of those two sexes is a created reality. If we turn over to Genesis 2 and verse 24 we see there the pattern for marriage that God instructs. The imagery of Genesis two is of this abundant, overflowing with goodness creation, in which, no suitable helper for man is found. And so God creates woman in verse 22, *equal* in that she is made in the image of God and *distinct*, for she is woman, not man. in verse 23 we read - 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." And here's the command - for this

reason – because they are equal but distinct – a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and become one flesh.

There's a huge amount here, but I want us to see that as women and men relate, there is a leaving, a joining, and a staying. We get here a picture of marriage as a public and permanent commitment, and the place of sex within that public and permanent commitment. The idea of becoming one flesh is a statement about sexual intimacy, but it isn't exhausted by that. To be one flesh is to be a new family, a new start, a new beginning. And because of that Christians have traditionally seen marriage as having three purposes. **Procreation** – making more people, **companionship** – the answer to the "not being alone" problem which Adam had, and lastly, marriage for **sexual order**. It's a safe place for sexual expression, for society to know and protect and safeguard good sexual expression within this marriage relationship. So we could say marriage is for sex. But sex itself is a means to an end – and that end is the marriage relationship.

So God gives us this picture of marriage, and sex within that marriage relationship. It's a picture of safety and enjoyment and growth and joy. And we see that in marriages – sometimes, I hope, frequently – in our own. In other people's. That's why there is such great joy in weddings – it's not the beauty or the expense or the great meal afterwards – wonderful as all those things are. It's because in marriage there is hope, and security, and love and beauty. Friends, I hope you rejoice in marriage. In your marriage, and in marriage in general – it is good.

But it doesn't stay good, for as we come to Genesis 3 we come to the Fall. The introduction of sin into the world as humans choose to rebel against their creator effected everything. It brought in death and pain and suffering and hardship. It affected marriages – the good order, the perfect relationship which is held up in Genesis 1 and 2 is distorted. There is struggle for power rather than a passion for service. Those three things that we saw about marriage are distorted in the fall. There is barrenness in marriage, and pain in childbirth. Companionship turns inward, and there's a focus on self rather than the other person.

And as we go on through the Bible we see sexual expression outside of marriage and the impact that has on society in general. In the fall our sexuality, like everything else about our humanity and our world, was impacted. That picture we see of committed, other-person-centered, heterosexual, child bearing, relationship building, society strengthening sex - that picture is marred. Because of sin it is distorted. We see that in the accounts of fallen humanity that the Bible tells us about, that we see around us even today, or rape, and incest, or abuse. Of sexual expression hurting people and breaking relationships rather than building them. Of society being confused, of family units being complicated and people being bruised as sex is seen and used as something for my good rather than something for the good of the other person whom I have committed myself to publicly and permanently. Rather than being a function of a relationship, sex has become something individualistic – I have needs, I will have them met. And I will choose how I will have them met. That very attitude cuts totally against our creation as sexually differentiated humans, where sex is secondary to the relationship that it serves.

And so we come to the Lord Jesus. Who immediately shows us that being human, being fully human, is not dependent on us being sexual active. For he himself was celibate, not married, and yet was completely and utterly perfectly human. Who taught and proclaimed a picture of marriage for his people that was consistent with the created order. And yet even more than that, in the Lord Jesus we're shown something about marriage that transcends just being a relationship between a man and woman.

Throughout the Old Testament marriage is used as an illustration of Israel's relationship with God. He is her bridegroom. To rebel against God is declared to be adultery. And Jesus picks up that imagery. His first miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11) is to provide an abundance of phenomenally good wine at a wedding – it was the bridegroom's role to provide wine at a wedding. And Jesus turns up and is the perfect bridegroom. In response to the Pharisees who complain that he and his disciples aren't fasting he replied - "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them" (Mark 2:19). The point is – he's the bridegroom.

And this all points to the picture which is made more clear in the rest of the New Testament – arguably most clear in Ephesians 5. Where the apostle Paul speaks about the other-person centred marriage that God calls Christians to. Wives submitting to husbands, husbands giving themselves totally for their wives. And Paul finishes by quoting the same passage from Genesis 2 that Jesus affirms, but then he finishes with this: 'This is a profound mystery', remember he's been speaking about human marriage, about how Christians should live in our marriages, but he goes on... This is a profound mystery —'but I am talking about Christ and the church' (Eph 5:32). Friends, human marriage is a picture of the perfect marriage between Jesus and his people. We're not saying that human marriage is unimportant, or anything like that. But the institution of human marriage is an illustration, it's a visual aid to point us to the true marriage, the perfect marriage, the marriage where all those things that we long for and seek after in human marriage are totally and utterly fulfilled – the marriage between Jesus and his people.

And as we're given a picture of the new creation that's how it's described. In our second reading from the book of Revelation the people of God are welcomed into his presence at a wedding feast. Hear these words – from verse 7 of Revelation 19 – 'For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready – we are his bride.' In the next chapter we hear these words – "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem (that is, god's people), coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev 20:2-4). You see here is a picture of a new creation where the good things of marriage are fulfilled in being with Christ Jesus.

Now there is far more that we could say here, this is simply a thumbnail sketch of the trajectory of marriage in the bible. Good, created for men and women, beneficial for us, and the world. But fallen and affected by sin. And those who come to Christ Jesus are to live in their marriages as they were created to be. But in Jesus we are also given a picture of the future where a perfect marriage is lived out. A marriage between our Lord Jesus and his people, where in him loneliness is gone forever, where in him a family is created. And our marriages now take on a new function, they illustrate this perfect marriage, as wives and husbands model Christ's love and compassion for his people.

It's been a thumbnail sketch but there are two very practical points I want to finish on.

The first is that **sex does not define us**. I started off by asking why it is that sex sells. The reason is because we live in a time where we're told that our sexuality defines us. Our worth, our significance, whether we are a real man, or a perfect woman is defined by our sexual attractiveness, defined even to the point that if we're not having sex with someone, not only will our needs will not be met, but even our very identity is under question. Our world has so emphasised sex that we think that without sex, we're somehow missing out on something, that we're not really being fully human. Now I've stated it

very strongly not because everyone thinks that, but because it's possible to think that – and many do – many younger ones particularly.

And in the face of that we must hear God's word. As his people, sex does not define us. Not being able to have sex, either through physical or psychological inability, or because you are not married and therefore not having sex, does not make you less of a person. You are not missing out on something that makes you whole, or complete. For your identity is grounded not in what you do - your identity as a Christian comes from your standing before the Lord Jesus. It comes from being one who is loved by Jesus, who has been saved by God himself. That is what defines you, that is where you find your identity.

Secondly, and flowing out of that, we need to grasp that **sex is for marriage**. We live in a world where we're told that sex is a need, in the same way that eating is a need, or warmth is a need. But that is just not true. Sex serves a purpose – and as God has made the world - that purpose is marriage. Sex is designed to unite, to join, to provide intimacy and joy and surrender and commitment to another person. It is part of the physical acting out of a choice and a commitment to give yourself completely to another person. Sex does not make a marriage, but sex sustains a marriage. There are some marriages where, for a wide variety of reasons sex is not possible. That doesn't mean that that marriage isn't valid, or real, but it is sad, and therefore if you are in that situation it's worth talking about it, and seeking to address it. You might need help in talking about it, or in addressing it, speaking to me is a good place to start. Sex is a good and wonderful thing and as Christians we should not be ashamed to say that, or shy away from affirming it. But the reason it is good and wonderful is not because it makes us as individuals feel good. It's good and wonderful because it bonds and strengthens marriages. It is a place where spouses share themselves completely and their focus is totally on the other person.

Sex is for marriage. And marriage points us to our Lord Jesus. And it is he whom we praise and thank for all the good things he has given us, including sex, all the forgiveness he offers us, especially for our sexual brokenness and failures, and all the hope he sets before us, where he will welcome us as a groom welcomes his bride.