



Sex is Not About Waiting

The point of sexual intimacy is the union of persons that it represents and is itself a part of.

by Michael Lawrence

Parents are big believers in waiting. Do you remember any of these? "Wait for your little brother!" as you ran off with your friends. "Wait a half hour before you get into the pool" just as you finished your lunch. "Wait until your father gets home!" as mom caught you pummeling your sibling for being such a nuisance.

Of course, it's not really that they saw virtue in waiting itself. It's just that waiting ensured something more important — loving your little brother, or protecting you from danger, or impressing on you the consequences of your actions.

There's one other kind of waiting that parents try to teach — the patient waiting involved in delayed gratification. From staying in school because of the better job we'd someday get, to working hard at practice every day, so we'd be ready for the competition that was weeks or months away, to saving the money we earned mowing lawns or babysitting so we could pay for college or buy an engagement ring (I can't tell you how many lawns are sitting on my wife's finger right now!), we learn to patiently wait in order to maximize our gratification in the future. It's a good lesson, as far as it goes.

But it doesn't work for everything. Some things are best when done as soon as possible — like eating an ice cream cone on a hot day. And other things can be delayed too long — like the vacation of a lifetime that comes too late in life to be really enjoyed.

And then there's sex.

At first, the argument to wait makes sense on the grounds of protecting yourself from something you're not emotionally or physically ready for. Later, it makes sense on the grounds that it will be better if it happens in the context of a committed, adult relationship. But what about now? You're in your 20s or 30s; your career is taking off, and your body and emotions are about as developed as they're ever going to be. And though you're not married, your relationships with the opposite sex are mature and adult-like in every other respect. So why keep waiting? You're not a kid anymore. And even if sex is marginally better inside of marriage than outside, what if your prospects for marriage aren't that good? Isn't sub-optimal sex now better than no sex at all, ever?

That's where we come to the limits of the "wait, because it's better in marriage" argument. And it's one of the reasons why so many of the single men and women I counsel in the local church find themselves in tears on my couch, telling me that after years of waiting, they just couldn't wait any longer.

The Biblical Command

When we turn to what the Bible has to say about sex outside of marriage, it's not hard to sum up the message. Don't do it. From the Ten Commandments in Exodus to the laws of Leviticus 18, to the instructions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6-7 to the public embarrassment that attached to the Virgin Mary, the Bible is clear that God's standard is that sex is to be reserved for marriage, and marriage alone.

And unlike much that you'll find on the shelves of your local Christian bookstore, the Bible doesn't spend much time trying to justify that standard. You won't find a verse that says "Thou shalt wait, because it's better in marriage." There is no chapter in Scripture that touts the protection from physical disease and emotional heartache that comes from monogamy, although both of those things are true.

Instead, the Bible says things like, "You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 18:4). Or, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The Bible teaches that we should reserve sexual intimacy for marriage for no other reason than that, if we are Christians, we belong to God. Sex outside of marriage is not only a sin against ourselves and our partner, but a fraudulent misrepresentation of God

and a cruel distortion of the intimacy he created to be a picture of the eternal intimacy of the Trinity itself.

A Union of Bodies, But So Much More

What is the point of sexual intimacy? Genesis 1 tells us that one of the points is procreation. We're to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with the image of God, and it's through sexual intimacy that we do that.

But right away it's obvious that there's more going on than mere reproduction. For one thing, though all living creatures are created to reproduce after their kind, not all do so sexually. And among those that do reproduce sexually, simple observation tells us that humans are unique in their experience of sex. Mating in the animal world is clearly attended with much urgency and instinctual drive, but not much more. Why are we different?

Of course, as far as the world is concerned, only a nerdy biologist, or a prudish Christian would bother to ask such a question. To the world, the point of sex is pleasure, release, orgasm. What other point would anyone need? Sex results in pleasure. I want pleasure, so I have sex. I want more pleasure, I have more sex. I suppose it's a given that men in our culture tend to buy into this view — even married men; even Christian married men. What seems to be new in the last generation is the increasing extent to which women are viewing sex this way as well.

Ironically, though the first view is historically associated with Christianity, and the second view is associated with the world, both miss the main point of sexual intimacy, because both reduce sex to an instrument, a means to another end. And whenever something is reduced to a tool, a utilitarian process, it ceases to be an object of beauty in and of itself, and is only as good as what it gets you.

Why is our experience of sex so different than the rest of creation? Why did God pronounce it very good? Simply put, because the point of sexual intimacy is neither the children nor the pleasure it produces, but the union of persons that it represents and is itself a part of.

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