



What's Good About Sex?

Sex clubs, Internet porn, AIDS . . . with so much bad news, it's easy to forget what God intended sex to be.

by *J. Budziszewski*

Is sex bad? A case could be made for that view.

- **Midnight.** John is trying to explain his way out of calling his wife by another woman's name during their embraces.
- **One o'clock.** Shelly, 16, is in her bedroom, secretly cutting herself with a razor because of what her boyfriend made her do.
- **Two o'clock.** His wife asleep, Steven is busy downloading shameful images from Internet bulletin boards.
- **Three o'clock.** Marjorie, who used to spend each Friday night in bed with a different man, has been bingeing and purging for four hours.
- **Four o'clock.** Pablo stares through the darkness at his ceiling, wondering how he is going to convince his girlfriend to have an abortion.
- **Five o'clock.** After partying all night, Michael takes another man home, not mentioning that he tests positive for HIV.
- **Six o'clock.** Lisa is in the bathroom, crying.

Not quite what my generation expected when it invented the sexual revolution.

Although still not quite willing to give up that enslaving liberation, feminist writers like Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe exhibit signs of fatigue and confusion. A few secular people toy with the idea of abstinence—an abstinence not so much of purity as of boredom, fear, and disgust. In Hollywood, of all places, it has even become fashionable to talk up Buddhism, a weary doctrine that finds the cure of suffering in the cessation of desire, and the cure of desire in the cessation of existence.

What's more, some Christian writers give the impression they hold the same dismal view. Overwhelmed by the sheer number of things to warn about, they have forgotten how to do anything but scold.

Maybe the sexual revolution was an even grimmer joke than we thought. Maybe there is nothing good about sex. Maybe sex is just plain bad.

A Gift of God

What's wrong with this picture? Although there is plenty of bad in the contemporary sexual scene, it's clear that we're forgetting something. The only way to get something bad is to take something good and spoil it. Whenever you find a bad thing, look for a good thing somewhere in the ruins.

The idea that sex is inherently bad doesn't come from the Bible. It comes from ancient gnosticism, which taught that the Creator wasn't God, but a lesser being who made a botch of things. Gnostics thought spirits good, bodies bad, and sex just a matter of bodies.

But the Bible calls God the Creator. He invented sex; it was His idea. And let's not forget that after He finished His work, He called the whole creation "good." Dazzled by His handiwork, Christianity espouses a higher view of sex than any other religion. That's why it also has the strictest rules about it. Anything so important has to be handled carefully.

So what's good about sex? Sex serves not just one great good but three. However, they need marriage to come into their own.

First among the goods of conjugal sex is procreation. God told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply." This was part of their dominion of the earth.

Second is union. When Adam was lonely, God didn't give him a man, an animal, or a crowd of people, but a woman—different than he, yet made with him in God's image. When Adam first gazed upon his new companion, he was so astonished that he cried, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."

The third good of conjugal sex becomes real only when the spouses are united to Christ, for that is when they become a living emblem of His sacrificial love for the Church and the Church's adoring response. Paul is so awed that he calls matrimony one of God's secrets. "This mystery is a profound one," he says, "and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church."

These three goods are the point of sex. They are what sex is for.

What about pleasure? I hear you ask. Has Christianity got something against that? No, pleasure is great. God is for it. But by His design, pleasure is a byproduct—an outgrowth of other things that are more important.

If you pursue pleasure for its own sake, two things happen. First, it disappears. Philosophers call this the "hedonistic paradox." Second, it steers you wrong, because pleasure can result from doing wrong as well as doing right.

Three Great Goods

Let's talk about each of the three great goods of conjugal sex in turn.

Procreation. In procreation we cooperate with God, offering our bodies, marriages, and homes as the occasions for His creation of new life. This is an incredible privilege. It is even more mind-boggling to consider that the birth of a child is the birth of an image of God who will live forever, who will one day be older than the sun and stars are now.

Procreation isn't just about your kids. Once grown, the kids will have kids, remember? How we parent will affect the parenting values of our offspring.

Union. Love isn't just romantic feelings. Love is a commitment of the will to the true good of the other person. Otherwise, how could a bride and groom promise to love each other? You can't promise to have a feeling.

If love is a commitment of the will, then what has sex got to do with it? Consider procreation again. Do you see how different—how special—it is? In every other biological function, such as eating, digesting and growing, the man and woman are separate organisms. For procreation, they join to become a single unit, functioning in covenantal harmony. Conjugal union is a true merging. They become a one-flesh unity—and I'm not just talking about their bodies.

When I say that I'm not just talking about their bodies, I mean that at every level, male and female were designed to complete each other. In sexual self-giving, the hearts and minds and spirits of the husband and wife cooperate with their bodies. They are united not just in their bodily dimension, but in every dimension.

This unity also helps prepare them to be parents, and the hope of children joins them in solidarity with every past and future generation.

Casual sex can't achieve that. It endlessly joins and severs, joins and severs. Imagine what it would be like to repeatedly tear off and reattach your arm. There would come a day when no earthly surgery would suffice; the reparative power of your body would be lost. It is the same when you repeatedly tear off and reattach your various sexual partners. Eventually they will all seem like strangers; you just won't feel anything. You will have destroyed your capacity for intimacy.

Mystery. Think again of Paul's words regarding the union of husband and wife: "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church." What was he talking about? So far in salvation history, we have only hints; we won't know the whole until it happens.

Think of the Song of Songs, of the Old Testament love poem that begins, "Kiss me with kisses of your mouth." Many readers are mystified as to how it got into the sacred Scriptures, but the ancient rabbis had an explanation. They said it not only portrayed the love between husband and the wife, but symbolized the love between God and His people. Shocking! Yet the New Testament speaks in the same way. The Revelation of John foretells the coming "marriage of the Lamb"—a future union between Christ and His Church, more intimate than anything we have known, not to be consummated until He comes again.

In some way that passes our present understanding, and for all its present flaws, conjugal intimacy is a symbol of that piercing heavenly intimacy. The little humiliations and the mutual sacrifices of the husband and wife are a training for heavenly union; the awe of their wedding night and the ecstasy of their embraces, a glimpse of it.

So is there any good in sex? In marriage, yes! God the Giver has made conjugal union the vaulted arch into two great goods, and the mysterious emblem of an even greater good—a good in this life we cannot comprehend. That's why we dare not uproot sex from marriage, the garden where God has planted it. Too much good is at stake to treat it lightly; too much power and danger to waste it on selfish games.

From the best gifts come the worst miseries, if we are too foolish to follow the Giver's directions.