

Sex Before Marriage: What Does The Bible Teach?

Dr. Bob Harrington

Is Sex Before or Outside Marriage Wrong?

Within marriage, sex is a wonderful gift from God. God created it for our pleasure, to express love and experience deep intimacy, to create children, etc. But the Bible explicitly says that sex before marriage and adultery are sinful and wrong and, if not repented of, will result in punishment. (1 Corinthians 6:9; Ephesians 5:5; Galatians 5:19-21, etc.). The Biblical term for such acts is “sexual immorality.”

What Is Sexual Immorality?

Sexual Immorality – (Greek *Porneia*) – refers to sexual relations, usually intercourse, before or outside marriage (husband and wife). [Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd. ed., revised by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).] This word applies to sex by or with unmarried people (called fornication), people married to someone else (adultery), prostitutes (who give sex for money), homosexual sex (same gender sex), and pedophile sex (sex with kids). All such acts are sinful and wrong.

This word applies to all of the sexual acts described in detail in the Old Testament: sex before marriage (Deut. 22:20-21), sex with a woman married to someone else (Deut. 22:22), rape (Deut. 22:25), homosexual sex (Leviticus 18:22), sex with animals (Exodus 22:18), and incest (sex with a relative - Leviticus 18:1-30). People were to be stoned to death for these acts in ancient times.

How Far Is Too Far?

The word for sexual immorality (Greek *Porneia*) is very broad and surely applies to all types of sexual activity outside marriage. We get our word “Pornography” from this word.

Teens and singles often find a more useful and broader word which more clearly covers all sexual contact is the word “impurity.” This word (Greek *Akatharsia*) has an even wider range of meaning, including the broad aspects of sex before marriage or outside marriage. Christians are commanded to avoid “impurity” (Galatians 5:19, see F.F. Bruce, *Commentary of Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, p. 247). It would definitely rule out any behavior below the line (see below) as “purity” is “given up” when a person “touches the private body parts” of another. Unfortunately, many Christians are not clear on this point. Many wrongly think that the Bible just says that sexual intercourse before marriage is wrong. If we turn from “impurity” as the Bible teaches, we must turn from many things that people can get involved in before intercourse.

Clearly a line must be drawn (like below) if we are to follow what the Bible says about “sexual immorality” and “impurity.”

- ◆A side hug
- ◆A kiss on the cheek
- ◆Holding hands
- ◆A frontal hug
- ◆Kissing on the lips

- ◆Touching private body parts through clothes
- ◆Rubbing each other through clothes for the purpose of rubbing private body parts
- ◆Touching private body parts under clothes
- ◆Touching and seeing private body parts with some clothes pulled back
- ◆Being partially or fully naked with the opposite sex
- ◆Oral sex and Intercourse

Privately reading this list helps Christians to know where the Bible draws the line. Many are confused about the whole subject and think that the goal is to be or remain a technical virgin (no intercourse). They think that maybe everything else is not really sinful. Now that you know about impurity and sexual immorality, read the following passages for yourself.

1 Corinthians 6:18-19: Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

Ephesians 5:3: But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

1 Thessalonians 4: 3-8: But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person--such a man is an idolater--has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.

2 Timothy 2: 22: Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

What do you think? If you honestly seek God's heart and read these passages carefully you will notice that God teaches us that there should not even be a hint of "sexual immorality" or "impurity" (Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). This totally rules out "any sexual touching" for someone who wants to live as a faithful Christian. Purity requires that Christians act in ways that are totally different than the rest of the world.

Some Christians find help in the "bathing suit guideline" — do not have contact with any body part which would be covered by a bathing suit or bikini. This guideline can give great clarity about what is "off limits."

Some Christians may even conclude, with good reason, that they cannot even engage in the items listed above the line until they are married. They are also very concerned about what Jesus said about "lust."

What Did Jesus Say?

Jesus said that 1) if you notice that someone is sexually attractive and 2) then you *purposefully think about and desire being with them sexually*, then it is wrong. Read the following passage:

Matthew 5:28-30 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Many Christians get confused about this passage because they do not know what it means to "look at a woman (or man) lustfully." If we could read the original Greek it would be easier, because it is saying that if we "look at someone for the purpose of lusting after them" it is wrong. We all notice people who are attractive or we can easily be sexually attracted to somebody because of the kind of person they are without even trying. This is a normal part of life, which everyone experiences. But Jesus says that if we follow up on that attraction and purposefully lust or purposefully think about "having someone for our sexual pleasure" we have gone too far – we are sinning. Many years ago the famous Christian writer Martin Luther put it this way:

You can't stop the birds from flying around your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair!

This statement is a good analogy for what Jesus says about lust. Any time you find yourself purposefully thinking about or daydreaming about having intercourse with someone you are not married to or even just "wanting to enjoy them sexually," you have gone too far. Stop yourself and re-channel your thoughts. Sometimes you may even have to run from sexual temptation, the way Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife in the Bible (Genesis 39). This is another reason why there can be no sexual touching for a follower of Christ. You simply cannot engage in sexual touching without being drawn into impurity and lust (wanting to go further or all the way).

This definitely means that you must watch your heart and mind, even with a simple kiss or a romantic hug or holding hands. This is why there is a growing number of Christians who even go so far as to question the whole notion of even dating, kissing, and the like as they are practiced in America.

With good reason, they say our current dating practices lead to rampant sexual immorality, divorce, and adultery. These folks are asking us to re-consider the old idea of courtship. They say it is more Biblical. Every teen and concerned parent would benefit from reading Josh Harris's book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. We may not agree with him on every point, but he helps us to wrestle with the heart of Jesus and to ask ourselves some good questions.

What Should We Do To Keep From Sexual Sin?

Below you will find the complete quote which Jesus gave us about lust. Read it carefully.

Matthew 5:28-30: But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

In English class we learned about "hyperbole," which is exaggerated speech to make a point. Jesus does not literally mean that we must pluck our eyes out if we have a problem with lust, but he wants us to know that we must take extreme measures to avoid lust and sexual immorality. Extreme measures may mean that you cannot watch certain movies, TV shows or even go to the beach at certain times (some guys just cannot keep a pure mind with all the attractive females in bikinis). It may also mean that when you are dating you will always try to be with others, so that you will not be alone as a couple. It can be very tempting to go too far or get sexually involved when you are alone with someone who likes you and you like them. You will also need to be careful about dating others who do not have these standards and may willingly or unwillingly try to break you down.

Jesus wants us to take extreme measures so that we can be protected from sexual sin. It is possible that you could get hooked into a pattern of sexual immorality and your guilt and feelings could cause you to turn your back on Jesus and the Christian life.

Of course this teaching also shows that pornography is totally wrong. Christians must be very careful to avoid pornographic pictures on the internet or from magazines and the like. And this is why committed Christians are careful about movies. Most males find it almost impossible to not lust or gravitate toward impure thoughts when they see unclothed or partially unclothed women. Such movies are often full of impurities which

Christians know that they must avoid. The concern over lust and impurity also explains why many committed Christian women avoid romance novels and soap operas. They too can lead us into lust and impurity. God wants to spare us this lifestyle.

What Are The Benefits?

God made us and knows what is best for us. Because he loves us he has given us these teachings. You may have never thought about it, but there are many benefits when we follow God's teachings about sex.

- You feel no guilt, no shame, and you will have no emotional scars when you hold to a standard of sexual holiness. You don't hear any accusing voices in your own conscience.
- You won't disappoint your parents and church leaders or have to hide things from them.
- You won't be tempted to compare your future spouse with somebody else you have been sexually involved with earlier.
- You have no risk of sexually transmitted diseases.
- You will not face the possibility of pregnancy, being tempted with abortion (which is really murder), or bearing a child out of wedlock.
- It gives you much needed training in self-control and self-denial.
- It protects you from the pattern where sexual immorality by teens and singles leads them into other tendencies as they get older: 1) more sexual immorality with other partners, 2) the likelihood of living together instead of getting married, 3) a greater likelihood of committing adultery once they get married, and 4) a higher rate of divorce for those who were sexually immoral before getting married.

God wants to protect you from all of this — and to see you experience the joy of sex within a committed marriage relationship. Then, when you are married, to repeat, you will have the joy of sharing this gift with your spouse without guilt, without fearing comparisons, without fear of sexually transmitted diseases, and you are better prepared to bring children into this world. It is important to also remember that with the self-discipline in your background (from staying pure) you are more likely to stay pure and stay committed to your marriage partner once you do get married.

God wants you to have His best. That is why the Bible teaches what it does about sex outside marriage.