

Is Sex Before Marriage Always Sinful?

Introduction

The world today exalts a self-centered, pluralistic, pleasure-seeking perspective on the topic of morality, especially sexuality. "If it feels good, do it. If it makes you happy, go for it." This is the anthem of the day. Our feelings are exalted as the ultimate authority of our lives and any semblance of an objective standard of moral absolutes is deemed puritanically prohibitive and intolerable. As feelings become authoritative, God's Word is rendered impotent.

But this is not the way that a Christian is to think. We are called to humble ourselves under God's Word and trust not only that it is authoritative, but also that it is good and profitable for all of life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God is good and He does good (Psalm 119:68). If our feelings are opposed to God's Word, it isn't because His Word is wrong, oppressive, or impractical, but rather because our hearts are rebellious, wicked, and sick with sin (Jeremiah 17:9). Therefore, it would serve us well to see what the Scripture says on the topic of premarital sex (also called "fornication" in some translations), to humble ourselves under it, and attempt to glimpse God's purposes and inherent goodness in His revealed will.

Considering the Scriptures

The most common word which the Bible uses in reference to fornication is *πορνεία* (*porneia*).¹ Here are a few places where this particular word is used (translated as "sexual immorality" in the ESV):

- **1 Corinthians 6:18-20** *Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*
- **1 Corinthians 7:2** *Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*
- **1 Thessalonians 4:3-5** *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God...*

- **Galatians 5:19-20** *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

There are a number of other passages which would be helpful to study in order to pursue a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, but the above passages suffice to show that Scripture is clear in condemning *porneia* as sinful and inappropriate.

God has declared sexual immorality to be evil, improper, sinful, fleshly, earthly, and against His revealed will. Those who continually and unrepentantly practice it are declared guilty and unrighteous, and will be subject to judgment by Him. Rather than engaging in the act of sexual immorality, the Bible says that we are to "flee" and "abstain" as we attempt to "control" our bodies for the sake of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7 indicates that marriage is the only proper, God-ordained means to guard against the danger of sexual immorality and is therefore the only fitting prescription if one is unable or unwilling to exercise self-control.

To ask yourself if you may have sex with a certain person, there is one question to ask. Questions like "do I love him or her" and "am I committed to him or her" are important, but they are not decisive. The ultimate and decisive question is "am I married to him or her." If not, then the Scriptures are clear -- you must abstain. Indulge once you are married; until then refrain.

Why This Restriction is Good

Why has God restricted sexual activity to the context of marriage? Is He opposed to sex? Of course not; He is the One Who created it! Is He then a cosmic killjoy who created sex and then forbids its enjoyment? Again, the obvious answer is no. God created sex, but has restricted it for His own glory and the good of His people. Don't overlook that last phrase. God restricts sex to marriage for our good!

¹ *Porneia* is a very general word which describes nearly every form of sexual activity which occurs outside of the context of a marital relationship. In other words, it is broader than simply premarital sex, but certainly includes it.

Man was not made to be alone (Genesis 2:18) and therefore God created woman as a companion and helper. This union between the first man and first woman is the basis for the institution known as marriage.² Therefore, marriage was then and is now the proper conduit through which God intends and prescribes sexuality to be pursued. Anything outside of this boundary is outside of the rhythm of the creative order and therefore contrary to God's design.

The fact that God places boundaries upon the ways and forms of pleasure does not imply that He is against our joy. Consider the example of an architect who specializes in roller coaster design. No one would call him a killjoy when he necessitates a safety bar across the lap for his ride which loops and takes turns at 70 mph. We understand that certain restrictions are necessary for such an adventure. Likewise, God created marriage as a picture of His relationship with His people (Ephesians 5:22-33) and any perversion of marriage distorts the picture of the relationship which we desperately need with Him. By obscuring this image of true relationship with Creator, engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage robs us of the knowledge of Him which is necessary to salvation. In other words, by limiting sex to marriage, God actually lifts our eyes to Him and our engagement in fornication only blinds us to Him. There is therefore great peril in pursuing this sin.

God is most definitely not against our joy, but neither is He for those fleeting and shallow shadows of joy which the world offers. As the Scripture says, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."³ I think that Lewis said it quite well:

"...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."⁴

Sex is a gift to be pursued and enjoyed, but within its proper parameters. Playing in the sandbox may feel good, but it does not compare to a day at the beach (don't think Galveston here). In the same way, premarital sex does feel good, but that does not mean that it is good. Pursue a greater pleasure.

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² Genesis 2:24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

³ Psalm 16:11

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*