

Week 5 - A Kingdom View of Sexuality

Introduction: Learning to talk about sexuality

For many of us, this is the first time you've ever been in a church that is speaking openly about a godly sexuality that isn't a burdened purity culture, filled with shame, and not open to questions. The good news is we are safe to rethink human sexuality, and in fact, we must if we are to figure out what it means to follow Jesus with our bodies in a world so confused about sexuality. We also need to learn to talk about this together in ways that are thoughtful, safe, and appropriate. We need to think not only of ourselves but of others when talking about this. For example, with someone other than your spouse or an adult, talking with a student—would create an unsafe dynamic for others and would not be appropriate. If you have any questions about this, ask me.

Defining the term: To begin, I should define what I mean by “sexuality” — for this class, this term includes gender, sex, sexual activity, identity, desire, and orientation — essentially the experience of having a body in relation to other bodies.

Baggage: We should also acknowledge the baggage around sexuality. For some, it might be church baggage with purity culture (Purity culture emphasizes abstinence from sex before marriage. Dating was discouraged entirely to avoid pre-marital sex. Women and girls are told to cover up and dress modestly to avoid arousing sexual urges in men and boys). Others are survivors of abuse and mistreatment, and some experience a lot of shame, loneliness, or confusion with their sexuality. While caring for the wounds of many, I want to help us arrive at a place where sexuality is understood as good news, as a gift.

In light of the Kingdom: I want to consider a view of sexuality in light of the Kingdom of God. To say it, ask it another way: what does it mean that we are the recipients of bodies that are made holy and will be raised to last forever in a loving relationship with God and our neighbor? There is a lot unknown here about what those raised bodies will be like, but we should remember that our bodies are part of God's future. This is how we need to frame sexuality.

Outline: For our time together, I want to outline what I think are the most critical questions on this topic to help you see where we are going:

1. What does it mean to be human? (Christological framing)
2. What are bodies for? (nowhere, nowhen, no-body)
3. What do we do with desire? (Body's grace, desire, man, woman, not a sin but a gift)
4. What is friendship? (Not good for a person to be alone)
5. Does singleness mean loneliness? (recovering the beauty of that call while not forcing it)
6. What is marriage? (and what it's not)
7. What is the Good News about sexuality? (grace, resurrection)

What does it mean to be human?

Human beings are creatures, made in God's image, made not to be alone but to inhabit creation in the loving company of God and others. We can already see that to be human is to fulfill what Jesus would later say was the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets: loving God and loving your neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40). In fact, this is where everything is headed in the end, when the fullness of God's kingdom is received,

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, 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, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell 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." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev. 21:2–5)

It's in this context that we must ask the question: what does it mean to be a creature of divine love, resembling something so other than us (divine image), and invited to share in a community of divine making forever?

- We are dependent on the company of God and others
- Though there is pain it will pass away.
- What has plagued our humanity in the Fall is being redeemed by one who is human, but is also most fully human. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the human vocation because he was fully human. He most perfectly shows us what it means to love God and neighbor.
- This is why we look to Christ to see what it is to be human, which involves, among other things, living in a community and having bodies.

What are bodies for?

Bodies are a good gift: Christians have a unique view of the body. We do not deny or belittle our physical bodies but receive them as a gift. They were created "good," and God graced human bodies with his divine image. It is this human body to which the eternal Word freely joins himself in the person of Jesus. It is also these bodies that are filled with the Spirit on Pentecost. It is also these bodies that are now part of the Holy Trinity because of the ascension of Christ.

We might conclude that the purpose of the body, by nature, is to inhabit the world God created and to enjoy the presence of God and others. The body is also the recipient and sacrament through which we experience life. We are not created as disembodied souls but embodied souls — which is why the resurrection is so important in our soteriology.

Have you ever been somewhere and not really been present? I do this all the time. After work, I come home and my kids are talking to me, but I'm not really home yet. I'm nowhere. The gift of the body is that we can be somewhere, but we can also defy that gift. Sitting on a phone scrolling, staring out into space, checking out, numbing out — can be a misuse of the body's gift of presence.

Bodies are a gift: Think of this, our only experience of place and time is through the gift of our bodies. So, God's gift to us is not just to have a physical form but to be somewhere sometime. James K. A. Smith wrote a book recently, *How to Inhabit Time*, in which he describes a tone-deafness to time, people's inability to be present to the moment and attend to time. What are our bodies for? They are first for a gift to *be* before they must do. Our existence isn't a tool; it is a grace, the joy of being.

The good news in this is you can take up space. You can breathe up air. You exist not as an accident or as something to manage or to make everyone else happy — you exist due to the pleasure and delight of God. Therefore, your body is not shameful or any more broken than anyone else's; it is not embarrassing, nor is it ugly, or wrong. It is a beautiful gift in ways far beyond appearance — it exists! Now this is critical if we're to understand sexuality as an aspect of having a body. It is not shameful either, it's not ugly, it just is. You can give yourself permission to have a sexuality, even if it's complicated or unclear — you've got one and it's good.

I think especially for women or sexual minorities or if you've grown up with shame, I imagine this is an important point to take in. This is good news. God has given you a body with sexuality and it is a good gift.

You Belong to a Body:

It is good news that your body doesn't exist alone, autonomous, but without losing its distinction or individuality, finds its place within a communal body of Christ. It is within this Body that we are called to be living members, given vocation, and an invitation to pursue the needs of others according to the greatest commandment. I have included Romans 12 for your study later.

Our bodies/sexualities are broken: At the same time that our bodies are made in God's image, they are broken, sinful, misguided, confused, deceitful at times, imbalanced, stressed, burdened, and dying (if you're over 40). How do we tell what is broken and what is not about our sexuality?

- Does it fulfill the summary of all of the Law and the Prophets (greatest commandment)?
- "Natural" is no longer enough — We are not holy by nature but by grace. We are not God's children by nature, but as Gentiles, we are children by election (Romans 11). The basis for what is natural and unnatural is no longer determined by ethnic, social, biological, or worldly means, but the Kingdom of God reconfigures all of it.
- Grace is at the center of Christian views of sexuality and everything it involves because it is all given: identity, the body, belonging, community, intimacy, friendships, and marriage.
- We are not justified by our biology, nor does that make us holy, set free, or whole — this is the aim that only Christ is capable of accomplishing for us.
- Biology can give a scientific and descriptive account of sexuality, procreation, and relationships — but it does not give it meaning, wholeness, or holiness. That is something that is lovingly given by your Creator as a grace.

- This is key if we are to begin to make sense of our sexuality. To begin making sense of sexuality first from the givenness of your body, sexuality, and identity by God. All gifts that still need to be sorted out with reference to God's grace, and loving help — not on our own, not self-realized, and not imposed by the prevailing winds of society.

Gender Roles, Emerging Identities, and Reconfiguring in the Kingdom

There are many misguided images of masculinity, what it means to be a “man” that take up violence with machismo, to have headstrong leadership—that are more cultural ideals or hero images than the image of Jesus. This is especially the case with patriarchal norms, a misguided view of male-headship, or gender roles in the home that conform to the pattern of this world and resist the renewing of our minds with Christ. They're also hurtful to men who are left to perform in these dressed-up versions of self-centeredness, insecurity, suppressed feelings, and a host of other unhealthy things. We are free to let this go in favor of becoming the kind of person God has created us to be—and our guide is the gentle, strong, humble, courageous, self-giving and suffering example of Christ.

There are also misguided images of femininity, what it means to be a “woman” that fall into cultural patterns and expectations that are equally disfiguring. Christ, of course, is the revelation of humanity, but as a man, that picture can be revealed further in the lives of other women in the Bible, like Mary.

We don't have to judge emerging gender identities, pronouns, or expressions of attraction but can have a posture of love, seeking understanding for each other. The best way is to ask, “What does that mean for you?” There is complexity in gender, sex, and identity, that we see find a place in the Kingdom of God. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch who had come to Jerusalem to worship and struggles to understand Isaiah 53:7 (Acts 8:26–40). The Spirit commands Philip to go towards Gaza for this sole purpose to include him despite Deut. 23:1, which bans all castrated males from the religious community.

What is clear is that in the Kingdom of God, all of this is being reconfigured.

What do we do with desire?

It was Saint Augustine who wrote, in his famous work, *Confessions*,
Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

For Augustine, desire itself is not sinful; it is the disordered desire that is the problem. Especially when we become enslaved by our desires and fall into sin when we let sexual desire lead us in the direction away from God. Augustin calls them disordered affections. All of sin is an expression of God-given desires that have been mangled and twisted. For instance, lust is a desire for intimacy that becomes selfish. Underneath our sins are desires for significance, love, community, being known, being valued, being at peace, satisfied, to be happy — that can so easily be twisted by self-centeredness, control, fear, or pride. So instead of fighting sinful behavior with repressing thoughts or guilt or shame, you might try contemplation: “Lord, show me the desire underneath this brokenness.” Part of desire and sexuality is painful, funny, and

messy, but this is just part of making sense of it. And it can't be done alone, we need community and friendships.

What is Friendship?

We read in Genesis that God noticed Adam alone and said that was not good. To be a human is to be in a community, but not all relationships should be defined by sexuality. Again, the desire to belong, to be loved, known, and for intimacy is good, but it can be so easily twisted and perverted with a disordered use of sexuality. Friendship and singleness are two of the most holy ways of being in a relationship with others. Sex isn't everything, and although good, outside of the covenant of marriage, it can quickly become the master and twist otherwise good relationships.

Friendship, as we see in Jesus and his disciples, and also with us, is also a gift.

Does singleness mean loneliness?

Singleness needs to be recovered as a beautiful vocation in the world and in the church. Celibacy, too, needs to be recovered in a healthy way and not forced on those who have no other choice but to be celibate. The difficulty is at least two major issues: the over-sexualization of all relationships and the lack of community to keep singleness from becoming lonely. The church's call to become a community and to extend the hospitality of family answers the world's desperate need for belonging, friendship, and sexuality to be rightly ordered below these things and not destroy them.

What is marriage? (and what it's not)

Marriage is not the end-all for humanity. It is not what "completes" a person or makes them whole. That is something only God can fulfill. Marriage has become the mark of success rather than a gift for creating community. Both internally and externally, marriage is a vocation of submitting to one another in love for the sake of others, not dominating or pursuing selfish satisfaction, but self-giving within a lifelong covenant. A Kingdom view of marriage actively works against gender stereotypes, gender roles, obligatory intimacy, manipulation, shame, neglect, or any other cultural norms that do not resemble Christ's, self-giving love.

What is the Good News about sexuality? (grace, resurrection)

In the end, there is Good News about sexuality as "given" and, though broken, something that is being "redeemed." It is not something that we must have the burden of self-deriving, or appeasing peers, or conforming to cultural norms. We worship a God who is incarnate, who demonstrated sexuality of singleness, not loneliness, of community not isolation, and of holiness not legalism. He is not only our example but our salvation. It is, after all, his body which is broken and poured out for our sake. It is God's body that is reconfiguring ours, healing, making whole, and ordering our desires in the most human ways. His Body makes a community, a body that demonstrates his self-giving and holy love.

Some topics that need to be discussed concerning sexuality:

- How we make sense of the Lord/Paul's invitation to singleness
- If celibacy is possible and if marriage is an accommodation for those burning with lust
 - That celibacy should never be forced in a misguided attempt at holiness
- Misguided gender roles
 - The misguided idea that women are to blame for male temptation and lust
 - Misguided images of masculinity, what it means to be a "man"
 - Misguided images of femininity, what it means to be a "woman"
- The sexual abuse scandals in the world and in the church
 - Victims of sexual abuse who are filled with shame and feel isolated in their hurt
- Sex in culture
- Sexuality in marriage:
 - How married couples understand, talk (or don't) about their intimacy
 - Obligation sex in "biblical marriages"
- Nuclear Family
 - Misguided views/idolatry of the nuclear family in the church
 - Purity culture is driven more by sin management than good news
 - What is the family for? A community-creating gift
 - Rethinking what it means to be and enjoy the church family as a community
 - Married couples with kids are not the only families in the church
- Emerging dimensions
 - Emerging gender identities, pronouns, expressions of attraction
 - An ever-expanding range of terms for how people make sense of their identity, orientation, fluidity, or dysphoria.
- Being nowhere, no when, and no-bodies
 - Jamie Smith no when
 - Disembodied
 - Not risking exposure to the effect of others
 - Lonely, isolated, self-controlling our sexuality
 - Vulnerability, desire, significant

We won't get to touch on all of that on this crash course, but I do want to frame this differently than all that. As Christians, we have the gift of approaching sexuality not as a sin to manage but as a gift to steward.

- Not that there is no sin, but that all have sinned, all still sin.
- All need the grace of God and of God's people.
- There is more to being human than sex. This is an expression of our humanity, not what makes us whole.

At the heart of this conversation about sexuality is the question, "**What does it mean to be human?**" and "**What are these bodies for?**" There is so much that we will not cover in this session, but I want to consider these two big questions in our time together.

What does it mean to be human?

- We look at Jesus and see the fullness of humanity. He is fully divine, and fully human. In him we see what it looks like to live a holy life, to receive and inhabit the gift of a body, and to care for the bodies of others. This means:
 - Jesus has and experiences sexuality yet without sin
 - His example is our reference point for answering “what does it mean to be human?”