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Colossians 3:18-19  
22nd Message  
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## PROCEED WITH CAUTION

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH  
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #6*

Our focus for this summer is on living out resurrection life in our relationships in the context of Paul's letter to the Colossians where Paul lays out house rules for wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters. In recent weeks we have talked about marriage and how God has designed husbands and wives to relate to each other in a way that is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the church.

Associated with marriage are three very relevant topics that we have added into our series. Last week we talked about divorce, the breakdown of marriage and the issue of remarriage. Next week we are going to talk about the issue of singleness, the issue of not being married, leaving many single people feeling unfulfilled, hurt, and left out. Today we are going to talk about sexuality and more specifically God's design for how sexuality is to be expressed in relationships.

We live in a sex-saturated world, a world that oozes with sensual appeal through every medium possible. The sexual revolution of the 1960's and 70's brought down barriers and changed attitudes towards sex. Penicillin, the pill, and abortion have changed the way we think about sexual things. The Internet has allowed pornography to be easily accessible and available 24/7 in the privacy of your own room. Adultery has become commonplace, even among our political leaders. Things previously done in secret are socially acceptable. Commitment and responsibility have seemingly lost their value. Basically, the pleasure of sex trumps everything, even for presidents. Sex is a commodity for a consumer society.

In recent years the world has also come to accept and affirm homosexuality and same-sex relationships. While showing tolerance, our society rejects anything but total acceptance. In the U.S. same-sex marriage is legal in six states and the District of Columbia, while California is waiting on the decision of the courts. Many other states recognize same-sex partnerships. Last weekend congressman Barney Frank married his long time partner, James Ready, becoming the first sitting congressman to enter into a same-sex marriage. President Obama now endorses same-sex marriage and this is sure to be an issue in the upcoming election.

The church is very divided on this issue of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. Just last week the Presbyterian Church narrowly rejected a proposal to accept same-sex marriage. The vote was 338-308, practically 50-50. Following the vote, Neal Presa, a pastor at Middlesex Presbyterian

Church in New Jersey who moderated the General Assembly debate, brought the congregation together in prayer. "Some of us weep while some of us rejoice," he said, bowing his head. "We are a divided church."<sup>1</sup>

My sermon title is: *Proceed With Caution*. The area of sexuality is like hiking on a trail in the mountains. There is goodness and beauty that abounds but there are also dangers and pitfalls that lurk. It takes wisdom to keep to the trail and navigate the path. As I have thought about this message I have tried to proceed with caution as well. My wife wonders why I am the one to talk on this subject. Well, Brian is on vacation and I can't let Bernard have all the tough topics. I want to touch on homosexuality, but I want to put this in the larger context of sexuality. My desire is to be biblically clear, thoughtfully balanced, and empathetically compassionate. There will be a time for Q&A again this week after the second service in Fellowship Hall.

Let me begin by stating several truths about sexuality.

**God created us both as spiritual beings and sexual beings.** We have sex. God created us in his image, male and female. (Gen. 1:27) Both spirituality and sexuality go deep to our core. Both are major components of our inner life. Both have major connections to identity, humanness, and the essence of our being. Both spirituality and sexuality are deep mysteries and are associated with our deep longing for union and intimacy. We have both spiritual and sexual desires and often one is confused for the other. This will be very important to our discussion.

**Sexual desire is a powerful, compelling force that is tantalizing, mystifying, and seemingly irresistible.** As we grow up, sexual desires and temptations can pull us into a bewildering, confusing, and intoxicating world before we are fully equipped with enough knowledge and maturity to be wise. We race into exploration of this world with neither map nor GPS. This world is shrouded with hopes and fears, thrills and spills, anticipation and ruin. At best it is a slippery slope. Our lack of wisdom and knowledge is intensified, magnified, and compounded because not only are we spiritual and sexual beings, but also sinful beings. We all have these desires, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. What is important is how we deal with them.

**The world has a very confusing and misleading message regarding sexuality.** The world gives a double message. On the one hand, the world says if it feels good do it, you have

to have sex frequently to be a properly functioning human being, you can't live without it, not having sex is bad, if God gives us the desire then it is okay to act on it. On the other hand, we hear that sex doesn't matter since it is just fun and trivial, and too much sex is bad. The Christian says that neither is sex necessary nor is it merely a leisure activity.

The church also has given very confusing messages. Fear-motivated control has led to the message that sex is dirty, evil, and unclean. Without giving any wisdom regarding God's design, the message has been abstinence, sometimes even in marriage. The church has unfortunately blasted the ways of the world in judgmental tones without the positive teachings of the Bible. These messages have compounded and increased problems of guilt, inhibited open sharing, and not provided thoughtful dialogue. The result is that people who grow up in church often have a negative and unhealthy perspective toward their sexuality. Sometimes the church does more damage than the world. The church should provide teaching that affirms what God affirms and aids people to sort through the mine fields while maintaining a positive perspective.

**God's design is for sexuality to be expressed in the covenant of marriage.** As Bernard said last week, marriage is designed to be between a man and a woman. God created humankind as male and female (Gen. 1:27) and instructed the first man and woman to leave and cleave and become one flesh, implying physical union among other things. God also told them to be fruitful and multiply.

Within the marriage commitment between a man and woman sex is blessed, a gift to be enjoyed. The Song of Songs teaches us that it is appropriate for married couples to have a very healthy, positive attitude towards sex. It is an important part of the marriage relationship and is to be practiced regularly. However, if we look at Jesus and the apostle Paul, we recognize that we do not need sex to have a full life.

**All sex outside of marriage is contrary to God's design.** In other words, sex outside of marriage is sin in the technical sense, meaning that it misses the mark. This pertains to every aspect of sexual immorality, including adultery, pre-marital sex, prostitution, homosexuality, pornography. Here in Colossians, Paul mentions five aspects of sexual sin that believers are to put to death:

**Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. (Colossians 3:5–7 NIV)**

Homosexuality is just one category of sexual immorality, but since it is a much-debated topic these days I will point out that it is mentioned five times in the Bible, twice in the Old Testament and three times in the New Testament. It is included with a long list of sexual practices in Lev. 18 and 20 (18:22; 20:13) that Israel was to avoid. In 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 homosexuality is included in lists of immoral

practices similar to what we find in Colossians 3. Perhaps the most familiar passage is Rom 1. I will read it because it will be important later on.

**They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. (Romans 1:25–27)**

When we read God's limits on sexual practices we need to realize that everyone draws the line somewhere, both the church and the world. For example, we have laws to protect the women, minors, and children. It isn't whether or not we draw a line, but it is a matter of where. When I was a young man, even though I was an unbeliever, I knew the unwritten rules about treating women. The Christian draws a line based on God's word. I know this sounds harsh, but it doesn't help people to say that sexual immorality is okay. The loving thing to do is to give people the truth. Everyone faces a choice whether or not to accept it.

**Understanding God's purposes are critical for proper behavior.** In Leviticus 18-20 God prohibited improper sexual practices so that Israel would not be like the Egyptians and Canaanites.

**You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. (Leviticus 18:3)**

In Colossians 3, Paul instructs believers to put to death the sexually immoral ways in which "they used to walk." This means that the people who had become Christians in Colossae, just like those in Ephesus, Corinth, and elsewhere, had been living in sexual immorality. Their world was just like our world. But now these believers were being instructed that sexual immorality was inconsistent with life in Christ.

The context of Colossians 3 is being raised with Christ and living a resurrection life. We have already taken off the old self and put on the new self. We are currently being transformed into the image of Christ, or as Paul says in chapter 1, in the process of becoming complete in Christ. A fundamental, foundational change has taken place. We are new creations altogether and have a new identity in Christ.

As Christians we are called to be God's sons and daughters and to live differently than the world. This was God's desire for Israel and now for the church. We are being formed into the people we will be forever, living in the presence of God. Therefore, we don't take our beliefs and practices from our culture. We don't try and figure out what we can get away with. We don't define a bunch of rules to control our sexual desires. We don't try and reinterpret the Scriptures. We grasp

the truth that we are a new creation with a new identity headed for an incredible destiny.

In the book of 1 Thessalonians, Paul says:

**It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God;(1 Thessalonians 4:3-5)**

God's will for us is to be sanctified, to be holy as God is holy. In the sexual area, that means to abstain from sexual immorality. As new creations in Christ, God desires us to control our body rather than being a slave to our body. There will be temptations, but we do not have to succumb. More accurately, God wants to bring the body under the control of the Holy Spirit so that our body might be an instrument no longer of wickedness but righteousness. This is what Paul says in Rom. 6:

**Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. (Romans 6:13)**

**There are other very good reasons for us to live pure lives.**

**First**, God wants to protect us. Sex outside of marriage in any form, though thrilling for the moment, leads to ruin. As the Animals sang, the House of the Rising Sun has "been the ruin of many a poor boy. And God I know I'm one." Once you start down that path, it is a steep slope, things get out of control fast and suddenly one is enslaved.

On three occasions the Song of Songs urges to "not arouse or awaken love until it so desires," (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4) meaning to not open the door to sexual love until it is the right time. And the right time is marriage and to open the door prematurely is playing with fire. God gives us a wonderful gift but we are to read the directions before opening and use as designed. We have to proceed with caution.

**Second**, in dating relationships, physical involvement clouds the relationship and inhibits growth. It divides rather than unites and produces guilt. Even engaged couples are to remain pure prior to marriage, focusing on the foundation they are building for a lifetime. Remaining pure prior to marriage has exponential results in marriage.

**Third**, God wants us to learn through the Spirit's power how to control our bodies so that when we get married we can love and serve another without needing physical gratification or seeking to satisfy lustful, selfish desires. The physical relationship in marriage is good and beautiful, but only if we are other-centered not lust-centered. Therefore, abstaining from sexual immorality, while keeping us from danger, prepares us for something good. We have to deal with lust sooner or later. Marriage doesn't eliminate it.

**Finally**, sexual immorality is idolatry. That is what Paul says in verse 5 of chapter 3. When Paul talks about homosexuality in Romans 1 he says that homosexuality, as is the case with all sexual immorality, is an example of what happens when we exchange the glory of God for an image, exchange the truth about God for a lie, when we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator.

The deepest problem with all sexual sin is a disregard for God. In other words sexual immorality is symptomatic of misplaced worship. We seek to fulfill our longing for love and intimacy with someone who is not God, a longing that only God can satisfy. Sexual sin is simply a manifestation of a heart issue, the confusion of sexuality with spirituality. The fact that divorce and sexual immorality permeates the church, including pastors, and that homosexuality divides the church, means that we are not living out our new identity in Christ and are not being formed in Christ. Sexual freedom is not a civil rights issue. It is a God issue. The summons of Scripture is to agree with God's word, humble ourselves, and put God on the throne of our lives.

### Three Questions

It is one thing to talk about theory, but what about reality? And this is where it gets really tough. Most of us fail and fall short; we are not perfect. Most of us have stepped outside of God's design at some point in our life, either as a believer or prior to becoming a believer. We might currently be struggling with sexual desires, either heterosexual or homosexual. We might have friends or family that struggle in this area. We might be having an affair. Let me try and address three questions.

#### Is there hope for forgiveness and healing?

Sure there is. This is why Jesus came. This is why he died. For some there is an encounter at a young age that is sexual in nature, either through our actions or the actions of someone else. This encounter may be minor or very significant. For others these encounters might come further along in life. Whatever our experience, we can be wounded, experience shame, and be filled with guilt. We tuck these encounters into some dark, subterranean compartment buried deep within us. But they leave a mark on our life and often don't surface for many years.

The good news is that God is a great God and he can bring redemption and newness of life when we turn to him. Much of the work of healing and experiencing God's love, grace, and forgiveness as a new creation in Christ is in this area of our sexuality. As the light of Christ shines in these dark areas, the darkness loses its power. The believer is not defined by being a sex addict or an adulterer, but by being in Christ. The gospel message is so much more powerful than the negative messages of judgment, condemnation, and fear.

## Are change and transformation really possible?

The short answer is yes, but more often than not it isn't easy, particularly in the area of sexuality. God calls all of us to change, to be transformed. That is what becoming a new creation is all about. Sometimes dramatic change can happen but more often than not there are areas of weakness and areas of struggle that we have to fight for much of our life.

I remember, when I first became a Christian, praying over and over that God would take away my desire to smoke cigarettes. One day I woke up and the desire was completely gone. Ever since, it has never returned. But there were other things I prayed for that God didn't take away. He wanted me to learn how to battle the flesh and trust in Him.

One thing we often hear regarding homosexuality is that it is a predisposed condition. Most of us are predisposed to certain things in one way or another. We are predisposed to perfectionism, alcoholism, gambling, lying, or depression. Humans are complex packages and we are born with a fallen nature that predisposes all of us to sin. We don't get to choose our genetic codes, parents, or family. We may not have responsibility for our genetic makeup or our predisposed desires, but we do have a responsibility for our actions.

If we have a bad temper, we have to take responsibility or we will hurt people. The sex addict can't just say: this is how God made me. We will all have tendencies and patterns that will be hard to break. We can't blame biology or someone else to justify sinful actions. We cannot eliminate the temptations, but we do not have to act on them. We have to make choices to deal with the sin areas in our life, whatever they may be.

What we need to remember is that, while we are weak, God is strong. God pushes us hard, but he doesn't break us. We don't settle or compromise, but push for improvement, always remembering what we are intended to become. The more we rely on the work of the Holy Spirit and the more authentic, open, and honest is our community, the more likely we are to see transformation taking place in our lives.

## How do we respond to people with same-sex desires?

I ask this question because we are much more comfortable with other sexual sins. What we don't do is to demonize gays, hold up signs saying that God hates gays, or put homosexuality in some special sin category and treat it different from any other sin. We don't compromise our beliefs, but we don't avoid homosexuals as if they have some infectious disease. Many of us know gays who are really, really great and responsible people. I had a fraternity brother in college that struggled in this area. I never knew it until after college. But he was the nicest guy you ever met. What we say is: there but for the grace of God go I. There is no difference between my sin and the sin of homosexuality. I know that I was going deeper and deeper into sin and farther and farther away from God until Jesus reached into my life at the age of 22 and pulled me out of the gutter. In Christ, God has forgiven me and shown his grace and compassion. And if that is what God has done for me, I am called to treat other people with the same love and compassion.

Homosexuality is an issue in our world, but homosexuals are people. Jesus touched tax-collectors, adulteresses, prostitutes, and unclean people, and we are to do the same. We love God and we love our neighbors. We seek the best for others to the extent possible. We build relationships, spend time, share meals, and hear the stories of people's lives. There can be a lot of factors of abuse and mistreatment that contribute to someone's sexual preference. A homosexual's partner may be the first person who ever listened and offered love and acceptance. And of course, that is what we all want – we just want to be loved and accepted. At the heart of all sexual desire is the deep desire we have for intimacy and love. And this is what Jesus offers to us. In Jesus we receive God's love and then we become Jesus to the world.

*May we know deeply the Father's love in our heart. May we know the grace of Christ that covers all our sin and allows us to be a new creation. May the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen us to live a life pleasing to God. Amen.*

1. <http://news.yahoo.com/presbyterian-church-rejects-gay-marriage-proposal-000619323.html>

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