

How Then Shall We Live? : Loving Intimacy
By Jason Huff
Song of Solomon 8:4,6-7, Mark 10:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10. Listen now to God's Word. "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more."

I remember the first time I fell in love. I was in 5th grade and at church camp for the first time. The girl was in 4th grade – a smart, pretty brunette. We were inseparable for most of that week. All was good...until I got to 6th grade and made the mistake one Sunday morning of wearing white socks with black shoes. That was all it took...she never said anything, and she didn't have to. Her look was enough. What was I thinking? But such is life, right?

All of us remember those events in our lives...our first crushes, those times when it seemed our hearts would burst and we didn't even know why. We may be 11 or 111, but we all have a profound desire to know someone else and be known by them deeply. I believe that God puts that desire in all of us. He is the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, and He wants to be in relationship with us. God teaches us what it means to be that close to us through our closest relationships with others...for many of us, He teaches us through the gift of marriage.

But in the last 50 years or so, America has become the land of broken relationships and broken intimacy. Divorce affects 40% of all first marriages and 60-70% of remarriages after divorce. Far more folks cohabitate without the benefit of marriage than ever before, and many young people delay marriage well into their 30s. Culturally, sex has been separated from marriage and treated like a fun thing to do rather than an intimate act between a married man and wife that bonds them together. Children are exposed to sexuality at an early age. Put everything together, and it's no wonder our society is confused about relationships, sexuality, and intimacy.

Sadly, Christians have not looked much better than the world on this one. Statistically, education is a bigger prediction of whether or not a marriage will work than one's faith system. Surveys by the Barna Group have found that the divorce rate only goes down for those who have considerable investment in Christianity and practice their faith on a daily basis in a tangible way. Belief alone doesn't make a difference in how American Christians act.

So what does the Bible have to say about all this? We tend to trust our opinions based on what we've seen and experienced in our lives and the lives around us. But in a culture with so many deep issues surrounding sexuality and intimacy, we can't trust experience to be a ready guide. We need the Bible to be our authority, as we spoke about when we began our series on the morals and ethics of the Bible. We need God to speak into our lives on this issue.

When we look at the very beginning of the Bible, we see something that may surprise us. Genesis 1:27-28 says this, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it." So not only does God make us in His image, He explicitly makes us male and female and blesses us, commanding humanity to "be fruitful and multiply." Sexuality is part of the blessing! And we've sometimes forgotten that in the church. Sometimes sex has been seen as a necessary evil or blessed only as the means of procreation. We've failed to celebrate that intimacy between a husband and a wife is a good thing, a blessed thing. In its proper context of marriage, God wants us to enjoy one another.

It's part of God's design for us to be close to one another in marriage. It's even built into the Hebrew language. When we reach Genesis 4, we see Adam and Eve having children. Various translations deal with it different ways, but in Hebrew, the literal interpretation of Genesis 4:1 is that "Adam knew his wife Eve." The ancient description of marital intimacy was one of understanding, of totally knowing the other person. The concept is that sexuality is the God-designed way for a husband and wife to be in communion together. Of course, there's far more to the relationship than that, but that's the implication – and it was a good thing.

Then we reach the Old Testament Law. As we discussed last week, the Law instructed the Hebrews in every aspect of life, including the realm of personal relationships. There were laws prohibiting sexual relationships with the same sex, with family members and cousins, and with animals, and adultery, prostitution, and promiscuity were outlawed as well. You might wonder if these laws were necessary, yet virtually all of these things were part of religious rites of the Canaanite religions surrounding Israel. In comparison, God made it clear that sexual relationships were intended for a married man and woman. This was seen as a blessing and was celebrated. The book called the Song of Songs celebrates the love of a young married couple, and it leaves no doubt that sexuality as created by God is a good thing.

The one thing permitted in the Old Testament that surprises us today is polygamy. The Law allowed but did not condone it, and very few people practiced it because it required great wealth. There's not a single polygamous relationship in the Old Testament that winds up well; there's tension, there's in-fighting, there's jealousy. It breaks the hearts of Abraham and Jacob; it breaks the family of David; it breaks the soul of Solomon. In the early church, we see polygamy totally abandoned based on the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul.

Jesus brought other changes. Under the Law, divorce was permitted, even though God had said that He hated it. But Jesus told the Pharisees that man should not separate what God has brought together. He even said if a man divorced his wife for anything other than unfaithfulness, he caused her and her new husband to commit adultery. In Judaism, it's far worse to cause someone else to sin than to commit a sin yourself. The responsibility was on his head, not hers.

In the early church, we see the Gentiles – those outside of Israel and the Law – accepted into the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Controversy arose over what Jewish laws they were to keep and what laws were simply ceremonial. In the end, the early church in Acts 15 told the Gentile believers that there were essentially two things they couldn't do. They couldn't participate in the practices of idol worship, and they should avoid all sexual immorality. This prohibition is constantly repeated, and it's among the things Paul continually says separates out the believers from unbelievers. Sexual behavior is a particular marker of God's people.

This is where we start getting nervous, perhaps defensive or even mad. Does God have the right to tell us what goes on in our bedrooms? Society says that it's nobody's business as long as whoever's involved is over a certain age and gives their consent. Society says it doesn't matter as long as two people are "in love." Cohabiting or married or "friends with benefits," straight, gay, doesn't matter. "Live and let live" is strong in our country's DNA. But does God get to decide what is best for us, even in those areas of our lives we would like to consider private? Yes, He does. Nothing is off-limits for Him. God wants the very best for us as His children and tells us what His best is. As we learned a few weeks ago, even deeply personal sins still affect the community; they have ramifications for all of us. The way we act in private affects our public lives and the lives of those around us. It should be important to us.

So what is God calling us to do? I think we need to talk through it, because the church has made some huge mistakes in the past and has cut off a lot of people from the love of Christ unnecessarily. Three thoughts: we need to get our own house in order, we need to rediscover biblical intimacy apart from sexuality, and we need to show those who disagree deep grace.

First, let's get our own house in order. We've all heard the parable where Jesus chastened the Pharisees for pointing out the speck in someone else's eye when they had a plank in their own. Jesus never said not to help your neighbor with his sins, only first to deal with your own so that you can really help. Truth be told, we still have a lot of plank removal to do. The church has been seen as hypocritical on these issues, and to some extent, the complaint is valid. If we who call ourselves Christians do the same things the world does in terms of pornography and adultery and divorce – which is statistically the case – it doesn't add up.

So why does the modern church have a bad track record? There are a few reasons. One is that the church is not a clubhouse for saints but a triage hospital for sinners. We tend to those who are sick of sin and want to be free of it, but recovery takes time. I walk much better these days, but I'm nowhere near running. The church is the same way. Sometimes we're going to make mistakes, even sin, but our goal is to be free from sin through the power of Christ's forgiveness. Just as you can't fault me for not running the 100-meter dash, we can't fault those who are being transformed by Jesus just because God's not finished with them yet.

But there's another reason we have a bad track record, and that's because we have been too lax on our own issues. Everybody in the church has problems with intimacy. Jesus said lust was the same as adultery. Paul calls us to mutual submission in marriage. We fail at all of it in some way. But rather than asking for God's forgiveness and direction, we tend to point fingers, to say, "Well, at least I'm not so-and-so." We justify ourselves by comparing our sins to the sins of others. But if we realize that we are just as guilty in heart and mind if not in actual physical actions, we can turn to God and ask Him to forgive us and to remove the planks in our eyes.

When we clean house, we also need to get rid of any fear or hatred we have. We have at times in the church vilified people who've acted outside of God's standards. We have acted in fear towards them rather than love. But all of us have stepped outside the boundaries of God's perfect will; none of us measures up, but God still shows us love. God never said to hate the person who lives outside the boundaries of marriage or those who are attracted to the same sex. We must hold in tension the fact that God absolutely forbids sexual sin while He still cares for those who are far from Him. Cleaning our house means that we have no animosity towards anybody, that we genuinely believe that God can save anyone, and that true love drives out fear.

Second, we need to reclaim biblical intimacy apart from sexuality. In recent years, progressive scholars have tried to make cases for sexual relationships in the Bible between major figures such as King David and Saul's son Jonathan or Jesus and Mary Magdalene. That has less to do with the Bible and more to do with certain circles trying desperately to find support for their beliefs. But what they have tried to do, though repugnant, actually points us to the biblical truth that deep, intimate relationships do not have to be physical.

We have portraits of many close friendships in the Bible. Proverbs 18:24 says "a man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." This plays out in many stories we've come to know. We have the story of Ruth and Naomi, where a Moabite woman risks her life and rejects her own culture to stay with her mother-in-law when their husbands die. Jonathan rejects the evil he sees in his father Saul and joins David even though he could make a claim on the throne of Israel. In the New Testament, we see Jesus draw close to three of His disciples – Peter, James, and John. And in this morning's final passage, Paul encourages brotherly love, saying, "Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more."

This is something our culture needs. We need to restore the value of honest, deep, true friendship. Because the truth is that despite what our culture says, sexuality is not the be-all end-all of who we are. No matter who you are, single or married, widowed, divorced, no matter who you're attracted to, you need deep commitments, deep friends you can trust, people who have your back, people you can share your deepest fears and hurts and dreams with in safety, knowing they love you unconditionally. And we still need those friends whether or not we're in a romantic relationship. The truth is, some of us may not be in one again, but it isn't a curse. Paul writes that singleness allows the single person to be dedicated to the Lord's will. We need to help people outside the church see that there is another way, a way where we can be a profound part of one another's lives in a way that is pure and holy, whether we're single or married. When we grasp this, we can grow close to one another without bending to the world's ways.

That leads me to our final point: we need to show those who disagree with Scripture deep grace. I was told a true story about a hairdresser who had moved in with her boyfriend. A sweet but self-righteous Christian came in to get a cut. The conversation between the two of them went really well until the fact that the hairdresser was living with her boyfriend came up. “Well, you’re just going to hell then,” the Christian said in all seriousness. The hairdresser replied, “Well, then, I guess I’ll see you there.” I don’t know how the rest of the conversation went, but apparently she was a really good hairdresser, because the Christian kept coming back!

In comparison, we need to show overwhelming grace to those who see things differently. This message was radical in the Roman Empire. All kinds of sexual behaviors were common. Yet the church didn’t grow by pronouncing judgment. It proclaimed the simple reality of sin and the promise of Jesus’ love and forgiveness, announcing the salvation from sin He purchased on the cross and the promise of a new and transformed life He offered to all who trusted in Him. It was never about getting your life in order and then seeking Christ; it was always about seeking Christ first, who would then order your life according to God’s desires for you.

The same is true now. We can’t expect that those who live without Jesus in their lives will follow Jesus’ commands. Our first step then is not condemnation but grace. We need to show love, compassion, kindness. If we are to convince anyone that the gospel is true and that the ethics of Scripture are correct, it must be through our transformed lives. Our concern about someone else’s relationship decisions shouldn’t be based primarily out of their “following the rules,” but out of genuine compassion for their situation and the desire for them to truly know Jesus Christ in all His fullness. It’s through our love that those outside the body of Christ will start to want to know Him and to experience the goodness of God’s work in their lives. It’s only then that what we say about ethics, particularly sexual ethics, will make a difference.

We aren’t talking about easy decisions here. Intimate relationships are very personal. For someone to move out rather than to keep cohabitating, to give marriage one more try rather than starting divorce proceedings, for someone attracted to members of the same sex to commit to celibacy – these things are so very hard. They won’t come naturally and make take a long time. It may take a lot of discussions through the Bible and what it says. It may take late-night phone calls and shoulders to cry on and a willingness to be there for them. And through all of that, we need to be there for them, not to judge but to be witnesses for Christ on a better path.

God has a path for us...a path of love and grace and mercy, a path where we as Christians can be closer than the closest friends because we know Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is hard to reject the world’s ways when they are all around us...but God does know best. Let us trust ourselves to His will, even in these deeply personal areas of our lives, and He will show Himself faithful to provide us with the true intimacy we really need.