

John Piper: Sex Belongs to Christians

In 1 Timothy 4:1-5, Paul confronts certain ascetic false teachers who believed that sex in marriage and eating foods freely were at best for second-class Christianity. Paul called these false teachings demonic.

First, the false teaching, as Paul summarizes it in verses 1-2 and the first part of verse 3:

“Now the Spirit clearly says that in the last times some will depart from the faith and pay attention to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their consciences seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods.”

Then, Paul’s response, starting in the middle of verse 3:

“... which God has created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and not to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.”

For those who know the truth of the gospel and who revel in the word of God concerning the all-satisfying glory of God, and who pray (Hallowed be your name!) and dedicate everything to God, the sex of marriage and the pleasures of food are made holy—that is, they are set apart from the sinful use of the world and made pure and precious and beautiful by participation in the goodness of God.

Unembarrassed by the Bible

We are not supposed to be embarrassed by the forthright sensuality of sexual love in marriage as the Bible portrays it—sometimes graphically.

“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. Let her be as the loving deer and pleasant doe; let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. Why should you, my son, be intoxicated by an immoral woman, and embrace the bosom of a seductress? For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He ponders all his goings” (Prov. 5:18-21).

It is no shame that “a man’s ways are before the Lord” as her breasts fill him at all times with delight. This is why God made her that way and him that way. In fact, that this delight in her is “before” the Lord—in the presence of the Lord—points to the truth that all our joy in what God has made is meant to be a delight in God. There is something of His glory in all the glories of the world.

We are not meant to revel in His creation instead of Him or more than in Him but because of Him, and because there is something of Him in all that is good and beautiful. The heavens are telling the glory of God. We are to see it. And worship him. So it is with the breasts of our wives. The breasts are telling the glory of God, the goodness of God, the beauty of God and more. We are to see it. And worship Him.

Let the Song Stun You

The Song of Solomon is in the Bible, among other reasons, to make sure that we take seriously the exquisite physical pleasures between a bride and a groom as a picture of Christ and his church. The point is not that we nullify the physical pleasures of this Song by seeing it as a full-color image

of Ephesians 5:22–33. The point is that we let the Song stun us that God would design such a relationship between man and woman – from the beginning – as the image of the covenant-keeping pleasures between Christ and his church.

“Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you” (Song 4:5–7).

“Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses.

“How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.

“It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth” (Song 7:3–10).

This is part of what Paul had in mind in 1 Timothy 4:3–5, when he said, “God created [food and sex] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ... It is made holy by the Word of God and prayer.” Sex is for “those who believe and know the truth.”

The Pleasures of Sex Are for

Christians

We might lose sight of this, since Hollywood has ripped the curtains off the sacred marriage bed and turned a luxuriant, holy pleasure into a cheap spectator sport. We might be tempted to think that, since sex is so sinfully misused and is so universally undermining to the all-satisfying beauty of Christ's holiness, maybe we Christians should have nothing to do with it.

Paul says the opposite. It is the world that has stolen what belongs to believers. Sex belongs to Christians. Because sex belongs to God. "God created it to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." If it is used by those who do not believe and know the truth, it is prostituted. They have exchanged the glory of God for images. They have torn sex from its God-appointed place in the orbit of marriage. But they do not know what they are doing. And the price they will pay in this life and the next is incalculable.

The pleasures of sex are meant for believers. They are designed for their greatest expression by the children of God. He saves His richest gifts for his children. And as we enjoy His gift of sex, we say, by our covenant faithfulness to our spouse, that God is greater than sex. And the pleasures of sex are themselves an overflow of God's own goodness. This pleasure is less than what we will know fully in Him at His right hand. And in it, we taste something of His very exquisiteness.

When the preciousness and pleasures of Christ are supreme, all dimensions of sex, including experiencing pleasure, seeking pleasure, giving pleasure, and abstinence from pleasure, will all find their biblical and Christ-exalting expression.

Everything God made is good. Everything is for the sake of worship and love. And this is true both in the feasting and

the fasting. In the sexual union and in abstinence. Sex is made for the glory of Christ – for the Christ-exalting glory of covenant-keeping faithfulness in marriage, and for the glory of Christ-exalting chastity in singleness. It is always good. Sex is always an occasion to show that the Giver of sex is better than sex. {eoa}

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