

What God Really Thinks About Sex Outside Marriage

I believe God is good, and the Bible is His revelation of Himself to us. Therefore, it too must be good. And if the Bible is good in general, it flows then that it is good for God's image bearers, male and female. I've felt compelled (there is no better word for it) to study the passages that seem hardest for women.

After studying Dinah, I went on to Deuteronomy 22, which seems to be the later laws addressing Dinah's situation so that the horrible fiasco that happened after her rape would not be repeated. The bottom line of the law is that the man who violates a woman has to restore her honor and dignity in her culture. He has to pay a dowry worthy of what he took indiscriminately.

He must marry her, and He cannot divorce her. Civilization at this point wasn't very civilized. For a culture apart from the law in which women had zero rights (see Dinah's story in Genesis 34), this was the first step toward giving her rights.

But I was struck by a bigger issue while studying this passage. Deuteronomy 22 has back to back laws on sex outside of marriage (punishable by stoning) and adultery (also punishable by stoning). The punishment is extremely harsh. I don't like the harshness of the penalty. It makes me extremely uncomfortable, especially if I'm asking the question if the Bible is good for women. But the punishment did cause me to sit back and reflect.

When God gives laws to His children on the topic of sexuality, what ethic is He setting up? How should people set apart to reflect a Holy God treat sex?

We are His image bearers, and the laws He projected onto His

children surely must reflect something about Himself. God sets up the sexual ethic He values, which is total fidelity between partners. It's not partial fidelity. It's not generally valuing monogamy.

God values complete faithfulness from beginning to end in marriage. Adultery between a married man and woman as well as fornication between two who were unmarried but betrothed to another person were punishable by death.

Unlike our modern culture in which the breaking of marriage vows has less stigma attached than ever before, betrothal between a man and woman in Israel reflected a deep commitment, not just between individuals, but between their families as well. In the harsh world they lived in, allies you could trust as family were crucial to flourishing life. Fidelity in those relationships were the fabric on which that society rose or fell.

God expresses in Deuteronomy 22 that He is serious about His children's fidelity to each other because they are image bearers of Him, and He is serious about His fidelity to His people.

Hosea 2:19-20 say, "I will take you for My wife forever. I will take you for My wife in righteousness and in justice, in mercy and in compassion. I will take you for My wife in faithfulness, and you will know the LORD."

God wanted betrothal to mean something serious to His children. Why? Because commitment is very serious to Him, and they were His image bearers. But the punishment seems incredibly harsh. The law seems harsh ... especially to law breakers.

This is where Jesus breaks into the narrative and gives us a better way. From Matthew 5:17, we know in general that Jesus fulfilled (not abolished) the Law. We also know from Jesus'

discussion with His disciples on the Emmaus Road in Luke 24 that the Law of Moses points to Him.

There is an interesting moment, a practical picture of what Jesus brings to our understanding of the law, in John 8 when the woman caught in adultery is thrown at Jesus' feet just before she is to be stoned to death for her part in disobeying the laws of Deuteronomy 22. I find it interesting in one sense because the man was not also brought to be stoned as the law commanded. But it was a sexist culture, and that really isn't that surprising. While the Law did not give greater penalty to the woman, the depravity in their culture perverted it anyway.

The life-giving point of this interaction between Jesus and the woman is that the only one to ever perfectly keep the Law also offered grace to this one who had broken it. But note that He doesn't do so in a way that undermines the value of the Law on fidelity in marriage! He says to her, "Go, and sin no more."

Jesus affirms that our God is a loyal, covenant-keeping God. He is faithful to His people that He created in His likeness, and we are to be faithful in our commitments as well. We will flourish when we are a covenant-keeping people, because that is what we were created to be.

As I said before, the law seems harsh ... for lawbreakers. But if we're honest with ourselves, it's not just the penalty of the law that we rebel against. Some think Jesus' ethic, "Go and sin no more," is as archaic as Deuteronomy 22.

Jesus affirms God's sexual ethic, which is complete fidelity. I've watched many families broken apart when faithfulness to the one with whom you made lifelong vows becomes less important than whatever struggle surrounds you. I've sat with many loved ones (children and spouses) who were devastated when one spouse gives up on their commitment. But the spouse who left rarely ever flourishes after walking away. Whatever

thing they valued over faithfulness when they walked away from their commitments was an empty promise.

I believe the Bible is good for women (and men). When Jesus tells the woman caught in adultery that her accusers have left, He offers her the grace that only He can offer. What sweet relief that the penalty is paid, and our accusers are silenced. But when Jesus then says, "Go and sin no more," He is reminding all of us that this Law on faithfulness reflects the character of our God, and we as His image bearers will not flourish apart from it. God is a God of complete fidelity, and He calls us to the same.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You Are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*