

Sexual Relations in Marriage

by John Piper

Faith is the key to overcoming sin, finding contentment, and experiencing fulfilling sexual relations in marriage.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Marital Faithfulness", "Sexual Purity"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of maintaining pure and faithful sexual relations in marriage, emphasizing the connection between faith, sin, and God's promises. He highlights the significance of contentment in marriage, rooted in faith in God's unfailing promises, as the antidote to the love of money and other sins. Piper explains how faith influences sexual desire, the guilt of past sins, and the use of sex as a means of grace and protection against Satan in marriage.

Transcript

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Hebrews 13:4-5

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake, you!'

It is interesting that the writer puts money and the marriage bed side by side. I wonder if that is a coincidence since most counselors today would put money and sexual relations near the top of their lists of trouble spots in marriage. Agreement in money matters and harmony in the marriage bed don't seem to come easily. Our focus this morning is going to be on sexual relations in marriage, not on money.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." That is, let sexual relations in marriage be kept pure, clean, free from blemish. All these terms like "undefiled," "pure," "clean," "without blemish" are simply visual or tangible metaphors for a moral demand, namely, don't sin in your sexual relations in marriage. But what is sin? Sin is any act or attitude that displeases God. But I find it very helpful to focus on the essential nature of sin as it relates to the great positive force in Christian life, namely, faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, "without faith it is impossible to please God." This implies two things

1) Since sin is anything that displeases God and since without faith you can't please God, therefore, if you don't have faith everything you do is sin, because everything you do displeases God.

2) This suggests very strongly that there must be a very close, perhaps causal, connection between the absence of faith and sin. And Romans 14:23 confirms such a connection. It says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." In other words, the essential nature of those actions and attitudes which we call sin is that they are not prompted or motivated by a heart of faith. The thing that makes an attitude or act displeasing to God is that it does not grow from faith in God. Sin is evil precisely in its failure to be the product of faith.

You may recall I preached a sermon on this last summer. Some of you raised some really good questions after that message that made me realize the need to clarify how it is that our actions come "from faith" or not from faith. Let me try to do this briefly here. First of all, what is this faith that produces attitudes and actions which aren't sin? Hebrews 11:1 says "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, faith is the confidence we feel in the good things that God has promised to do for us tomorrow and to eternity. We can't see them, but faith has the assurance that the promises in which we hope will come true. Hebrews 11:6, mentioned earlier, says,

Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

In other words, the faith which pleases God is our coming to Him with confidence that, perhaps contrary to all appearances, He will reward us with all the good things He has promised.

Now, how does such faith produce attitudes and acts which are not sin? Go back with me to Hebrews 13:5. "Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have." The love of money is a desire that displeases God; it is sin. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, "The love of money is the root of all evils." Now the antidote to this sinful love and all the evils that grow from it is contentment: "Be content with what you have." But the writer doesn't leave us there by ourselves to somehow crank up contentment. But he goes on to give a basis for contentment: "For God has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you.'" The basis for contentment is the promise of God's unfailing help and fellowship. The promise is taken from Deuteronomy 31:6,

Be strong and of good courage; do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you; He will not fail you or forsake you.

So the writer to the Hebrews is saying this: God has made such comforting, reassuring, hope-inspiring promises in His word that, if we have faith in these promises, we will be content. And contentment is the antidote to the love of money which is the root of all sorts of evils.

Now, we can see more clearly how it is that an action or attitude comes "from faith" or not. If we do not have faith, if we do not trust the promise of God, "I will never fail you nor forsake you," then we will feel anxious and insecure, and the deceptive power of money to buy security and peace will be so attractive that it will start to produce other evils in us. We will be inclined to steal, or lie on our income tax returns, or rationalize why we shouldn't be giving a tithe to the church, or conveniently forget about a debt we owe a friend, or refuse to spend any money to make our rental property more livable, etc., etc. The evils that come from the love of money are endless. And the reason these evils are sin is that they do not come from faith. If we have faith in the promise, "I will never fail you nor forsake you," then we will be free from the anxiety and insecurity that craves more money and we will have victory over the sins that result from the love of money. If you are content in Christ, resting in the promise of God always to help you and stay beside you, then the compulsion to steal and lie on your tax return, and skimp on your giving and neglect your debts, and oppress poor renters will be gone. Instead there will be an honest day's work, complete

accuracy on the tax return, generosity to the church up to and beyond the Old Testament tithe, faithfulness in retiring debts and doing unto your renters as you would have them do to you. And all this new behavior will not be sin but righteousness because it comes from faith in the hope-giving promise of God.

Now, just in case you may have lost the connection between all this and sexual relations in marriage, let's go back and pick up the thread. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled." That means, "Let the marriage bed be without sin; do not sin in your sexual relations." Now we have seen that sin is whatever is not from faith. Sin is what you feel and think and do when you are not taking God at His word and resting in His promises. So the command of Hebrews 13:4 can be stated like this: Let your sexual relations be free from any act or attitude that does not come from faith in God's word. Or to put it positively, Have those attitudes and do those acts in your marital sexual relations which grow out of the contentment that comes from confidence in God's promises.

But now immediately a problem emerges. Someone may ask, "If I am content through faith in God's promises why should I even seek sexual gratification at all?" That is a good question. And the first answer to it is, 'Maybe you shouldn't seek any sexual gratification; maybe you should stay single.' This is what Paul was urging in 1 Corinthians 7:6 and 7. He says, By no means am I commanding everyone to get married and gratify sexual desires. All I'm saying is that sexual desire is O.K. and if a person has a compelling desire, marriage is the place to satisfy it. But (verse 7), "I wish that all were (single) as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." This is really a remarkable verse. Paul could wish that everyone were single like him: free from the entanglements of family life and from the strong urge to be married. But he knows that's not God's will: "Each has his own gift from God." God wills some people to be married and some to be single. He does not endow everyone like Paul; some He endows like Peter, who took his wife with him on his missionary travels (1 Corinthians 9:5). So the first answer to the question, "If I have contentment through faith in God's promises why should I seek sexual gratification?" is, "Perhaps you shouldn't. God may want you single."

But there is a second answer to this question, namely, the contentment that God's promises give does not mean the end of all desires, especially bodily desires. Even Jesus, whose faith was perfect, got hungry and desired food and got tired and desired rest. Sexual appetite is in this same category. The contentment of faith does not take it away any more than it takes away hunger and weariness. What then does contentment mean in relation to ongoing sexual desire? I think it means two things. 1) If gratification of that desire is denied through singleness then that denial will be compensated for by an abundant portion of God's help and fellowship through faith. In Philippians 4:11-13 Paul said,

Not that I complain of want, for I have learned in whatever state I am to be content ... I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

If Paul could learn to be content in hunger, then we can learn to be content if God chooses not to give us sexual gratification.

2) The other thing contentment means in relation to ongoing sexual desire is this: if gratification is not denied us but offered to us in marriage we will seek it and enjoy it only in ways that reflect our faith. To put it another way, while the contentment of faith does not put an end to our hunger, weariness, or sexual appetite, it does transform the way we go about satisfying those desires. Faith doesn't stop us from eating but it stops gluttony; it doesn't stop sleep but it keeps us from being a sluggard. It doesn't stop sexual

appetite but ... But what? That's what we want to spend the rest of our time trying to answer, though time only allows a very partial answer.

First of all, when the ear of faith hears the word from 1 Timothy 4:4 that

everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer --

when the ear of faith hears that, it believes. And so faith honors the body and its appetites as God's good gifts. Faith will not allow a married couple to lie in bed and say to themselves, "What we are doing is dirty; it's what they do in the pornographic movies." Instead, faith says, "God created this act and it is good and it is 'for those who believe and know the truth' (1 Timothy 4:3)." It is the world which has plundered God's gifts and corrupted them by misuse. But they belong rightfully to the children of God and so faith will not let us view them as worldly or defiled. "Let the marriage bed be held in honor by all and the marriage bed be undefiled."

Secondly, faith increases the joy of sexual relations in marriage because it frees from the guilt of the past. I didn't say much about this last week because I had in view mainly single people who still had in front of them the chance to go the way of purity and freedom or the way of unchastity and bondage. What would you say to a person about to commit a sexual sin because he was confident God would forgive him? I would say, (and have said to such a person): "If you believe that what you are about to do is sin, and you decide to do it because God has promised to forgive sin, then probably your decision will be evidence that you are not born again, you are not a Christian but are still 'in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:23).'" "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Paul asks in Romans 6:1,2 and answers, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Those who are born of God and love Jesus cannot walk up to Jesus as He hangs on the cross and say, "I know that you are suffering now for my sins and that it is your dying wish that I sin no more. But there's this one need that I have that I can only satisfy by sinning and so I hope you'll understand as I thrust this other sword into your side. There now. I sure am glad that every time I do that your blood forgives me." Those who have been born of God cannot think like that. So all I have to say to a person before he chooses to commit sin is, "Advance at your own peril. There may be no forgiveness because you may be so decisively hardened by crucifying Christ afresh (Hebrews 6:6) that you will not be able to find genuine repentance anymore (Hebrews 12:16, 17).

That was the situation last week. But now I have in view mainly us who are married but have to look back on an act of fornication or adultery, or incest, or a homosexual fling, or years of habitual masturbation, or preoccupation with pornography, or promiscuous petting or divorce. And what I have to say to us is this: If it genuinely lies within you, by the grace of God, to throw yourself on the mercy of God for forgiveness, then He will free you from the guilt of the past. "There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). "To the one who does not work but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin" (Psalm 32:1,2). "He does not deal with us according to our sins nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love towards those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:10-12). "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). There is no need for a child of God to carry any guilt into the marriage bed. But that takes a solid faith because Satan loves to make us feel unforgiven for the rottenness of our former life. "Resist him, firm in

your faith" (1 Peter 5:9). "Quench his flaming darts with the shield of faith" (Ephesians 6:16)--faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself for you (Galatians 2:20), who for your sake was made to be sin that you might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21), who bore your sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). Lay hold on your forgiveness and take it with you to the marriage bed. Christ died for your sin that in Him you might have guilt-free sexual relations in marriage.

Now let me clarify something I said last week, namely, that even though the guilt of our sin can be washed away, some of the scars remain. I can imagine a couple just before their engagement sitting together in a park; he turns to her and says, "There is something that I've got to say. Two years ago I had sexual relations with another girl. I was away from the Lord and it was just one night. I've wept over that one night many times. I believe God has forgiven me and I hope you can." In the weeks that follow, not without tears, she forgives him, and they marry. And on their first honeymoon night they lie together and as he looks at her the tears well up in her eyes and he says, "What's the matter?" And she says, "I just can't help but think of that other girl, that she lay right here where I am." And years later, when the novelty of his wife's body has worn off, he finds himself inadvertently drifting back in his imagination to the thrill of that one night fling. That's what I mean by scars. And all of us have such scars. All of us have committed sins which, though forgiven, make our present life more problematic than if we hadn't committed them.

But I do not want to give the impression that Christ is powerless against such scars. He may not remove all the problems that these scars cause us but He has promised to work even in all these problem for our good if we love Him and are called according to His purpose. Take our imaginary couple I just referred to. I prefer to think that there was a happy ending. They came eventually to a satisfying sexual relationship because they worked at it openly in constant prayer and reliance on the grace of God. They talked about all their feelings. They kept nothing bottled up. They trusted each other and helped each other and the found their way to peace and sexual harmony, and above all, new dimensions of God's grace. Christ died not only that in Him we might have guilt-free sexual relations in marriage, but also that He might then, even through our scars, convey to us some spiritual good.

The third thing now that we can say about faith and sexual relations in marriage is that faith uses sex against Satan. Look at 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.

In Ephesians 6:16 Paul says we should ward off Satan with the shield of faith.

Here he says to married people, "Ward off Satan with sufficient sexual intercourse. Don't abstain too long, but come together soon so that Satan will gain no foothold." Well, which is it? Do we guard ourselves from Satan with the shield of faith or the shield of sex? The answer for married people is that faith makes use of sexual intercourse as a means of grace. For the people God leads into marriage sexual relations are a God-ordained means of overcoming temptation to sin (the sin of adultery, the sin of sexual fantasizing, the sin of pornographic reading, etc.). Faith humbly accepts such gifts and offers thanks.

Now notice something else in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. This is very important. In verse four Paul says that the man and the woman have rights over each other's body. When the two become one flesh their bodies are

at each other's disposal. Each has the right to lay claim to the other's body for sexual gratification. But what we really need to see is what Paul commands in verses 3 and 5 in view of these mutual rights. He does not say, "Therefore stake your claim! Take your rights!" He says, "Husband, give her her rights! Wife, give him his rights!" (v3). And in verse four, "Do not refuse one another." In other words, he does not encourage the husband or wife who wants sexual gratification to seize it without concern for the other's needs. Instead he urges both husband and wife to always be ready to give their body when the other wants it.

I infer from this and from Jesus' teaching in general that happy and fulfilling sexual relations in marriage depend on each partner aiming to give satisfaction to the other. If it is the joy of each to make the other happy, a hundred problems will be solved.

Husbands, if it is your joy to bring her satisfaction you will be sensitive to what she needs and wants. You will learn that the preparation for satisfactory sexual intercourse at 10 p.m. begins with tender words at 7 a.m. and continues through the day as kindness and respect. And when the time comes you will not come on like a Sherman tank but know her pace and bring her skillfully along. Unless she gives you the signal, you will say, "Her climax, not mine, is the goal." And you will find in the long run that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Wives, it is not always the case, but often, that your husband wants sexual relations more often than you do. Martin Luther said he found twice a week to be ample protection from the tempter. I don't know if Katie was up for it every time or not. But if you're not, give it anyway. I do not say to you husbands, "Take it anyway." In fact, for her sake you may go without. The goal is to outdo one another in giving what the other wants. Both of you, make it your aim to satisfy each other as fully as possible.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." That is, do not sin in your sexual relations. And that means, have only those attitudes and do only those acts which come from faith in God's hope-giving promises. We should all regularly ask ourselves: "Does what I am feeling or doing have its roots in the contentment of faith or in the anxious insecurity of unbelief?" That will give you help in hundreds of little and big ethical decisions.

I've simply tried to show the impact of faith on three aspects of sexual relations in marriage. First, faith believes God when He says that sexual relations in marriage are good and clean and should be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. Second, faith increases the joy of sexual relations in marriage because it frees from the guilt of the past. Faith believes the promise that Christ died for all our sins that in Him we might have guilt-free sexual relations in marriage. And finally, faith wields the weapon of sexual intercourse against Satan. A married couple gives a severe blow to the head of that ancient serpent when they aim to give as much sexual satisfaction to each other as possible. It makes me just want to praise the Lord when I think that on top of all the joy that the sexual side of marriage brings, it also proves to be a fearsome weapon against our ancient foe.

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