

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Building Faith at Home Series

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Celebrating God's Glorious Design for Sex

Colossians 1, Genesis 1-2, Song of Solomon 7, Ephesians 5

Introduction:

A. Mature content warning and prayer

If you got here after the announcements, we're starting our 2014 Building Faith at Home series today. And the first two weeks of the series will frankly cover the topic of sex. Parents, we trust your discretion as to whether or not you have your children in the worship service today. If you'd like to take them to Sunday School at this time, our volunteers would love to greet your kids in Jesus' name. The Kindergarten and younger classrooms are down this hall; the elementary classes are outside, up the small flight of stairs, and then in the first door.

Let's pray for God's guidance and blessing this morning...

B. The importance of building faith at home

Now, building faith at home is one of our church's core values. We value healthy, loving, Jesus-centered homes and the faith that is nurtured there. God's Word, in places like Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78, and Ephesians 5-6, tells us that home is an important place for spiritual growth. And not only that, think about how much more time you spend at home and with those in your home than you do at church. One family ministry expert estimates that on average, kids from Christian homes spend 3,000 hours a year with their parents, and only 40 hours a year at church.¹ Home is important. And I want everyone in our church, kids or no kids, married or single, living with others or alone, to enjoy a Jesus-centered home.

C. Why talk about sex?

And as you know, the choices we and others make sexually can make a profound impact in our homes. And some of those choices are greatly damaging the homes of our churches and country. In seminary I heard a Christian counselor share that the Center for Disease Control estimates that in the US 1 out of 4 women and 1 out of 8 men have experienced some form of sexual abuse, and that 1 out of 10 women have experienced forced sex. Studies done by the Kinsey Institute estimate that the average male has sex before his 17th birthday, and the average

¹ Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*, 85.

female at age 17.² The latest stats I could find estimate the US spends 13 billion dollars a year on pornography, which as one pastor points out, was more than the revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC from the same year, combined. It is estimated that 70% of men ages 18-34 visit a porn site in a typical month, that 1 in 6 women struggles with a porn addiction, and that 90% of US kids ages 8-16 have seen some form of pornography.³

We could go on, discussing disturbing stats regarding adultery and divorce, abortion, STDs, sex-trafficking, body image struggles, and more, but I think it's clear we need to address the topic of sex, for the sake of ourselves, our precious sons and daughters, the marriages and future marriages in this room, our community, and the glory of God. Now, I know that talking about sex can bring up all sorts of uncomfortable feelings, both for you and me. Two sermons on the subject will not solve all of the sexual challenges represented in our homes.

But I hope and pray that these two weeks help remind us about the importance of being a place where we invite God's Spirit and God's people to help us deal with our sexual hurts and struggles. I love you guys, have been praying for you, and invite you to join with me in praying for our church family. Perhaps God will start a work in us that leads to embracing His healing and truth about sex. That people will let go of shame, that parents will have life-giving conversations with their kids, that marriages will be saved and enriched, and that we'll make godly choices that lead to experiencing more life in Jesus.

Now next week we'll address some forms of sexual sin and dealing with those struggles. However, I don't think that's the best place to start. Today we're going to consider God's glorious design for sex. And for those who are parents, I encourage you to think not only about how these truths apply to you, but also how you can pass them on to your children. There's a time and place to lovingly warn our children about the consequences of sexual sin. But parents, let's not send the message that sex is ugly, dirty, and gross, so save it for the one you love. Let's instead winsomely share with our kids why God's glorious design for sex is worth celebrating. And parents, I hope you'll join us next Sunday evening here at 5pm, when we'll watch a video of experienced Christian counselors discussing the topic of raising kids sexually.

Now, before we consider God's glorious design, let me confess a wrong attitude. When I was a teen, I had trusted in Jesus and believed the Bible was true. However, despite my beliefs, I

² http://www.nbcnews.com/id/37853719/ns/health-sexual_health/t/surprising-sex-statistics/#.Uv5Aqs6diVQ

³ From the *Real Marriage* Research Brief.

honestly viewed God's commands in the area of sex as burdensome restrictions and out of touch with our times. So, in case you or anyone you know shares that perspective, let's first consider two essential truths that will free us to celebrate God's design for sex. First, we need both awe and love for Jesus.

I. Foundations that free us to celebrate God's Glorious Design

A. Awe and love for Jesus (Col 1:16-20)

Let's see why Jesus is so worthy of our awe and love as we turn to Colossians chapter 1, Colossians chapter 1. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 16. "For in him [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

Look at verses 16 and 17. Here we see that Jesus created everything and holds it all together. Every atom, every planet, every galaxy. Now imagine Jesus gave you the ability to travel at the speed of light, which is 186,000 miles *per second*. And Jesus invited you to travel at the speed of light to the edge of the known universe. Do you know how long it would take to get there? 14 billion years. Then imagine, after your 14 billion years of light speed travel, you turn around and look over the known universe. Scientists estimate you would see at least 100 billion galaxies, each one of those galaxies having billions of stars in it.⁴

Imagine, there at the edge of this inconceivably vast universe, Jesus reveals His full glory to you. You see all of the awe-inspiring power and wisdom of the One who is able to effortlessly create and sustain this unimaginably vast universe. Now can you imagine, in the presence of such a power, explaining why you brushed Him aside so that your feelings and pop culture could guide your sexual views and behavior?

Having that awe Jesus deserves can help us follow His design for sex. However, if we only focus on Jesus' overwhelming power and wisdom, it could lead to a fear-based obedience and to a fearful guilt when we fall short.

⁴ These figures came from the DVD edition of *The Privileged Planet*.

However, when we see how awe-inspiring Jesus is *and* how incredibly He loves and serves us, that'll transform our hearts. Look at verse 20. Here we see that God will reconcile all things through Jesus' death on the cross. As verse 21 goes on to explain, our evil behavior has alienated us from God. But instead of giving us a punishment fit for treason, Jesus came on a rescue mission for us. He deeply humbled Himself by taking on human flesh and living a perfect, sin-free life on our behalf. Then Jesus, who holds all things together, chose to hold the nails and wood of the cross together, taking the punishment for all our sins so that He could welcome us home. And as verse 20 says, we hopefully anticipate that time when Jesus reconciles all things. Think of it, no more struggle, or pain, or death, and an unimaginably wonderful level of acceptance, intimacy, and love with Jesus and His people.

Now, as God's Spirit, Word, and people help us see the majesty of Jesus *and* His incredible love for us, it will free us to value Jesus more than sex and to trust His ways. My view as a teen that God's commands were restrictive burdens could not be further from the truth. A Savior who loves us enough to die for us is a Savior who loves us enough to give us commands that are for our good, that lead us into life. Everything God calls us to is not easy, but it is all for our flourishing. Listen to how Romans 8:32 describes God's favor towards us, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Only when you have this awe and love for Jesus are you ready to celebrate God's design for sex.

B. Freedom comes from liberating restrictions

A second truth that will help us celebrate God's design for sex is to understand the nature of freedom. I used to think that freedom was having no restrictions. However, that's just not how things work. My care group is discussing *The Reason for God*, a book that makes this point well. It notes that over the long run, real freedom is not the absence of restrictions. Rather, real freedom comes from finding the right restrictions, those that fit our nature and liberate us.

Think about our worship leader, Jacob. He had aptitude for the guitar, and he has chosen to practice the guitar for years. Now not all of that practice has been fun, and he's missed out on other opportunities as he's practiced. However, that limitation of practice released a new type of freedom, being able to enjoy playing the guitar well, leading us in worship, and even being able to use his skills to woo Megan to become his wife. Jacob's freedom came from embracing the liberating restriction of practice.

Now think about the food we eat. At least for me, real freedom would not come from eating everything I want all the time. That “freedom” would lead to a breakdown of health and early death. In the long run, I’ll experience freedom only if I refrain from indulging some of my food cravings. To take the analogy a step further, imagine I told you everyone should create their own “truth” about food. And I believe what’s healthy for me is to eat lots of pizza, burgers, and milkshakes every single day. Now we all realize that my “truth” will not lead to true freedom, because it violates the design of my body. Similarly, God designed our sexuality in a certain way, and when we violate that design, it will not lead to real freedom. For our sexuality to flourish, we must honor God design.

If you were to lovingly tell your pet fish, “Hey, don’t jump out of your tank” you’re not some kill-joy dictator trying to keep your fish from having fun on land. Rather, you realize that your fish is designed for water, and he’s only truly free if he stays in the water.

Now, if there’s anyone who knows what your sexuality is designed for, it’s the Creator. And if there’s anyone you can trust has your best interests at heart, it is our loving Savior. After all, He lost His freedom on the cross so that you can enjoy freedom in Him forever. So, instead of listening to our feelings or culture, how about we listen to the One who longs for us to walk in life-giving freedom? Let’s examine His glorious design for sex, and see how we can flourish.

II. God’s glorious design for sex

A. God gives wonderful gifts of dignity, sex in marriage, and children - Gen 1:27-28, 31a

Turn with me to Genesis chapter 1, Genesis chapter 1. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 27.

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Now skip down to verse 31. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” We learn a lot in these few verses. First, in verse 27 we see that men and women have incredible dignity, for we are made in the very image of God Himself. Your sexuality is sacred and precious. It is far too valuable to give away to someone wanting to use you as an object of their pleasure. Parents, do your kids know how precious they really are?

Second, in verse 28 we see God bless the man and woman, and then the first thing he tells them to do is to be fruitful and increase in number. This will be made clearer in the other passages we examine, but I want to say up front that God's design for sex is between one man and one woman in a monogamous marriage relationship. And in that context, sex is a wonderful gift from God. As others have joked, it's not like God made Adam and Eve, went out to grab a bite to eat and then came back and said, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute; what are you two doing? That's not part of the plan!" No, God blesses them from the beginning to enjoy sex. And one of the many blessings that can come from the gift of sex is children. And what a blessing children can be! Look now at verse 31. Here we see that all God had made was very good, which includes sex. God gave us the gift of sex, and His commands are designed to help you enjoy it.

B. Sex is for a man and woman in marriage to express oneness – Gen 2:20-25

Let's see more of God's design for sex as we turn to Genesis chapter 2. Genesis 2. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 20.

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

In Genesis 2, God provides Adam an object lesson. As Adam names the animals, all of which have male and female counterparts, Adam sees that he lacks a suitable partner. Then, God brings the woman to Adam. And in verse 23 Adam breaks into poetry, he's inspired by the presence of Eve. Then the next verse immediately brings up marriage, an exclusive and permanent relationship. Again, God designed sex to be between one man and one woman in the safety of the commitment of marriage. And notice that verse 24 says that the two will become one flesh. That's not just true physically when a husband and wife make love, but also relationally. And even the sex itself is meant to be intensely relational, to reflect an oneness between the husband and wife. When the Bible describes Adam having sex with Eve in Genesis 4, it says that he "knew" her, in the Hebrew it's the word "yada". Now this term is not just a

polite way to describe sex, it describes sex's relational nature, as the husband and wife experience giving and receiving, entering and being entered, knowing and being known. And as verse 25 says, they were able to enjoy this glorious union, naked and unashamed.

Listen to how author Philip Yancey reflects on our body's design and its implications for sex. "The more we learn about human sexuality, the more it differs from how the animals do it. Most obviously, humans come vastly over-equipped for sex. The human male has the largest penis of any primate, and the female is the only mammal whose breasts develop before her first pregnancy. Virtually all other mammals have a specified time in which the female is receptive, or in heat, whereas the human females can be receptive anytime, not just once or twice a year. In addition, the human species is one of very few in which females experience orgasm, and humans continue to have sex long after their child-bearing years have passed. Why are we so oversexed? Relationship is the key. Human beings experience sex as a personal encounter, not just a biological act. We are the only species that commonly copulates face-to-face, so that partners look at each other as they mate and have full-body contact."⁵

As Yancey notes, even our body's design hints that sex is not meant as a casual encounter but rather as a deeply personal, powerful act. And when a husband and wife enjoy sex, it can enrich and deepen the relationship. And one of the ways sex does this is by providing intense physical pleasure.

C. Sex bonds husband and wife through mutual pleasure - Song of Sol 7

Let's see examine this further by turning to Song of Solomon, chapter 7. Song of Solomon chapter 7. It's right after Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and before Isaiah and Jeremiah. The first 5 verses of chapter 7 have the husband admiring his wife's beauty. Let's pick it up in verse 6.

⁶How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights! ⁷Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. ⁸I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, ⁹and your mouth like the best wine.

Now listen to the wife's response. May the wine go straight to my beloved, flowing gently over lips and teeth.¹⁰ I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me. ¹¹Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. ¹²Let us go early to

⁵ Philip Yancey, *Holy Sex: How it Ravishes Our Souls*, October 2003 edition of Christianity Today.

the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom — there I will give you my love. ¹³ The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my beloved.”

And some of you thought the Bible was boring, didn't ya? God has given us a wonderful gift – husband and wife deepening their one-flesh connection as they enjoy giving and receiving pleasure from one another. Listen to the advice the author of Proverbs 5 gives his sons. “¹⁸ May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. ¹⁹ A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love.”

Neuroscientists tell us that sexual pleasure is one of the most intense experiences. When you are excited sexually, the chemical opioid is released into your brain. And apart from taking heroin, nothing is more physically pleasurable than this chemical. You see, God designed our brains to connect us to that which brings us great physical pleasure. It's why heroin is so addictive. And opioid,⁶ is a wonderful gift in the context of a marriage relationship. For the intense pleasure of opioid deeply bonds the husband and wife together, bringing great joy to the relationship and making it easier to love one's spouse in tough times. So maybe God knows what He's talking about when He invites you to wire your brain to make that powerful connection only to your spouse, rather than making that potent of a connection to dehumanizing images on a computer screen, or to a boyfriend or girlfriend that doesn't have your best interests at heart, or to yourself as you touch yourself and think lustful thoughts.

As I teen I thought I was missing out on something if I listened to the Bible's sexual warnings. I now see, as Philip Yancey says, “Actually, the warnings are there to keep us from missing out on something. Fidelity sets a boundary in which sex can run free.”⁷ Many in our culture suggest that nearly any form of sexual expression is fair game. However, when we distort what sex is designed for, it doesn't lead to greater flourishing. Rather, it leads to a loss, not only in our relationships with each other, but also with God.

D. Sex is a window into our relationship with Jesus

Let's turn now to Ephesians 5, where we'll see that God designed sex not only as a blessing for husbands and wives, but to point us to our relationship with Him. In Ephesians 5,

⁶ When men have sex, it also releases a bunch of oxytocin, a chemical that makes men feel connected.

⁷ Philip Yancey, *Holy Sex: How it Ravishes Our Souls*, October 2003 edition of Christianity Today.

Paul has been comparing the relationship of a husband and wife to the relationship of Christ and the church. Let's look at verses 31-33, as Paul concludes the discussion.

³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Look at verse 31. Paul quotes that Genesis 2 passage we discussed and then notes that the oneness that a husband and wife experience as they only cleave to each other in marriage and in sex somehow reflects the oneness that believers experience with Jesus. Paul describes this intimacy of oneness between Jesus and the church as a “profound mystery.” Dan Allender describes it this way, “If God created sex for more than mere physical and relational pleasure, then we must look at sexuality as an important window into the heart of God.”⁸

Why did God create sex? We've talked about many wonderful reasons this morning, but I believe the ultimate one is to reveal Himself. Sex points us to the powerful intimacy we can enjoy with Jesus, and perhaps even the intimacy that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy.

Again, listen to Yancey describe it. “In one sense, we are never more Godlike than in the act of sex. We make ourselves vulnerable. We risk. We give and receive in a simultaneous act. We feel a primordial delight, entering into the other in communion. Two independent beings open their inmost selves and experience not a loss but a gain. In some way – “a profound mystery” not even Paul dared explore – this most human act reveals something of the nature of reality, God's reality, in his relations with creation and perhaps within the Trinity itself.”⁹

E. Can singles celebrate God's design?

Now to be honest with you, if I heard these wonderful truths back when I was single, especially right after one of my many dateless Valentine's nights, I probably would've thought, “Well isn't that nice for you married people, that you get to enjoy this great gift from God. How am I supposed to celebrate God's design for sex?” So, if you or anyone in your home identifies with that tension, let me share a few thoughts that I hope are helpful.

First, Jesus greatly elevated singlehood. In ancient cultures, it was very shameful to never get married and have kids. However, Jesus lived the most glorious life of all time... as a

⁸ Quote from *Intimate Allies*.

⁹ Philip Yancey, *Holy Sex: How it Ravishes Our Souls*, October 2003 edition of Christianity Today.

single man. And He legitimized the path of singlehood for us. For our ultimate identity is not found in our marital status, but in Jesus. And our ultimate hope is not in a fulfilling sexual relationship with a spouse. For marital sex in and of itself cannot complete us. Sex is designed to be a metaphor that points the church to something far more important, intimacy with Jesus. To center one's whole life around seeking a good marriage and sex life would be like me centering my life around looking at pictures of my wife and kids. The pictures are nice, but they point to something far more significant, my wife and kids. And so sex in marriage is nice, but it points to something far more significant, our intimacy with Jesus and His people.

It's why Paul, the author elevating marital sex to this lofty status, could also say in 1 Corinthians that it can be a good thing to remain single and never have sex. For to live a self-controlled sexual life as a single is not about missing out on something, it's about making sure you enjoy something. For singles can more exclusively focus on the most important reality, loving and serving Jesus. And singles, you're also free to better express the inclusiveness of God's love. As a married man, there are more limitations on how can I serve and get to know my sisters in Christ. And even my friendships with men are somewhat limited – I have less time for them and must consider how it impacts my family before sharing personal things with friends.

My single brothers and sisters, when God says to avoid sex outside of marriage, it is not only to save your possible future marriage from hardships, though it definitely will. It is because God wants you to be free to pursue unhindered intimacy with Him, to pursue close relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ, and to show the inclusive nature of His love for others as you passionately engage in His glorious mission.

Conclusion:

A. Celebrate God's design for sex

To summarize, God designed sex to be between one man and one woman in the context of a monogamous marriage. Only in this committed covenant relationship can the gift of sex really flourish. For only in marriage are we free to fully enjoy the intensely relational act of giving and receiving that expresses the intimacy of a husband and wife, two becoming one flesh. And only in marriage are we free to fully enjoy the intense pleasures of sex, knowing that what we are doing is right and that the strong bond we are creating with our spouse is a wonderful thing. And only in marriage are we best equipped to enjoy and parent the fruit of our union,

children. And only in marriage are we free to have sex that honors God's Word and our dignity as image-bearers of God. And only in marriage are we free to serve the ultimate purpose of God's design, husband and wife reflecting the faithful, intimate love that Christ has for His church. God has given us an incredible gift in sex - it's worth celebrating and it's worth honoring His design.

B. Celebrate the giver of the gift

But whether you're ready to celebrate the gift, or you're struggling, I hope you'll focus on the much greater gift, intimacy with Jesus Himself. For He wants to deeply know us and be known by us, in love.

Now we live in a broken world where God sometimes feels hidden. And we can add to this feeling of distance from God when get stuck in sin, when we have the wrong perspective about God's commands, and when just fail to really seek Him in prayer, Scripture, and service. But I will tell you that God rewards those who seek Him, and despite my many failings, there have been times when God has revealed His presence, love, and joy to me in ways that are more powerful than sex; and times when I have experienced community with brothers and sisters in Jesus that was very intimate and impacting. And whether you, or I, can currently sense that experience or not, believers in Jesus can always look forward to glory. For there, when we know His love and acceptance, face to face, and we enjoy perfect communion with each other, not one of us will be thinking, "Man, I wish I had a better sex life back on earth."

Let's pray...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.