

## So What's Wrong with Adultery and Fornication? Biblical Perspectives on Sex Outside Marriage

[SLIDE 1: Title]

All of you are aware that our culture is saturated with sexuality, and that Western Christianity is correspondingly obsessed with sexual ethics—obsessed to the point that issues relating to sex and sexuality have to some extent become the central ethical concern of Evangelicalism. So the question I want to explore here is the one you see on the screen: from a biblical perspective, what makes sex outside of marriage an ethical issue in the first place? Sex is a basic biological function, so why would it be an “ethical” concern at all? As many of you know, we touch on aspects of that issue in various of my classes, so here I’m going to try to pull all of that together into a more focused discussion.

We don’t have a lot of time here, so let me begin by outlining what I’d like to look at and set some parameters in terms of what this presentation will and will not do.

Will *not* . . .

- have very many pictures this time, since this topic doesn’t lend itself to that. I’ll just use the slides to outline points and to show you some relevant Scripture texts.
- define the word “sex,” only because it would take an entire hour just to do that. Define it however you like. We’ll see some specific behaviors mentioned in these biblical texts as we go along, but beyond that define it however you like.
- pass judgment on any of you based on what you do or have done in re your sexuality. I myself assume that all adults have been, or currently are, sexually active, because generally we are. We are speaking here about what we will tell other people in the context of counseling, teaching, mentoring, and preaching in re the biblical teaching on sexuality. What you have done in the past with your boyfriend or some person of the same sex as you, I do not care, and neither does God. God cares about the future, not the past.

What I *will* do . . .

- as the subtitle on this slide says, I'll be talking about several biblical perspectives on sex outside marriage. Emphasize the plural, "perspectives," because there are more than one and they approach the issue from different angles and through different sets of metaphors.

[SLIDE 2]

- Specifically, we'll survey three major complexes of metaphors, or rhetorical themes, tied to the topic of sex outside marriage in Scripture. One or a combination of these will explain the majority of the biblical texts that address this topic directly.

[CLICK]

1) Theft—this is probably the predominant sexual ethic of the Old Testament, grounded in the premise that sex outside of marriage is wrong because it is an instance of theft, or of one man taking something that belongs to another man. We see this very occasionally in the New Testament as well.

[SLIDE 3]

2) Purity—in the OT, all sexual activity creates at least a temporary state of ritual impurity, but sex outside marriage creates a more serious and more sustained form of impurity. In the NT, Paul especially extends this language by stressing that all forms of sexual sin make individuals unclean and thus impact their relationship with God.

[SLIDE 4]

3) Love—a third complex of biblical concepts on this topic emerges from the thesis that sex outside marriage violates the love command by putting my own pleasure ahead of what is best for others. This is most obvious, and most significant, in Jesus' teaching on sexuality and divorce, but is also evident in Paul and other biblical discussions on the topic.

So the three themes we'll look at are theft, purity, and love. At the end we'll summarize all of them and note how they might apply to specific situations we encounter today.

[SLIDE 5]

Let us begin with the first of these three themes, theft.

In the OT teachings on sex outside marriage, particularly in the Torah but also clearly reflected in the narratives and wisdom teachings based on Torah, a woman's sexual behavior is viewed as the property of her father, then of her husband, not of herself. This being the case, having sex with a particular woman is a matter of contractual arrangement between men, and violations of this contract are a form of theft. This type of theft is particularly serious because it can compromise the paternity of the woman's children, and thus the rightful inheritance of the land and the passing of the family name. It can also seriously damage the father/husband's reputation.

The "sin" here overall is **stealing** something that belongs to another man, specifically jeopardizing the rightful transfer of land from one person to another or taking away from the father or husband's reputation.

This line of thinking is somewhat alien to us but is clearly evident both in specific OT laws regarding sexuality and in various case studies in the OT narratives.

[CLICK; Exodus 22:16-17]

Here we see a basic text on what we today call "pre-marital sex," or traditionally "fornication." [READ] If a man has sex with a woman outside marriage, he has damaged her father's goods, and therefore must pay money, typical of OT theft laws. They should get married if the father consents; if not, you still have to pay him. Father's property, father's choice.

[SLIDE 6; Deut 22:28-29]

This one comes near the end of a famous chapter on this topic, Deut 22. The one on the screen here is the basic rape law [READ]. Basically, "no harm no foul." If she's not married and neither are you, pay her father the money and get married. You took something that belongs to him, and now

you must pay it back. The no divorce clause prevents this from becoming a form of regulated prostitution.

I might mention that this chapter also prescribes a death sentence in cases of adultery or sex with someone who is engaged, but that one leans toward the purity side of things. The basic principle, however, is the same: if you steal someone's spouse and bring shame to the family, you pay a high price.

The logic behind these various laws is played out in many OT narratives regarding sexual misconduct, where the "sin" lies in what one man has done to another man by having wrongful sex with that other man's daughter, fiancé, or wife.

[SLIDE 7]

So in Genesis 38, why can't Joseph have sex with Potiphar's wife?

[CLICK]

To do this would be a breach of trust and an act of disloyalty. In case you're thinking that "sin against God" here implies that having sex with her is wrong in itself, note that the entire discussion relates to the trust his master holds in him and the consequences of violating it. In fact, the statement, "he has not kept back anything except yourself" could be taken to mean, "Go get your husband's permission and then come back and talk to me."

[SLIDE 8]

In 2 Samuel 11, what's wrong with what David did with Bathsheeba?

[CLICK]

The answer is two-fold, straight out of the mouth of Nathan the prophet: abuse of power and theft. Recall Nathan's little story about the lamb that he used to set David up, which highlights how seriously David has sinned while comparing having sex with a man's wife to eating his sheep. You abused your power and took something that belonged to someone else. Wrongful murder in the context of a robbery.

As a sidenote, this theme tends to reverse our cultural conception about sexual morality so that the man, not the woman, is the one held primarily accountable for sexual misconduct. This whole deal is about what men do to men.

## II. Purity

[SLIDE 9]

Aside from the concept of “stealing” from another man, another major group of biblical texts on sex outside marriage follow the logic of purity concerns. This theme is prominent in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and is familiar to us because “purity” almost completely dominates the language of sexuality in Western Christian culture today.

[CLICK]

It thus makes sense to us to talk about “dirty jokes” or “filthy language” or to say that some woman looks “nasty.” If I asked you, “Are you keeping yourself pure,” 90% of you would likely assume that I am talking about sexuality issues, even if I did not mention that specifically. Or if we see someone wearing a “purity” ring, we understand that that person is not keeping herself free of greed. My church this week had a “purity retreat” for teenagers, which you would obviously understand to be talking about sex.

To get a grip on this, it will be helpful to review the basic logic of purity laws—purity laws in general, not just purity laws relating to sex.

The essential premise is this: in any given cultural, that which seems “natural,” whatever seems to be “whole” and to function the way it should, is considered “clean.” But anything that is incomplete, or that has parts it shouldn’t have, or doesn’t have parts that it should have, or that does not perform its natural function, that thing will be considered “unclean.”

Things belong in certain categories, and when something doesn’t stay within its proper category, or doesn’t do what things in its category are supposed to do, that thing will be considered “unclean.”

Now, when we apply that to issues of sexuality outside marriage, in the OT purity outlook, which Paul and other NT authors adopted and applied to their

own cultural situation, the category of “things I can have sex with” includes “the man or woman I am married to.” If you have sex with anything outside that category, this is deemed unnatural, and as such it is defiling and makes you unclean.

This type of thinking drives the famous catalogues of deviant sexual behaviors that we see in passages like Leviticus 18.

[SLIDES 10 and 11; READ]

All of these behaviors make you “unclean” simply because they involve having sex with “unnatural” partners. Family members are not in the category of people I can have sex with. Nor are my neighbor’s spouse, or people of the same sex as me, or animals. If I have sex with those things I am crossing the line, and that makes me unclean.

So, not surprisingly, the conclusion to this gratifying catalogue of deviant behaviors is saturated with purity language.

[SLIDES 12 and 13; READ]

That kind of thing is fairly easy for us to swallow because we readily judge that incest and having sex with animals is “abnormal” behavior, so it seems right to us that these things would make a person “unclean.” I say this noting, BTW, that when it comes to sexuality, “normal” is in the eye of the beholder. So when someone says, “Oh, I just like the normal stuff, and lots of it,” better ask right now what “normal” means.

Anyway, whatever “normal” means, Paul adapted the OT purity language and extended it to ALL sex outside of marriage, even what we would consider to be more “normal” forms of sexual intercourse. For Paul, any form of sex outside monogamous heterosexual marriage makes you “unclean.”

[SLIDE 14]

Thus we get some of the more obvious Pauline statements on sexuality that explicitly use purity language, like Ephesians 5:3, which immediately follows the statement that Christ gave himself for us as a fragrant offering, and which is followed by the disturbing claim that

[SLIDE 15; READ]

Notice here how the word “porneia,” which is notoriously vague, is essentially treated as synonymous with “impure”. Specifically here, it looks like “porneia” is a subheading under “all impurity.” There’s a larger category of things that make you unclean, and sex outside marriage is prominent within that category.

One particularly interesting instance of this purity language appears at 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

[SLIDES 16 and 17; READ]

Here Paul starts with the common Christian practice of using familial titles for people in the church, as we today call each other “brother” and “sister” as a sign of intimacy and common identity.

That being the case, for a Christian couple to engage in sex outside of marriage—normal sex between Christians who are not married—is a form of incest, which Leviticus 18 treats as an “abominable” activity. To have sex with your sister would make you unclean, so to have sex with a woman in the church would make you unclean. Hence, Timothy, who is male, must regard female members of the church “with all purity.”

The purity concept is, in my view, driving the extended discussion of marriage and sexuality at 1 Corinthians 5–7. There’s a lot going on there that we could talk about, but the key passage is the famous analogy Paul draws between the physical body and a “temple.”

[SLIDES 18-21; READ]

Here we see Paul making two basic moves.

[SLIDE 22]

First, he starts with Genesis 2:24, which he quotes at 6:16, “the two shall be one flesh.” Paul reads that as a euphemism for sex, which allows him to treat the act of intercourse as literal union with your sex partner.

[SLIDE 23]

So Paul's basic logic is this: as a Christian, I am connected to God as a "member" of Christ's "body."

[CLICK]

But if I have sex with a prostitute, I am making myself "one flesh" with her.

[CLICK]

So what happens when I have sex outside marriage is this: I am already connected to Christ, and when I have sex with this person, I am now connecting both Christ and myself to this other person, who is an unclean person. So now I have made Christ himself unclean, which is not cool with God. You're just going nowhere with God as far as that is concerned.

[SLIDE 24]

To emphasize this point, Paul switches over to another metaphor, the idea that your body is a temple of God's holy spirit,

[CLICK]

with God living inside you somehow.

[CLICK]

When you engage in sex with a prostitute, you defile yourself, and thus defile God's temple. God doesn't like defiled temples; he has a history of leaving them and giving them over to judgment.

So when you bring this unclean person into his temple, now his temple is defiled, and like would be the case with any god,

[SLIDE 25]

he'll just split and head on back up to the sky or wherever he came from. He won't stay in an unclean place.

[SLIDE 26]

This touches on an unusual biblical purity term, “abominable.”

The imagery behind this term refers to something that smells bad, a sort of “stench” in God’s nostrils.

[SLIDE 27]

Impure sex makes you stink; God can’t stand the smell of that coming off of you. A modern word for this would be “disgusting”: it disgusts God to smell that. When you’ve had sex outside the lawful boundaries, God smells that coming off you and is disgusted. He’s not going to hang around in a temple that smells like that. He leaves.

III. Love

[SLIDE 28]

A third complex of biblical teachings on sex outside marriage, or really sex in general, is grounded in the motif of “love.” This one is probably most readily associated with the teachings of Jesus, which are everywhere driven by two “love” passages from the OT, Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18.

To contextualize this, let us briefly review the foundational premise of Jesus’ message, that applies not only to sex outside of marriage but really to everything. Here is the rudimentary premise of Jesus’ message, which he communicated both through his teachings and through his life, and even through his manner of death.

OK? This is his basic, ingenious contribution to the history of religious and philosophical thought: other people do not exist to please me. God did not put other people on this earth for my personal use and my pleasure.

[SLIDE 29]

That is Jesus’ revolutionary idea. Other people do not exist to serve my needs; I exist to serve other people’s needs. That is the genius of Jesus. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”

Biblically, Jesus based this love ethic on Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which he of course radicalized by defining the word “neighbor” as “everyone” so that it includes even “your enemy.” You have to love everybody.

The essential idea in Jesus’ ethic about everything, including sex, is this: you always act in a way that shows godly love toward the other person. This principle will override all other ethical considerations in every single case. And in Jesus’ teaching, love does specifically override all other ethical considerations, even in cases where those other ethical considerations proceed directly from the OT Scriptures. You start with love and then move to whatever else you’re talking about.

This theme is always present in the backdrop of Jesus’ message, even at points where he doesn’t cite Leviticus 19:18 directly. One of the best examples of this principle is also one of the strongest statements about sex outside of marriage in the Bible, Matthew 5:27-32.

[SLIDES 30-33; READ]

[SLIDE 34]

This passage cites two clear teachings from the OT about sexuality, Exodus 20:14, “You shall not commit adultery,” and Deut 24:1-4, the divorce certificate passage. What we see here in Matthew 5 is Jesus reading these two regulations through the love command.

The basic problem that Jesus envisions here is that I am married to this woman and want to have sex with that woman. One way I can deal with that is simply by lusting and fantasizing about that other woman. That does not violate Exodus 20:14 in any way. I can lust all I want and never actually commit adultery by anyone’s definition.

[SLIDE 35]

Jesus, however, reads that command through the love command and says, “Lusting after that person is not loving that person.” Treating that person as an object of fantasy pleasure is not “love” as he would understand that. Therefore, while lust is not technically covered under the adultery command, it IS covered by Leviticus 19:18, since it represents a failure to love. Hard to

argue that lusting and fantasizing represents loving and valuing that other person as a human being.

[SLIDE 36]

Jesus then immediately turns to the second way that people get around the “adultery” command: divorce my current spouse and marry that other person I want to have sex with. No adultery there, since I’m having sex with my lawful spouse.

Again, though, it’s very hard to argue that you’re showing love for anybody by doing that. You get what you want, but everyone else is put in a compromised position, and you are responsible for that.

So now what happens is that your desire to have sex with someone other than your spouse has led you, your new partner, your ex, and your ex’s new partner into a situation that God does not want. That’s not love, and the result is that you, and not these other people, bear the onus of that with God.

Let me now summarize all of this and quickly point to some specific points of application.

[SLIDE 37]

The first point we discussed essentially says that having sex outside marriage is a form of theft, of taking something that belongs to someone else.

This one probably seems hardest to apply to modern culture, simply because it assumes that female sexuality is a commodity exchanged by men, that a woman’s sexual experiences basically belong to someone other than herself, whereas our culture has gone out of its way to train ourselves that women are in control of their own sexuality.

This is simply assumed even in Christian culture: every woman in this room believes that she has a choice about her sex partners, and about when she will have sex with her partners, and every man in this room would affirm that. If that isn’t clear to you, there are a large number of state and federal laws designed to protect the rest of us from you.

So is this totally irrelevant, or does this apply at all today? I would say “Yes, it does apply” in two ways.

First, it obviously applies to what we call “adultery,” having sex with a person who is married to someone else. Adultery is actually specifically mentioned under all 3 of the headings we’ve discussed here: it’s a form of stealing; it’s a defiling behavior that makes you unclean; it breaks the love command. It’s just wrong all around. Here specifically, if you have sex with another person’s spouse, you are stealing from that person.

Second, in our broader culture, while this might seem irrelevant, I would suggest to you that this is actually the only sexual ethic that our culture consistently affirms. Nobody thinks it’s OK to steal someone else’s sex partner. Having sex with your cousin’s boyfriend is not considered an ethical behavior. If a gay guy has a steady partner and goes on a business trip and has a one-nighter with someone, his gay partner is going to leave him, and their gay friends are going to take the side of the partner he cheated on. So probably here we’re not maximizing the potential of what the Bible offers on this point.

The basic principle would be, at a minimum, that you do not become sexually involved with who are already in a relationship. Tell them to terminate the current relationship first and then call you. Do not take what is not yours. You do not steal someone else’s partner; you only go after people who are free to make a choice with no claims on them.

[SLIDE 38]

What about the notion that sex outside marriage makes you “unclean” in God’s sight? What does that suggest to us today?

This one applies in several ways. First, obviously, any sexual relationship that is not a monogamous heterosexual relationship is out.

Second, even monogamous heterosexual sex outside marriage is “defiling,” which essentially means that it makes you unclean in God’s sight and thus prevents you from having free access to God. That’s what impurities do: they block your access to God and the community of God’s people.

In re Christians particularly, this line of thinking can be extended to suggest that heterosexual sex between Christians is a form of incest.

[SLIDE 39]

Finally, the love principle. True love does no harm and does not act in service of its own interests.

The basic logic of the “love” principle would be this: I have sex with my wife because I love her, and I do not have sex with other people because I love them. Not because I love my wife, but because I love all of you—this is the reason I would not have sex with any of you. I would not be showing genuine love to you if I did that.

Let me be precise here: it is not the case that I do not have sex with that other woman because I love my wife; it is the case that I do not have sex with that other woman because I love that other woman, and I realize that having sex with her is not genuinely the best thing I could do for her, since there’s really nothing else I can give her.

The cure for lust is genuine love. If I really love someone and want the best for that person, in theory my aspirations to do harmful things to that person, or to use that person in service of my own desires, will diminish. Having sex with that person would be hurtful to that person in some way, so if I love I will not do that.

This would also be, presumably, the ethic Jesus would apply in re things like pornography: that industry is hurtful to people. It is difficult to argue that we are showing Christian love toward people in the pornography industry by supporting that industry. If you know how that industry operates and then still get sexual gratification from watching people engage in that, I don’t know what you’re doing pursuing a vocation of Christian service. Pornography is the very worst form of dehumanization and human trafficking. Very difficult to see where the love is in that.

The bottom line is that when you put all these together and embrace them, there is simply no Christian framework for sex outside marriage. It does no good for anyone; it does only harm.

