



Keeping Biblical
Sexual Ethics
While Being
Yourself

Don't Become Your Parents!

Vincent E. Gil, PhD, FAACS

(That's *Progressive's* "Dr. Rick" in the picture above, not me.)

No, this is not a **Progressive** ad-type piece that promotes tossing everything parents do or represent out the window for the sake of *you* becoming *you*. Nor is it going to tell you that being in some ways "like your parents" is abhorrent and un-woke.

I hope it *is* going to make you think about what you probably were taught about yourself, about sexuality and ethics; about how these align (or not) with what society is screaming at you. Most of all, I hope it will encourage you to understand more fully how we are to regard our sexual ethic, as a means of not only honoring our bodies, our selves, but also our relationship with Christ.

Let's start with the not-so-inconsequential.

It's now the Western cultural standard for all young adults to find their selves apart from parental models. It's not that we ought to *reject* our parents; it's more that to be "like them" is the wrong model. And, in certain circumstances, sure, "being like our parents" may not set us up to be all that we could be; or that in fact, their modeling was terrible. But I believe in most circumstances, parents attempt to get the young to understand life and living from an experienced perspective. True, along the way to adulthood, we all toss out some of that learning and replace it (I hope) with our own hard-earned lessons. But replacing parental teachings shouldn't be an all-or-nothing event.

Society also screams at adolescents and young adults today not to be *prigs* when it comes to their sexual expression. As a matter of fact, the rubric today is to regard our sexual selves as a commodity to be experienced, like a car: test-driven before you settle into it. Hey, we're told it's

part of what's *natural*—what could be more natural than sexual attraction and interaction? (Obviously, your parents and mine went through similar erotics, and probably didn't invent the hesitation, or involvements, either.)

And yet, there is a more consequential and sobering side to how we understand our sexuality, and especially how we manage it—from our home background, forward.

If you come from a Christian home, you were probably taught about sexuality and erotics via one of two fairly common formats: (1) Avoidance of the topic, or relegating it to minimal conversations and explanations, all of this with admonitions of keeping virginity, and peppered with “don'ts.” The Bible was used as a means of instilling limits, and guilt rather than understanding as a natural ethic. Or, (2) You were given understandings about the body and your sexuality, but with an emphasis on keeping one's self ‘pure’ till marriage, for all the reasons explained to you as biblical requisites. If a gal, you may have even been educated on a “purity ring's benefits,” and given one. (I have yet to find documentation on the *popularity* of purity rings for guys—although these exist, for sure.)

As an adult now and in retrospect, both exposures can be seen as deficit models, and come across as indoctrinations into virginity and purity—neither of which may have produced anything more than watchdog caution. If one ‘slipped,’ a lot of guilt and remorse could follow—rightly or not. For many young adults, these are reason enough to discard what was “taught to them,” because these positions seem out of context with what surrounds them as natural today.

I've taught Christian college-aged students for decades, and increasingly, many in my Human Sexuality courses have openly questioned the sexual ethic they were taught by parents *and* their church; some outright contending these were narratives that were far removed from both biological realities as well as the pragmatics of contemporary life.

Parents, in their view, were well-meaning religionists, but the ethics of sex they tried to instill “just don't make the cut today.” When students wrote anonymous reflection papers, many were quick to quip,

“My parents' world and my world are so different that the holding back on sex for them made them fear their own sexuality. Everything about sex was taboo. That's not what I've wanted, nor is it what I am doing. I'm responsible when I do have sex, but I've learned to discard the fear and manage it to the betterment of my person. Obviously, they don't agree with this.” (*Female, 21*)

“I can't think of depriving myself or my girlfriend—which I intend to marry—from having intimate [sexual] moments. It's not like we're strangers having random sex. When we started dating we waited for a while until we knew we weren't playing each other; then we have had sex regularly ever since. It's been great. We're going to get married, anyways.” (*Male, 21*)

“Virginity is a nice concept, but who's a virgin today? Being real with one's sexual feelings and exploring these with another is the better way. I don't think God condemns

you for having sex if you are serious about the person and not, let's say, just wanting them for sex." (*Male*, 22)

The Pew Research Center, a respected organization, found in 2020 that "casual sex"—defined in their survey as "sex between consenting adults (whether in a committed or informal relationship)", is sometimes or always acceptable to the general population. For Christians, numbers agreeing are much higher than expected: 54% for mainline Protestants, and 36% for evangelicals.¹

The point to be made here is not just the changing statistics over the last generation, but the rationales being used to define the ethic of sexuality in the current Christian young adult population. Let's examine this.

- Most of my former students did not provide or contest biblical references: These were just not mentioned as part of their rationales (!) Such an omission is telltale, that the decision-making about sexuality, and obviously the ethic behind it, seems to have shifted from including any biblical understanding of the meaning of sexual intimacy to a more personal and self-centered rationale. This shift seems consistent with contemporary movements of self-identification and self-authentication.
- "Being responsible"—meaning 'not taking advantage' of another person sexually; not jumping into sexual activity early in a relationship; and being aware of how one directs one's sexuality—seem sufficient to generate an ethical position for proceeding with sexual intimacy when it is deemed "appropriate" in a relationship. It's unclear from responses whether "being responsible" included contraception, although a good number of my female students volunteered they were on contraceptives ("to be safe rather than sorry"), or had even had intrauterine devices (IUDs) implanted to avoid taking a daily pill. No mention of condom use by males in self-reflection materials.
- While "casual sex" (meaning sex when possible) and "sex on a first date" are generally frowned upon, virginity and its maintenance as a deterrent for sex in the longer course of a relationship is not mentioned. When it is mentioned, virginity is often referred to as an 'outmoded' concept, one that many young Christian adults may believe as an "ideal," but not a factual, even possible "reality." Evangelicals may hold on to the ideal, but in surveys I've conducted, these come up "slipping" into sexual activity more frequently than expected (12–26%).
- Not being in conformance with parental attitudes about sex is deemed to be the natural progression of becoming an independent adult—as much for those in the Christian percentages cited, as it is for the general young adult population. In this respect, a good portion of Christian young adults match better with contemporary social positions than they do with their parental models, or what was taught to them via their denomination.

What all this underscores is young Christian adults often differing significantly from parental teachings about sex; of "not being their parents"—by default, or design. Voices from the church seem to be less consequential as sexual guideposts; biblical teachings which may have been handed down seem not to be engaged by quite a few; or for these to make significant enough of a

¹ Pew Research Center, August 2020, "Nearly Half of U.S. Adults Say Dating Has Gotten Harder for Most People in the Last 10 Years." www.pewresearch.org.

mental détente to maybe, even, defer on sex. The fact that biblical understandings are not even mentioned by quite a few is concerning, even if such were just stated to then be refuted.

A first rule in psychological counseling is to understand the problem. **What is the problem here?** (*Is there a problem here?*)

Some readers I'm sure by now are saying, "*Here we go! Another position paper on not having sex!*" Or, "*Sex is bad and therefore to be avoided until "legit" in marriage—and marriage only!*"

If we're going to consider including what scripture teaches in an ethic of sexuality that helps guide our behavior, then we must engage what now appear as anathematical: **The bible isn't against sexual behavior; but it's definitely teaching that our sexuality, along with our bodies, along with our minds, are trusts—sacred trusts for the Christian—for which God has deemed parameters are necessary. Just like God has deemed parameters are needed for other behaviors humans could engage.**

Note my use of the term "parameters." It's meant to convey that the God who created our sexuality is happy with it; that God doesn't deem sexual behavior "bad" in and of itself. Like other human behaviors, God calls our sexuality to become part of our willful engagement with holiness.² For that, God determined humans need parameters to guide them.

If we are to be holy because God is holy—and we *are* called to holiness, then it is essential to hear God's message and not just our own contrivances.

There is a problem, when biblical teachings about the body, and about our sexuality, seem to have slipped out of the equation for how we ought to live as Christians. God doesn't want persons to ignore their sexuality—or bury it, closet it and toss away the key. God does expect us to understand it, and manage it under the purview of God's teachings.

What are those teachings? Here are the essentials: (If you want to know in depth, spend a little time looking up the verses that follow each comment!)

- God wants you to be aware of your body—your sexual body. He wants you to know about it, understand it, and manage it. (Ps 139:14ff; I Thess 4:4-5; I Cor 7:9; Ro 12:1).
- Likewise, God wants you to understand your mind, and the role your mind plays in your sexual erotics. (Lk 24:45; Chron 28:9; Rom 12:2; Rom 8:6; Phil 4:7; Matt 4:7; 1 Cor 2:16; James 11:23; Eph 4:23, Prov 23:33–35; Job 15:8).

² Holiness, "what does *that* mean, anyways!?" It means Christians are called to live a life that emulates the goodness and holiness of Christ—an effort at sanctification. Paul teaches, "... *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things*" (Phil 4:8). Moreover, "*As obedient children, do not conform to the passions of your former ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy"*" (1 Pet 1:15–16). And, "*Therefore, beloved, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that defiles body and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*" (2 Cor 7:1). Paul's ultimate admonition: "*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body....*" (1 Cor 6:18–19)

- God wants you to understand the distinctions between what surrounds you as possible influences, and what you have been called to listen to, to embrace, as a child of God’s kingdom. (Rom 12:2; Zech 1:4; John 15:9; 1 John 2:15).
- God is not indifferent to your sexuality or your sexual needs; indeed, God understands them because God did the ultimate—God became flesh so you would know, “God knows!” (Heb 4:15–16; Heb 2:17–18; Isa 53:4–5).
- God’s salvation has made you a “new creation.” God’s spirit dwells in you, the gift of the Comforter, to help guide you to all God’s truth. We are not alone in this new walk. (John 14:6, 21, 27; 15:26; 16:13-14; 2 Tim 1:7; Rom 8:15; Zech 4:6; James 1:4–5).
- As a new creation, God expects you to manage this “temple”—your body—as a living gift (your ‘sacrifice’) to God. (Ps 119:9; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Cor 10:13; 1 John 2:1–2).
- Abstinence (a much derided word now) isn’t a cuss-word. It’s a position arrived at when one understands the benefits of self-control and management. God urges you to abstain from all things that rob you of holiness. (1 Cor 7:2; 1 Thess 4:3–4; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 2:11; 1 Cor 3:5; Gal 5:13–6:18).
- Sex with another isn’t just a “moment” or a “thing” — or even a ‘natural’ to indulge at will. The Bible teaches it’s the most intriguing, intimate union that two persons can have. The act itself is an act of unification. Because of this, the Bible teaches sexual intimacy presumes commitment and respect for one another, deems it a **life-body-union**, and thus situates it within “marriage” (a covenant before God) as a means of understanding its sacred bonding long-term. (Gen 2:23-24; 1 Cor 7:2; Heb 13:4; Eph 5:22–23; 1 Tim 3:2; Exod 20:14; 1 Cor 5:1; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Acts 15:20; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:3; Rev 14:4.)
- God isn’t asking you to do anything that isn’t humanly possible. It *is* possible to guide and direct our erotics; and certainly, as any other behavior, to guide and direct our sexual behaviors. The call to holiness isn’t just about your sexuality: It’s about your entire way of living so that your life glorifies the God who saved you. (1 Cor 10:13; 2 Tim 1:7; 1 Cor 9:24–27; Ro 12:1–2; Titus 2:6, 2:12; 1 Cor 7:9; Phil 4:8–13; Matt 5:82).

As a young adult Gen Z or even later Millennial, you may read these verses and conclude that God has too many regulations—they read much like what your parents tried to tell you. Conversely, it’s my hope that you—or anyone—reading these verses concludes that our sexuality is, indeed, a manageable gift, given to insure we are enabled to connect most intimately with another: Hopefully, engendering a life-long commitment to union.

I’m not going to tell you how to live your life here—scripture does that, and does that well, as evidenced in many of the passages cited (particularly in Apostle Paul’s writings). It is a call to live *not like your parents*, but rather in the knowledge we as Christians are called to holiness. That includes managing our sexuality to the best of your ability, and within the parameters God has so clearly delineated: Living soberly, seeking wisdom, learning self-control, not listening to “the

things of this world” and moving to a space where knowing God is sufficient to move us through our erotics in ways that do not hinder our walk of faith.

If this all sounds like “no recipe, all hyperbole” it’s because I don’t want to sound like your parents. And yet, these probably tried to teach you truths to live by that remain central to a Christian walk.

Even if you tried, you can’t really become your parents—that line’s a scare tactic to move you further into generationally “doing your own thing.” Become yourself, for sure. But do try to engage a Christian ethic of sexuality that helps you to become holy.

It’s God’s request, not your parent’s. And if you need a recipe, it’s all in the verses cited above!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



VINCENT E. GIL, PhD, FAACS, is Emeritus Professor of Medical & Psychological Anthropology and Human Sexuality at Vanguard University. His PhD in Medical and Psychological Anthropology is from UCLA, and included coursework at UCLA’s Neuropsychiatric Institute. His postdoctoral in Sexual Sciences (Clinical and Medical) is from The Masters and Johnson Institute, and followed by a second postdoctoral in Public Health Epidemiology (Sexual Diseases) from UCLA. His recent book, “A Christian’s Guide through the Gender Revolution” (Cascade, 2020) gives voice to understanding gender and intersexuality as well as addresses a theology of being that reflects Jesus’ care and concern for all. Dr. Gil is also a licensed minister with the SoCal Network of the Assemblies of God, and a member minister of the support network of United Evangelical Churches. Dr. Gil can be contacted at: vgil@vanguard.edu.