

Many Christians know at least some of the biblical do's and don'ts about sex — especially the don'ts. What we don't always understand is the beauty of the why — why God says what he says about sex, and why it is meant for our blessing.

The better we understand God's sacred design for human sexuality, the less we will settle for smaller pleasures that quickly turn into spiritual bondage. Instead, we will be so captivated by God's sacred design that we will feel compelled to surrender our sexuality to Jesus Christ and experience the freedom and the joy that will come as a result.

Part of a Glorious Story

We won't understand sex unless we understand marriage, which we can't understand unless we see its grand purpose in God's eternal plan.

God designed marriage to show us our soul's relationship to him. After the apostle Paul gave the Ephesians explicit instructions about the one-flesh relationship between husband and wife, he went on to say that he was not talking about human marriage at all. "This mystery is profound," he wrote, "and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). The gift of marriage is meant to teach all of us about our personal, communal, covenantal relationship with Jesus Christ, which we do not have to be married to experience.

Blind Date to Beautiful Bride

We encounter this theme through Scripture, not just in Ephesians 5. The story begins in Genesis with a blind date, in which God the Father introduces the first woman, Eve, to the first man, Adam, and tells them that they are designed to become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

The story ends in Revelation with a wedding to end all weddings, where the people of God are presented to Jesus as a "bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2) — the most beautiful bride ever, clothed "with fine linen, bright and pure" (Revelation 19:8). The giving of the bride is followed by the best wedding reception ever: "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [namely, Jesus] has come, and his Bride [that's us!] has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). This is the beauty we were always meant to become.

Between the blind date and the wedding reception — from Genesis to Revelation — the Bible sets our relationship to God in the context of marriage. For example, the prophet Isaiah tells us that our "Maker" is also our "Husband" (Isaiah 54:5). Our relationship to God is so exclusive that we are spiritually "betrothed" to him (2 Corinthians 11:2).

When we turn away from God, then, we are guilty of nothing less than spiritual adultery — as the children of Israel often committed (Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 16:30). But praise God, when we confess and repent of our sin, we become God's virgin bride all over again (Jeremiah 31:4); this is how complete our cleansing is. We become as pure and pristine as a perfectly white wedding dress.

In short, the Bible uses marital imagery to help us understand our soul's relationship to our Savior. No other human relationship is as exclusive as the love covenant between husband and wife. Thus, the Bible uses marriage as a metaphor to tell the story of salvation. The story even comes with a soundtrack: the love songs that we read in the Song of Solomon.

Covenant Cement

Sex plays its part in this beautiful story by securing the bonds of marriage. Think of sexual intimacy as "covenant cement" — the physical bonding agent of a holy commitment. It has other purposes as well, including the propagation of the human race. But God has so much at stake in marriage as a symbol of spiritual reality that he has designed the gift of sexual intimacy to help secure its sacred vows. This is how unified a husband and wife become — their bodies become one flesh.

The sexual is always connected to the spiritual. The apostle Paul confirms this mystery when he talks to husbands and wives about their sex lives and says he's especially concerned about their prayer lives (1 Corinthians 7:5), or when he ties his teaching against prostitution to his doctrine of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-17). Our sexuality — what we do with it and what we don't do with it — turns out to be one of the most spiritual things about us.

Given, Not Taken

None of this will make much sense to us unless sex and our sexuality become something for us to give rather than to take. This too is part of the beauty.

God's relationship with us is one of totally self-giving love. So anything intended to show us God's love must also display selflessness and even sacrifice. This means we will never experience the beauty of our sexuality until we stop treating it as something for ourselves and start thinking of it as something for God, most of all, and also for others.

Unfortunately, most of us are not givers, but takers, and when it comes to sex, there are so many ways for us to take. Sexual contact without consent is taking. Using pornography is also taking — from the women and men exploited by that industry, from the people around us who suffer from our diminished capacity for affection and purity, and maybe from a future husband or wife. If only we could see the damage that we do when we take instead of giving.

Surrendered Sexuality

Giving starts when we surrender our sexuality to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, offering our sexuality up to God and then letting him show us how he wants to use it. He will keep what we shouldn't have anyway and give us back what is best for us to have.

There is something about the beauty and purity of giving our sexuality to God that unleashes great spiritual power in the world. We see this supremely in the life of our Lord Jesus, who was never a taker, only a giver.

Not that he wasn't tempted, because the Bible says that he was tempted in every way, just like we are (Hebrews 4:15), which presumably includes various sexual temptations.

But in his flesh-and-blood humanity, Jesus surrendered his sexuality to God; this was part of his complete submission to the Father's will. Jesus was not called to marriage as part of his earthly ministry. He was called instead to celibacy — a calling he embraced with purity and chastity.

We see the results in his relationships with women especially. No woman was ever more secure than she was in the presence of Jesus. Whether rich or poor, homemaker or prostitute, Samaritan or Jew, women were always drawn to Jesus. Part of their attraction was their sense of absolute security. They knew that they could trust Jesus with anything, which they could do only if he had surrendered his sexuality to his Father.

We see similar power in single men and women who so devote their lives to Christ and his kingdom that they choose to offer up their sexuality to God. Some of the most remarkable Christians I have ever known or read about made that holy choice. I think of William Still, one of my mentors in ministry, who devoted more than fifty years to serving the same church in downtown Aberdeen, in Scotland. Mr. Still, who never married, enjoyed remarkably intimate friendships with the people in his congregation.

I think of Helen Roseveare, a missionary doctor to the Congo. Roseveare's account of the abuse she endured from soldiers who attacked her hospital is one of the most profound things ever written on suffering for the sake of Christ.

There are so many others that I could mention, like John Stott, the English preacher, and scholar whose ministry continues to influence the global church, or Lottie Moon, the Southern Baptist missionary to China. Through their single-hearted devotion to Jesus, such women and men became living witnesses to the enduring reality of our eternal union with Christ.

Freedom and Beauty

It's not just single people either. When we look at exceptional Christian leaders whose ministry lasts over a lifetime — people like Ruth and Billy Graham, Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, and John and Vera Mae Perkins, to name a few — we find a commitment to purity at the core of their ministry. They gave their sexuality to God by safeguarding sexual intimacy within the promises of covenant matrimony — the only lifelong relationship in which our bodies do not belong to ourselves, but are given to someone else in the name of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:4).

We tend to see sexual purity mainly in terms of things that we shouldn't do — something negative. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of God's purpose for our purity. Of course, all of us are called to say no to ungodliness. But there are even more ways for us to say yes, and pursuing sexual purity is primarily a way of saying yes to the beautiful purposes of God.

The more we take sex for ourselves, the more we are in bondage. But the

more we offer it to Christ for his kingdom, the more freedom and joy we have, the more we bless others, and the more beauty we see in the world.