

I. Intro

A. About 40 years ago, Richard Foster, the author of *Celebration of Discipline*, wrote a second book, *Money, Sex and Power*, based on the idea that these three were the most likely ways we would get life wrong. They were the things we were most likely to mishandle – to turn into an idol. Last week we looked at money (more specifically, consumerism). This week we think about sex.

B. It's part of a reflection based on Exodus 32. The Jews got in trouble for worshipping a golden calf. That is probably not your issue. We have moved on from golden calves, but we have not moved on from idols. We tend to slip up by turning good things – gifts from God - into ultimate things, generally without realizing that is what we are doing.

1. We do not realize that we have turned away from God, that we subsequently have a god-shaped vacuum in our heart – which has left us hungry for meaning and purpose. And so we go looking for both in all the wrong places.

2. Today I would like to make the very unsurprising suggestion that we have done this – are doing this – with sex. I want to argue that: our culture is sexualized in unhealthy and odd ways. And that because we have made sex an idol – in our effort to make it more than it is – it has demanded more and more and delivered less and less and it is breaking us.

C. There are moments when it is clear that our culture has become hyper-sexualized. I had one 20-some years ago, after almost two weeks in Africa – with half of that time being spent in Ethiopia – a country not only influenced by Islam but one almost devoid of advertising - I felt physically assaulted when I landed in London.

1. The lights and the noise and the cars and the pace were all overwhelming. But what was most shocking was the skin. I'd been to London several times before. In fact, we'd spent some time in London on our way to Addis Ababa. But after two weeks outside of the West's sexually charged culture - after two weeks away from magazines and billboards and commercials. After two weeks in a setting strongly influenced by Islamic morals – where most of the women were hidden behind burqas. I was not ready for Piccadilly Square.

D. While I am here let me note that that was twenty years ago, and those days were – I would say Victorian, because that means prudish to most people. But there is reason to believe the Victorians had more sex than we do. I will just note that our culture is sexually misguided, which is what happens when idols get their way.¹

E. While I am making qualifying comments, let me note that sex is a not a new thing. Nor is the elevation of sex – a hyper, misguided focus on sex.

1. A casual reading of history would make it clear that sex has always been a powerful force and that it has often jumped the tracks.

2. A casual reading of Scripture makes the same point:

- a) We find a long list of individuals who are up-ended by sexual sin² - David comes to mind.

- b) And we find cities where sex runs amok (both Sodom and Gomorrah and Corinth come to mind).
- c) We are aware that many of the ancient religions included ritualistic sexual practices and temple prostitutes.

F. A sexualized culture is nothing new. But the West today – with its curious mix of consumerism, technology and individualism – has found new ways to make an old idol as dangerous as it ever has been – if not more so.

G. And tragically – not surprisingly, but unthinkably - has managed to do so not just for adults but also for children.³

H. So this morning, I'd like to discuss the idolatry of sex. I have four main points.

II. God is Pro-Sex.

A. It is important to start by noting that sex was His idea. From his perspective, our sexuality is not bad or evil or dirty or surprising. It is something to be embraced.

B. We were created in His image as sexual beings.⁴ Sexual intimacy was His idea. He designed our bodies.⁵ Pleasure was His invention. Despite rumors to the contrary, God is not a prude.

C. In God's plan sexual intimacy – between a man and a woman who are married to each other – is not only the process through which new life is created, but also a wonderful bonding experience.⁶ A partial answer to the loneliness Adam faced.

D. Christians have often been portrayed as being against sex.⁷

1. And sometimes, in some quarters, they have been. You can find some bizarre anti-sex statements by Christians if you go looking for them.⁸ One will suffice. Yves of Chartres counseled the devout to “abstain from sexual intercourse on Thursday in remembrance of Christ's rapture, on Fridays in remembrance of Christ's crucifixion, on Saturdays in honor of the Virgin Mary, on Sundays in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, and on Mondays out of respect for departed souls.⁹ Which if you are paying attention, leaves only Tuesday and Wednesday.¹⁰ And some went further, saying you can't have sex during Advent or Lent or a bunch of other seasons, narrowing the available acceptable days to 44 per year.¹¹

E. But anyone who reads the Bible soon realizes that that is not the official view. God did not put Adam and Eve on the 44-day a year plan.

1. Anyone who reads Genesis 2:25 - in which Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed.
2. Or Deut. 24:5, where Moses tells newly married soldiers to take the year off, stay at home and make their wife happy.
3. Or Proverbs 5:18 that instructs the reader to “rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

4. Or anyone who reads Paul's counsel in I Cor. 7:5 that husbands and wives should not deny each other sexually. That the husband's body belongs to his wife and the wife's body belongs to her husband. And that they should not be apart from each other for two long – even for prayer.

5. And then you have the Song of Solomon.^{12,13} Which in Hebrew is so erotic that in earlier centuries single men under the age of 30 were not allowed to read it.¹⁴

F. No one who reads this book can believe that God is surprised or troubled by sex when it is expressed in the context of marriage. God created sex as a wonderful, powerful unifying force between a man and a woman. Sex is good.

III. But, point number two, the power that makes it good makes it dangerous.

A. And it is easy to get it wrong, and when we do, the damage can be profound.^{15,16,17}

B. Therefore, God has placed specific boundaries around it. Not to diminish it, but to direct it. This is an enormously unpopular idea today. People get cancelled for suggesting this. But let's be clear, the Bible suggests this.

1. The seventh commandment is direct and to the point. In fact, it's only two words in the Hebrew – no adultery. Sex is for marriage.

2. Jesus takes that command to a higher level in the Sermon on the Mount by stating that adultery is not just the physical act of sex outside of marriage, but what goes on in our mind that matters.

3. Paul writes in I Thessalonians (4:3) that “it is God's will that we should be holy – that we should avoid sexual immorality.” He later says that it is not good for a man to touch a woman¹⁸ Which, read in context, means that neither sex should raise desires that can't be righteously fulfilled.

C. Now I realize that this isn't the word on the street, or in the classroom, or in the movies. There the suggestion is that anything goes and the only two people unlikely to be having sex are people who are married to each other.

D. And so, God's laws seem bizarre, but – as is always the case, the prohibitions we find in His Word are not arbitrary. They are there to keep us from harm. Sexual intimacy is a powerful yet fragile thing. Those who treat it casually run the risk of hurting themselves or others.

E. There is so much more to be said here:

1. One of the ironies is that those who are trying to make sex more than it is (those who are treating it like an idol) end up making it less than it can be.¹⁹

2. The problem with casual sex is that it's not supposed to be casual.

3. The problem with pornography²⁰ is not that it shows too much of a person, but that it shows too little. The focus is on the physical alone, when sex is also to be a relational and spiritual event. The Hebrew word – yada – that is used to describe the intimacy between Adam and Eve is translated “to know.” Because it implies a multi-faceted connection²¹

4. The Bible also teaches that sex is spiritual. That what happens to our bodies affects our souls.²² And so, those who treat it as if it is only physical end up with broken hearts and broken homes and broken children and a broken soul.²³

5. Sex was not designed to be casual, which is why God wants it reserved for a husband and wife in the bonds of marriage. It’s reserved for those who are willing to make a permanent commitment to each other.²⁴ If you are not going to do that then you should keep your hands off the other person’s body and soul.

F. There is so much more that might be said here:

1. It is worth debunking the claim that marriage is just a piece of paper.

2. It’s worth noting the irony that sex appears to be misunderstood by people who desperately want to understand little else.

3. Or of the fact that in the pursuit of immediate pleasure many people rob themselves of real, lasting intimacy. Which, as I mentioned before, is fragile.²⁵

4. But they also protect us from harm. As has been well said, we do not break God’s laws so much as we break ourselves against them – whether we recognize that immediately or not.²⁶

G. There is more that could be said, but I need to move on.

IV. Point 3: In making sex an idol – in ignoring God’s counsel – we move towards pain and trouble.

A. Cultures shape our views towards sex and sexual expression. Most start conservatively.²⁷ Initially violations are scandals. However, conservative societies tend to grow rich, and rich societies have the wealth to survive violations for a while. But most rich societies grow soft. Sexual restrictions are removed and at some point they collapse because they spend down their wealth.

B. That is clearly happening now. Two weeks ago, I heard someone say Western Civ was like a trust fund baby running out of money. That seems right. The apocalypse has been overprescribed for two thousand years – and I am not going there. But there are a lot of ways in which the West is collapsing, and our idolatry about sex, which has led to confusion - which is now leading to a dramatically declining birth rate - is one of the sure signs that we are on the wrong path.

C. I hope to eventually get back to One Hundred Plus soon. I got 85 of the lectures done, and I have five new ones partly finished. One of them is a mostly finished lecture on the sexual revolution. All I will say here is:

1. The first sexual revolution was not what happened in the 60s. It is what happened in the late second and early third century, when the biblical ethic took over.

2. As Kyle Harper points out in his Harvard Press book, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*, the Roman sexual ethic was that free men – especially wealthy free men - could sleep with whoever they wanted to. Women could not.

3. The shocking message of the Bible – that sex was reserved for marriage, and that wives could expect their husbands to be sexually faithful – was transformative.

4. In I Cor. 7 Paul writes about sex, and at one point he says, “wives your body is not your own. It belongs to your husband.” OK. Right. Yawn. Everyone knew that. But then he goes on and says, “husbands, your body belongs to your wife.” This was shocking.

D. Now we could spend time tracing the events of the 1960. Maybe back up and look at how things have unraveled following the Puritans – who, by the way, celebrated marital love with great energy. They are unfairly viewed as prudes. But we could look at where we started back when the Puritans landed on Plymouth Rock.

E. We could chronicle the relatively small deviations from that norm up through the 20th century. And then document the relatively quick slide from the 1960s forward. Highlighting the flash points:

1. The release of the Kinsey Report. Hugh Hefner’s founding of Playboy. The slow but steady rise of children born out of wedlock.²⁸ The development of the pill. The normalization of homosexuality. The mainstreaming of pornography. The rampant spread of internet pornography.²⁹ The sudden spike in transgenderism. The sudden separation of sex and gender. The rise of polyamory.

F. We could try to document where we are at today. And I could do so in a very predictable way – staying in my lane as a pastor, rehearsing all the biblical prohibitions of what we are doing and the deleterious effects they are having. Sexual abuse. Sexually transmitted diseases. The sexualization of children. Homes broken by adultery. The decline in marital sex.³⁰ The endorsement of polyamory. People who have treated sex so casually that it has lost much of its currency.³¹ Regret. Guilt.

G. We could wonder at where the culture will turn next – what new expression of sexual expression it will celebrate.

H. I could spend more time here pointing out how the Sexual Revolution didn’t lead to wonderful things. How it has been bad for women – led to Harvey Weinstein. I could make the point that among the reason some secular people – like Louise Perry – are looking again at faith, is because Christian marriage is great for women. It turns out telling women they could have sex like a man is not a recipe for female happiness.

I. But at the moment, I am not real interested in fixing blame or rehearsing the damage.

V. But, that is exhausting and I need to land the plane. Let me give you point number four: God's plan is best. It's what you want. If we could see what God sees – see our life – it is what we'd pick.

- A. Idols do not work. They cannot ultimately deliver, and the idolatry of sex is one of the easiest ways to see that.
- B. And no one wants anything that smacks of self-righteousness. That is so off-putting. Let me note, no one is without sin here.
- C. Let me invite you to trust God and invite you to follow the pathway set before us - by the inventor of sex, who loves you and is saying – this is the path you want to take.³²
- D. My first thought this AM was, Lord, help those of us who have made mistakes on this front, or who are making them, who carry anger or guilt of confusion, sense your love for them and the right next step.
- E. And help those who are young navigate this moment well. May both groups find healing and hope and joy in your love, forgiveness and path.
- F. May those who are married keep the marriage bed undefiled.
- G. May those who are single – as Jesus was and as Paul was – and as Paul wishes more people would be – then you are to remain chaste:
 - 1. Too many make sexual sins the most heinous of all - David committed murder but is remember more for his adultery. That is partly because sex has the ability to lead to great joy but also great destruction.
- H. Whether single or married you have to keep yourself from temptation and flee it when it finds you.
- I. Men and women, understand that you are not as smart as God. His law is good.

VI. Closing Prayer.

¹ In fact, while some might be willing to admit that sex – or pleasure in general – is their highest goal, and thus their god, others would probably argue that freedom is. They would suggest that the right to do as they chose – whatever that might be – and to not be restricted by small minded people (especially those intent on forcing their religious and moral views upon them) is what they are after.

³ Writing twenty years ago Neal Postman noted that prior to television children had to be old enough to read to be introduced to the secrets of adulthood. Today, because of the Internet, young children are often exposed to hardcore pornography. According to the London School of Economics, nine out of ten children who go online, usually to do homework, will stumble across pornography.

⁴ “Notice how closely related our human sexuality is to the imago Dei: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female He created them. Strange as it may seem, our sexuality, our maleness and femaleness, is somehow related to our creation in the image of God.” Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*, p. 91. (Note: Stating that we are sexual beings does not imply that we must have sex. Additionally, we manifest our sexuality in many ways besides intercourse).

⁵ Clearly, God could have engineered procreation in anyone of a thousand different ways (just read science fiction books to get some ideas of some of the alternatives). But He designed us as He did, including making the sexual union one of intense pleasure.

⁶ Clearly procreation is a major role of sexual intercourse. But, as Todd Lake writes in, “Sex and the City (of God)” “the goodness of marital sex is not contingent on the production of children.... Though the Bible value children as a gift from God, they are notably absent from the major passages that deal with marital erotic love.” (The Pornographic Culture, Christian Reflections, Baylor, p. 12.)

⁷ Karl Barth pointed out that after the fall there has been a vacillation between evil eroticism on the one hand and an evil absence of eroticism on the other. (See Foster, Money, Sex and Power, p. 94).

⁸ No less a figure than Augustine – whose wild youth most likely tainted his perspective – took the view that even marital sex was a venial sin. In *The City of God* he refers to the “shame which attends to all sexual intercourse,” and suggested that it be limited to those times when a couple wanted a child.

⁹ Richard Foster, Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life, Harper and Row, 1985, p. 101.

¹⁰ And then, eventually, because some were so suspicious of sex the church said, “No sexual relations between husbands and wives during the 40 days of Lent. And then, intimacy was off-limits during the 40 days of Advent. And then, during the 40 days of Pentecost. They added so many off days to the list that eventually there were 44 days a year available for marital intimacy. Some of you hear this and think – what a nightmare. Some hear that and think – where can I get one of those calendars.

¹¹ I must give credit where credit is due – this is John Ortberg’s joke not mine.

¹² As an aside let me note that some have interpreted the Song of Solomon metaphorically, arguing that it’s not really recording the thoughts and activities of two lovers, but that it is describing the relationship between the redeemed and the Redeemer – between the church and God. Perhaps, but when critics charge that this is a result of an anti-sexuality bias among Christians, they get the facts exactly backwards. Christians have embodied a faith that allows them to see in sexual union the best metaphor available for speaking about the union of Christ and the church. Todd Lake, Sex and the City (of God), The Pornographic Culture, Baylor, p. 11. // A commentary on Genesis 2:25 – the passage where Adam and Eve are naked and unashamed. The Song of Solomon plays out as a dialogue between two lovers who are quite intoxicated with each other’s bodies.

¹³ Foster, p. 95. Richard Foster, in his book, *Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, notes that it features, “sensuality without licentiousness, passion without promiscuity and love without lust.”

¹⁴ Robert Kruschwitz, The Pornographic Culture, Christian Reflection, The Center for Christian Ethics @ Baylor, Volume 5, p. 6.

¹⁵ Though every aspect of who we are has been affected by the fall – and our sexuality is no more corrupted than anything else – because our sexuality is so central to who we are it has consequences that can be much more far-reaching than those of other aspects of our fallenness. (See Todd Lake, Sex and the City (of God), The Pornographic Culture, Christian Reflections, p. 11.

¹⁶ Like other things with significant upsides (such as fire) sex has big downsides. The illustration of fire is an especially appropriate one given Proverbs 6:27ff, which reads: Can a man scoop fire into his lap without being burned?...So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife...whoever does so destroys himself. Beuchner has compared sex to nitroglycerin, “which can be used to blow up bridges or heal hearts.”

¹⁷ One of the reasons that so many jokes are told about sex – one of the reasons that it can be so funny – is because people will do very silly things

¹⁸ There are additional comments from Paul: Romans 1:10ff, 1 Cor. 6:9, 19; 10:1-13; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:5. And there are additional passages from others. In Acts 15 the Jews – struggling over what they can require Gentiles to adhere to when they come to faith. Remember, there are lots of cultural issues. And some want the Gentiles to become Jews culturally before they can make a decision for Christ. They reject that but still say, “no fornication.”

¹⁹ Donald Joy, a Christian psychologist, has studied relational bonding and intimacy issues for several decades. He argues that couples that skip (or rush) the steps towards intimacy often fail to fully develop.

²⁰ One of the other obvious problems with pornography is that they create a standard for beauty, performance and perpetual availability that is not only unattainable by “normal” people, but is unattainable by those in the photographs and movies as well.

²¹ "Because of the true sexual relationship are a form of knowledge, casual liaisons are by their very nature counterfeit. When Isaac married Rebekah, he removed her veil; but when Judah made use of a prostitute, her face was wrapped (Genesis 25:65-67; 38:14-19). The only proper form of sexual knowledge takes place in marriage because in marriage two people live together and get to know each other." (R.C. Sproul, "Intimacy and Security, TableTalk, Ligonier Ministries, March 23, p.47.)

²² Frederick Beuchner has written, “Adultery, promiscuity either heterosexual or homosexual, masturbation less as an expedient than as an escape – one appealing view is that anything goes as long as nobody gets hurt. The trouble is that human beings are so hopelessly psychosomatic in composition that whatever happens to *soma* happens to the *psyche*, and vice versa.

²³ To that end there is a great line in the movie, Vanilla Sky. One character is hurt by the betrayal of another one and says to the other, “Don’t you know that when you sleep with someone your body makes a promise whether you do or not.” That is a profoundly biblical concept. /// John Ortberg has written: “When you engage in sexual intimacy in a way you are not just touching someone’s body, but you are coming about as close as you can to touching someone’s soul. It’s that intimate.” John Ortberg, *The Power of Sex*, sermon at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Aug. 7, 2005.

²⁴ If you are not willing to make that commitment to someone then keep your hands off their soul. / Some argue that marriage (a wedding license) is little more than a piece of paper, and claim that “we can love each other without the paper.” In fact, while you can certainly have sex without a piece of paper, it’s debatable if you love someone if you are unwilling to make a commitment to them. Furthermore, the argument about a wedding license being little more than a slip of paper is hardly convincing. The next time someone states that ask someone to hand you their billfold and then take out their money and start ripping it up. (It’s just a piece of paper). Or tell them that the next time they get a ticket they should try ripping it up in front of the officer, explaining to him (or her) that it’s only a piece of paper. Ortberg was talking about this and asked, “How long would a university stay in business if when it came time to hand out diplomas they said, we couldn’t be bothered about it.”

²⁵ Perhaps it’s helpful to compare marital intimacy with a meal – one that comes with the promise of a wonderful dessert. Some people fill up on appetizers – or perhaps eat the dessert first – and then end up not only losing interest in the meal and dessert afterwards, but often feel ill. It is only those who are disciplined that enjoy the entire evening.

²⁶ The “free sex” lifestyle often has a longer run than other libertine activities – such as drugs – b/c the downside often does not show up as quickly.

²⁷ Groups based on a loose sexual ethic (open marriage, etc) generally do not last very long. See the Oenida experiment.

²⁸ Children have all born out of wedlock, but there used to be shame when it happened. Today there is little. In some settings (the inner city) the majority of children are born outside of wedlock.

²⁹ Pornography shows how something good, out of place, goes bad. It spoils. Porn Sites Attract Younger Viewers: Currently there are 4.2 million sites, and over 372 million pages of pornography on the internet. Every day 68 million internet searches find them. The average age of first exposure to pornography is now 11. 80% of 15-17 year olds have had multiple exposures to hard core porn and 90% of 8-16 year olds have viewed it online. 12-17 year olds are now the largest consumers of online pornography. (Leadership Network Advance May 2006 citing CP80 Foundation Internet Channel Initiative)

³⁰ My information is largely anecdotal, but in the last few years there have been a number of studies released suggesting that many couples are little more than roommate – engaging in sexual activity seldom or not at all.

³¹ One of the ironies of the age is that many of those who have tried to make sex more than it is have made it less than it could be. One of the surprising discoveries of the last ten years is not how much sex people are having, but how little. And, also, how much more satisfying those who have treated sex as a sacred activity find it to be later in life.

³² I get depressed and furious when I think about the challenges my kids face in having a sexually healthy perspective in a world where I can hardly hope to keep them from erotically charged images and messages – but only help them try to deal with them.