

Why sexual morality matters

by Rev John Castle

A Sermon given at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst on 26th September 2021

Readings: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Luke 7:36-50

Introduction

Today we are looking at our fourth topic in our series of *Tough Questions for Today's Church* and we are asking *Why sexual morality matters*. I wonder how you feel about this topic? I'd not be at all surprised if some of us feel uncomfortable or nervous about this.

You may be anxious about whether I'll deal with it in a sensitive manner. You may feel vulnerable, concerned about your own emotional reaction. This is, after all, a very personal matter. Other feelings that this subject brings up include guilt or shame, fear that we might be judged, or a sense of inadequacy, as we compare ourselves to what we think is "normal", or the "ideal", which perhaps we feel we don't match up to.

And there may also be some who are feeling a little cynical – are we about to hear a load of moralising guff? A list of "do's and don'ts"?

I promise to deal with this subject sensitively, and I can let you know now that the sermon will end by thinking about God's grace which extends to all of us, whatever our weakness or inadequacy. But I'm also going to tell you a few hard facts, which may make for some uncomfortable listening.

History

Unfortunately, the Church's teaching about sex has not always been positive. A lot of the blame for this can be laid at the door of Augustine of Hippo, a very important theologian of the 4th and 5th centuries, who thought that, following the Fall in the Garden of Eden, sex, even between husband and wife, was sinful if not used for the purpose of having children. It is probably true that Augustine was influenced by memories of his sexually immoral past before he became a Christian. This view added a sexual dimension to the story of Adam and Eve; and Eve, as the woman who induced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, became the symbol of women as the cause of men's sexual mistakes, rather than men being held accountable for their own sexual behaviour. A feminist interpretation would say that blaming women for men's behaviour is a typical feature of a patriarchal culture, and I certainly agree that it should have no place in Christian ethics.

The moral views of Christians do have a tendency to be shaped not only by the Bible but by the society in which we live. The more puritanical flavours of Protestantism in the centuries following the Reformation undoubtedly had the effect of distorting the biblical understanding of sex as a good gift of God. The Victorians seem to have

been uptight about sex, but very ready to talk about death. Today we're uptight about death and more able to talk about sex, but not always in ways that are healthy or upbuilding.

Over the past century in Western society there has been a reaction to the traditional Christian view that sex should only take place within marriage. Psychologists warned of the dangers of repressing our sexual desires, and liberal thinkers argued for individual freedom. The 1960s was a focus of rebellion against authority, including that of the Church.

The prevailing view in our culture now, supported by the law, is that sex is a matter for the individual, and society should not regulate people's behaviour, except to protect the vulnerable from harm. Censorship is seen as generally a bad thing, with the one proviso that children shouldn't be exposed to too much explicit content – but what that means has changed over time. The stigma that there once was at “living in sin” is long gone. Sex is a recreational activity, and it needn't be anything more. Many people think it's completely normal to have sex on your first date – in fact, there are dating apps designed for people who just want a one-off hook-up. And what's wrong with that?

Here are a few statements I've made up which I think convey the attitudes that a lot of people in our country have today:

“We need to chuck out Victorian attitudes to sex and free men and women to enjoy sex without guilt or shame.”

“My body is my own. I can do what I like as long as I'm not harming anyone else.”

“Porn is just a bit of harmless fun.”

“Sex workers should be treated like people doing any other kind of job.”

“Sex work empowers women”.

Sex without limits

So is all this sexual freedom a good thing? Now that it's OK to follow your desires without guilt or shame, surely people must be happier and society must be better.

The evidence doesn't seem to support this. And that's because people continue to be selfish, and power continues to be abused.

Most of us will be aware of the Me Too movement, which took off in 2017 following revelations about the abuses committed by the film director Harvey Weinstein. Weinstein knew that actresses who desperately wanted a role could be persuaded to have sex with him. He also knew that young girls could easily be exploited for the enjoyment of his social guests. But eventually some of the women began to speak out. The Me Too movement encourages women to speak out about abuse they experience, rather than just accept it and keep quiet.

You don't need to be an ardent feminist to realise that on balance men have more power in society than women, and this often leaves women open to being exploited.

In our culture, the individual's freedom and happiness is considered to be paramount. Our culture also encourages men to take the lead in initiating relationships, and women are socialised to believe that they should give a man what he wants. People are reluctant to express disapproval, which means that those who want to manipulate and exploit others feel they can get away with it.

I'm going to read you a genuine spam e-mail that I received. You may find it laughable, but it illustrates the mentality that is out there:

Getting laid is simple....

All you have to do is read this email...

And then watch this completely free video that shows you a scientifically-proven mind control trick that gets women turned on, attracted to you, and wanting to bang.....within seconds.

I didn't waste my time watching the video, and I saved the e-mail to illustrate the kind of mentality that is out there. There are videos on YouTube giving exactly the same advice.

Current worrying trends

Children have become increasingly vulnerable to unhealthy influences on the internet in the area of sex. According to information recently gathered by the NSPCC from 39 Police forces in England and Wales, recorded crimes of online sexual abuse of children increased by three quarters in the last four years from 5,458 in 2016/17 to 9,736 in 2020/21.¹

But just as worrying is the sexual abuse of children by other children, which has been known about for a long time, although it seems that too little has been done about it.

In 2008 the BBC Panorama programme asked a charity to conduct a survey of young people in schools and youth clubs about inappropriate sexual behaviour.² Of the 273 young people aged 11-21 who responded, 22% said they had been forced to "do something sexual" or had seen this happen to someone else. Government figures quoted said that in 2006-07 there were 3,500 fixed period exclusions and 140 expulsions from schools in England for sexual misconduct - anything from explicit graffiti to serious sexual assault, even rape. Many of those expulsions were from primary schools and in 20 cases the child responsible was just five years old.

Skipping on to 2016, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee³ examined a wide body of evidence and summarised their findings in these words:

¹ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2021/child-abuse-online-safety-bill/> accessed 25/9/2021

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/22_12_08_youngvoice.pdf

³ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/91.pdf> page 15, Sept 2016

Teachers, parents, young people and third sector organisations are telling us that sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools is having an impact on young people and school life. Consequences include: physical and emotional harm, including teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; girls feeling unable to fully participate in educational and extra-curricular opportunities; teachers spending valuable time dealing with incidents of sexual harassment and bullying; and young people developing a sense that sexual harassment and sexual violence are acceptable behaviours and learning social norms that are carried through to adult life. The Government and schools must make tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence an immediate policy priority.

In June 2020 a young British woman called Soma Sara started a website called *Everyone's Invited*, which invites young people who have experienced sexual abuse, whether verbal or physical, to share their testimonies. This year she published a list of the schools attended by the children who had experienced these abuses. Not all the abuses happened on school premises, but nearly all were committed by fellow pupils. The list of nearly 3,000 schools includes 3 schools which are attended by children from our parish – Edgbarrow, Sandhurst and Ranelagh.

The following testimonies illustrate the experience of young people in our country today⁴:

"Since year 8 all of the boys in my year group find it funny to go around touching girls in inappropriate ways such as bum grabbing , breast grabbing etc. I'm now year 10 and nothing has gotten better. They all do it - catcall whenever a girl would walk past and sexualise girls."

"When I was younger, me and a childhood friend of mine realised we had developed feelings for each other so I told him I liked him but we couldn't date because I was moving so he agreed on just making out now and then, so we did but one night he took it too far and he asked for sex and after I had said no numerous times he was still asking and he pinned me against the bed and started touching me down there and saying 'come on, it'll be quick and safe' but luckily his little brother called for us."

This one is about Sexting – sending indecent pictures by phone:

"I was around 12/13 and one of the 'popular' boys at school started messaging me. I'd never been kissed or had any boys show interest in me, so was just happy that a boy was talking to me. We never used to chat at school, only message on our phones. One day he sent me a message asking me to show him my boobs. I didn't want him to stop talking to me so I did. Straight away after he asked me to sent a picture of me fully naked, I did this for the same reason - I didn't want him to stop talking to me and spread gossip about me."

So what should sex and relationship education include? In the latter part of the 20th century the view of the educationalists was that teenagers are going to experiment with sex anyway, so the important thing was to teach them how to put a condom on a banana and give out a message about "safe sex". The new emphasis is on consent. But if a girl says yes because she doesn't want to lose her boyfriend, as in the last

⁴ <https://www.everonesinvited.uk/> accessed 24/9/2021

testimony, is that consent? And that scenario doesn't just apply to teenagers, but to adults too.

What has fuelled this growth in inappropriate sexual behaviour?

There are clearly many factors in society, including a growing liberalisation of attitudes about sex, the huge amount of "advice" on the internet that assumes a morally neutral stance on sexual behaviour, and, of course, the influence of social media. But one particular sinister and growing influence is online pornography.

An online survey conducted on behalf of the NSPCC in 2016 with 1,001 girls and boys aged 11-16 across the United Kingdom found that 48% had seen online pornography⁵.

So what's wrong with porn? If consenting adults agree to have sex in front of a camera for the entertainment of others, what's the harm?

The NSPCC website says that "children and young people [who] watch porn or sexually explicit content are at greater risk of developing:

- unrealistic attitudes about sex and consent
- more negative attitudes about roles and identities in relationships
- unrealistic expectations of body image and performance."

Here is one quote from a boy aged between 12 and 15 years old⁶

"I've been watching a lot of porn recently – it's become a bit of an addiction. I think about sex all the time. Whenever I see a girl I fancy, I think about how it would be to sleep with them and do the stuff I've seen in porn films. I can't help it even though I know it's inappropriate."

It's not just children who are damaged by porn. There's a growing problem of young men in their 20's who have erectile dysfunction caused by watching porn⁷. The algorithms on the porn sites are designed to get you watching more and more extreme forms of sex, with the result that having sex with a real partner can't get you aroused any more.

There's so much more that could be covered on the subject of sex in modern Britain. I haven't even begun to talk about the intimate connection between sex trafficking and both pornography and prostitution. But I think the message should be clear: Sexual morality does matter. We've let the sex genie out of the bottle, believing that it would grant all our wishes, with hardly any moral constraints. Some people think we can still tame the genie and have complete sexual freedom without the harm. The reason I'm unconvinced is because this whole experiment with sexual freedom fails to ask what God our Creator thinks about sex, relationships and

⁵ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2016/i-wasn-t-sure-it-was-normal-to-watch-it>

⁶ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-porn/>

⁷ <https://thelaurelcentre.co.uk/blog/porn-addiction-and-erectile-dysfunction/>

marriage. Failing to follow the Maker's instructions leads to things going disastrously wrong.

Biblical teaching on sex

So let's take a look at a few passages from the Bible and see what guidance we can find there.

We start right at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1 we read:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. *Genesis 1:16 (NRSV)*

We are made in God's image, male and female equally.

"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31)

In the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 we read:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. *Genesis 2:24-25 (NRSV)*

Jesus quotes both passages when speaking about marriage (Mark 10:6-9).

OK, you may ask, where in the Bible does it say that you can't have sex outside of marriage? There's no verse that explicitly says "Thou shalt not have sex outside of marriage", although there is the 7th Commandment "Do not commit adultery"⁸. But there are several places in the OT laws that imply that sex outside of marriage was wrong, and threatened the good order and harmony of the community. It's assumed in many other places too.

St Paul addresses sexual behaviour in some of his letters to the churches he founded. He is addressing the subject from the point of view of people who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ and need guidance on what holy living looks like. Here is his message to the church in Thessalonica:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. *1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 (NIV)*

The key to our behaviour, according to Paul, is *holiness*, i.e. living in a way that recognises that we belong to God. There is further instruction in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 6 he addresses the argument that because Christians are exempt from following the Jewish Law, anything goes, and that "food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food", in other words if we have sexual desires

⁸ Exodus 20:14

then they should be fulfilled. Paul replies that not everything we might choose to do is good for us, and we should not let anything take control of us.

Moreover, Christians belong to Christ, and so our bodies also belong to Christ, and are part of him. So how could a Christian join part of Christ physically to a prostitute? Here he uses the language of Genesis 2, “becoming one flesh”, which refers to sex within marriage. And the final part of Paul’s argument speaks for itself:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples 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 honour God with your bodies. *1 Corinthians 6:18-20, (NIV)*

Please note that Paul is telling his readers to flee from sexual *immorality*, not from sex. In fact in the next chapter, where he addresses the subject of marriage, Paul encourages husbands and wives to give themselves to each other sexually, and that their rights to this are absolutely equal:

The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. *1 Corinthians 7:3-5, (NIV)*

As a single, celibate man, Paul enjoyed the freedom from family responsibilities that enabled him to give more time to his work of mission and teaching, and recommended it to others, but he was also realistic about sexual drives, and is clear that the place for them to be expressed is in marriage:

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. *1 Corinthians 7:8-9, (NIV)*

The whole area of same-sex relationships and marriage will be addressed in the *Living in Love and Faith* course which we are doing shortly. But what about heterosexual couples who live together without being married? What difference does a bit of paper or a ring on a finger make?

Most of the couples who get married in our church are already living together. So why do they get married? It’s certainly not due to social stigma. And I don’t think it’s just about having a big day and spending lots of money. The thing I emphasise in my wedding sermons is that marriage is about making a public commitment to each other. And the fact that so many couples living together don’t ever get married has got something to do with wider trends in society to do with flexibility, keeping your options open or hedging your bets, a dislike of formality and so on. But for a Christian who wants to do things God’s way and live a holy life, I really can’t see that this is an option. Sex for a Christian belongs in marriage as a vital component in

binding two people together in an intimate and exclusive relationship. Sex without the commitment of marriage is not part of God's plan for our lives.

Space for grace

So what if the relationships I have had, or the things I have done, fall short of God's standard as we see it in the Bible? What does God think of me then? What do I need to do?

In Luke's gospel we read the story of the woman who came in to a dinner party where Jesus was the honoured guest and started weeping over his feet and anointing them with expensive perfume. There was a massive contrast between this woman, who everyone there knew to have led a sinful life, and Simon, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus and who was a strict keeper of the Jewish law. This woman may well have been a prostitute, and Simon the Pharisee was shocked by the sight of her touching Jesus. He's thinking to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner."

Jesus responds by telling Simon a little story about two men who owed money and how they were forgiven their debts, one a small amount and the other a very large sum. So which, Jesus asks, will love the creditor more?

Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'

'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.'

Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'⁹

This is just one of many examples in the Gospels of the way Jesus accepted people regardless of who they were, how they had lived or what they had done. And his acceptance always changed them. Zacchaeus gave away half his money to the poor and compensated those he had cheated. Matthew left his tax office and followed Jesus. Mary Magdalene became one of his closest followers, and was the first to announce that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus is always willing to take us as we are. He even gave up his life for us on the Cross. Our response to his forgiveness and acceptance is to offer him our lives, and to turn away from self-centredness and living according to the world's values in order to be more like him. This is what holy living is about.

⁹ Luke 7:36-50 (NIV)

Perhaps today we need to repent of ways in which we have failed to live up to God's standards, either by things we have done or failed to do, or in our unloving attitudes to others. Those of us who have been Christians for a long time may be tempted to be self-righteous like Simon the Pharisee, and think of others as being less good than us.

So let's take a moment now to bring to God the thoughts and feelings that have been stirred up by this sermon. Maybe there are things you need to say sorry for to God, and things you need to put right. Maybe you're moved to pray for people you know, or situations in our national life. Let's pray silently for a moment.