

## **“Jesus and Marriage”**

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We’re coming to end of a long series of sermons called “Who Is Jesus?” With these last few sermons, I wanted to show how Jesus speaks about some of the most powerful forces in our lives. Last week, I talked about money. This week, I’m talking about marriage and what I’ll call “erotic relations.” (Since there may be some kids in our midst, I’ll try to avoid using the word “sex.”) Next week, I’ll talk about politics. These subjects can be controversial and they can make us feel uncomfortable. I understand that. Yet I think if we don’t talk about these issues in the church, we aren’t being faithful to God, and we’re not equipping ourselves to live as God’s people. The Bible says a lot about these issues, and these are real issues that we face almost every day. If this is God’s world, and the Bible is God’s word, we should expect that the Bible has something very important to say about real-world issues. We need to consider “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27),<sup>1</sup> and the whole counsel of God discusses all kinds of issues, some of which can be awkward or uncomfortable to talk about. And sometimes getting uncomfortable is a good thing. There are two things I want to say before I begin: I want to reassure you that I won’t be vulgar or graphic; and though I may make some of us uncomfortable, before I’m done, I want to point us to Jesus and to hope.

I think it should go without saying that “love and marriage” plays a very large role in our lives. On the positive side, erotic love is a good gift from God, to be enjoyed between a man and a woman in the context of marriage. The physical act of love helps unite a man and a woman, physically and emotionally. Pastor Tim Keller says it’s “the commitment glue that holds you together.”<sup>2</sup> It is for pleasure. It produces children; we wouldn’t be here without it. On the negative side, when it is misused and abused, it is devastating. It leads to broken relationships, violence, exploitation, and all kinds of problems in our society, like children born to unmarried parents, diseases, pornography, and trafficking, among many other issues. Also, it is everywhere: it’s in movies, on television, on the Internet, in books, and in advertisements.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing t(he Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 235.

It's no surprise, then, that Jesus talks about erotic relations. But he often does so within the context of marriage, which is the context in which it is supposed to be enjoyed. God created both, and they are meant to go together "like a horse and a carriage" to quote an old song sung by Frank Sinatra. Today, we'll look at a number of passages in Matthew's Gospel that relate to this issue. I'll address them in order of their appearance.

The first passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount. This is one of the major teaching passages of Jesus. In Matthew 5, Jesus clarifies the meaning of some of the Ten Commandments and other laws in the Old Testament. This is Matthew 5:27–32:

<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

<sup>31</sup> "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

I think these verses are fairly easy to understand. Here, Jesus addresses two issues: lust and divorce. And they're related, because the root issue is adultery. Both lust and divorce are contrary to God's intent for marriage. We'll see later that Jesus affirms the definition of marriage as one man united to one woman in an exclusive bond that lasts a lifetime. Jesus states that anything that is contrary to that definition, whether in thought, desire, or act, is wrong.

Here, Jesus says that looking at a woman with lustful intent is committing adultery with her in his heart. This isn't a quick glance that notices an attractive woman. The present tense verb, "looks," indicates that this is an ongoing action. It is fantasizing having a physical relationship with a woman. The desire for such relations is good within marriage, but what Jesus is referring to is a disordered desire.

Lust is certainly a problem. Lust may be a greater problem for men than it is for women. But women can also look lustfully at men. And even if the desire isn't for the physical act per se, a woman can look at other men and say, "If only he was my husband. He's more devoted to his wife than my husband is to me. He's a better father than my husband. I wish I were married to him." That, too, is committing adultery in the heart. A desire to be with a person who is not your

spouse is adultery in the heart. It's also coveting, which means it's breaking the Tenth Commandment (Exod. 20:17).

The issue of lust is evidenced today by the massive problem of pornography. I want to give you some statistics related to pornography, because they illustrate how big the problem is. These stats are a few years old; if they were current, I imagine we would find that the problem is even worse. Here are some of them:

According to one set of statistics, forty million American adults regularly visit Internet pornography sites; 20 percent of men admit to accessing pornography at work; and 53 percent of men identified with the "Promise Keepers" movement say they have viewed pornography in the last week. Seventy-two percent of visitors to pornographic websites are men, and 28 percent are women; 9.4 million American women have accessed pornography in the last month, and 13 percent of women report accessing it at work. The average age that children first see Internet pornography is eleven years old; 90 percent of eight- to sixteen-year-olds report having viewed online pornography; 80 percent of fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds say they have had multiple hard-core exposures to online pornography.<sup>3</sup>

The amount of money spent on porn in 2006 in the US was \$13.33 billion. More recent estimates figure the current annual amount spent on porn is roughly \$15 billion or more. 42.7 percent of Internet users watch porn. And the numbers go on and on in depressing fashion.<sup>4</sup> This is a problem outside of the church, and it's a problem inside of the church. Note how many men associated with the Promise Keepers, a Christian movement, look at porn.

Jesus says, in a hyperbolic way, that if our eye causes us to sin, we should gouge it out, and that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off. It would be better to lack an eye and a hand than to go to hell. I say that's hyperbole, because someone without eyes and hands can still lust in their hearts. But Jesus' point is that if something is causing you to sin, get it out of your life. Do whatever you need to avoid lust. There are many different ways to eliminate exposure to porn on the Internet. If you struggle with lust, you may need to install software on your computer and digital devices, not watch certain TV shows or movies, meet with someone who can hold you accountable, or take other measures.<sup>5</sup> The chances are there is someone here who struggles

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<sup>3</sup> Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 223-24. Burk attributes these statistics to Jerry Ropelato, "Internet Pornography Statistics," Top Ten Reviews, 2008, <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>. I accessed this site on May 23, 2015 to check them.

<sup>4</sup> Ropelato, "Internet Pornography Statistics."

<sup>5</sup> One good resource for suggestions on how to break a pornography addiction is Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

with this, or at least knows someone else who does. If you need help, please come see me. There is no shame in confessing sin and asking for help. That is a huge part of the Christian life.

We often find that tempting thoughts come into our minds without our invitation. This will happen, but we must not entertain these thoughts. I think of something that Martin Luther once said: “Temptations of course cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.”<sup>6</sup> We shouldn’t let lustful thoughts make a nest in our minds. We have to guard our thought life. And we have to guard our desires. The problem with lust is that we want what we don’t have, which makes us miserable, and we don’t appreciate what we do have, which makes us ungrateful. Lust interferes with our relationship with our spouses and lust makes us ungrateful to God for what he has given to us.

Jesus was also very serious about divorce, which is certainly a problem within the world and within the church. Divorce is contrary to God’s design for marriage. I’ll say more about that in a moment.

The next passage we’ll look at is Matthew 15:10–20. Some Jewish leaders come to Jesus to tell him that his disciples are breaking the tradition of the elders by not ceremonially washing their hands before they eat. This is part of Jesus’ response:

<sup>10</sup> And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: <sup>11</sup> it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” <sup>12</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” <sup>13</sup> He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” <sup>15</sup> But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” <sup>16</sup> And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup> Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. <sup>19</sup> For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

External things don’t make a person clean or dirty. It doesn’t matter what one eats. What defiles a person is what is inside a person. Here, adultery is mentioned again. But so is “sexual immorality.” What does Jesus mean when he says this? This phrase is the translation of a Greek

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<sup>6</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Pierce and Smith, 1950), 176.

word, *πορνεία*. The word fundamentally means “prostitution.” It was used to describe not only prostitution, but any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage.<sup>7</sup> It was also used to translate a Hebrew word<sup>8</sup> that is often translated as “prostitution” (NIV), “harlotry” (NASB, NKJV), “promiscuity” (HCSB), or “whoredom” (ESV, KJV, NRSV). This word was often used to describe Israel’s idolatry, because they had cheated on their husband, God.<sup>9</sup> We’ll talk more about that later.

So, once again, we see that Jesus says that any erotic relations outside of marriage is sin. This would include cheating on one’s spouse as well as having these relations before or outside of marriage. This would also include homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. According to New Testament scholar Robert Gagnon, “No first-century Jew could have spoken of *porneiai* (plural) without having in mind the list of forbidden sexual offenses in Leviticus 18 and 20 (incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, bestiality).”<sup>10</sup> All such sexual behavior, as well as lust and all that comes with it, is wrong. It defiles a person. And all these things come out of hearts that have disordered desires.

I’ve mentioned this before, but that’s really the human problem. We have disordered desires.<sup>11</sup> In this vice list in Matthew 15, Jesus mentions “evil thoughts,” “murder,” “false witness” (lies), and “slander.” The apostle Paul mentions *πορνεία* in two vice lists that also include things like idolatry, hatred, jealousy, and greed (Gal. 5:19–21; Col. 3:5).

We all wrestle with some of these sins, if not most or all of them. They all flow out of a heart that needs to be changed by God. We have disordered desires because there is sin in the world and there is sin in our hearts. We are born with messed-up hearts and we act on our messed-up desires. We need someone who can forgive us for our sins and someone who can transform our hearts so they desire the right things.

The next passage is Matthew 19:3–12:

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<sup>7</sup> “The word-group [including *πορνεία*, *πορνεύω*, etc.] can describe various extra-marital sexual modes of behaviour insofar as they deviate from accepted social and religious norms (e.g. homosexuality, promiscuity, paedophilia, and especially prostitution).” H. Reisser, “Πορνεύω,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 497.

<sup>8</sup> זָנוּת.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 2:1–5.

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 191. Later, he writes, “There is also every reason to believe that the use of *porneia* in Mark 7:21 (par. Matt 15:19) should be taken in this broadest possible sense to include homosexual behavior” (p. 436).

<sup>11</sup> See the sermon, “Jesus Exposed Sin” (January 29, 2023), at <http://wbcommunity.org/who-is-jesus>.

<sup>3</sup> And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” <sup>4</sup> He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup> and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” <sup>7</sup> They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” <sup>8</sup> He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

<sup>10</sup> The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” <sup>11</sup> But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

Here, the Pharisees are trying to test Jesus. They wanted to trap him. They want him to weigh in on an in-house theological controversy. One rabbi, Shammai, said that divorce for any reason other than sexual immorality was wrong. Another rabbi, named Hillel, said that a man could divorce his wife “even if she spoiled a dish for him.”<sup>12</sup> Josephus, a Jewish historian writing at the end of the first century AD, refers to this when he writes, “He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever (and many such causes happen among men), let him in writing give assurance that he will never use her as his wife any more.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus doesn’t just say which side is right, though he does side with Shammai. Instead, he brings them back to Genesis. First, he reminds them that God made humans “male and female,” which is a reference to Genesis 1:27. Then he reminds them of Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” But notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Genesis says” or “the Bible says.” No, he says, “he who created them . . . said.” He shows that Genesis is God’s word.<sup>14</sup> And he also shows that the way God made men and women reflects God’s design. God made men and women to marry each

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<sup>12</sup> So says the Mishnah (*m. Git. 9:10*), quoted in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* 4.253, ed. and trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 120.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Jesus’ view of the Bible, see the sermon, “Jesus Believed the Old Testament Is the Word of God” (May 14, 2023), at <http://wbcommunity.org/who-is-jesus>.

other. They are made, biologically and emotionally, to complement one another. They are fitted for each other. God's intent was for a man and a woman to become one flesh for life.

The Pharisees then ask why Moses commanded divorce. They are referring to Deuteronomy 24. If you look at the beginning of that chapter, nowhere is divorce commanded. Rather, if a man divorces his wife, he was to do it in a certain way. Here, Jesus says that Moses permitted divorce. It was a concession because of the hardness of the people's hearts. But divorce was not God's plan. From the beginning, God intended marriage to be an exclusive, lifelong union of man and woman. Jesus does allow divorce in the case of sexual immorality, but the ideal, what God designed marriage to be, is an exclusive, faithful, lifelong joining of man and woman.

I want to point out three things here. One, the culture of divorce in America, even within the church, is contrary to God's will. The redefinition of marriage that we have seen in the last couple of decades did not occur overnight. It started with no-fault divorce laws. It started when we began to think of marriage selfishly as a temporary relationship between two people who are in love and make each other happy. In that view, when a man and woman no longer have romantic feelings for each other, or when things just aren't that fun anymore, they are free to divorce. But that is not what God intended. Marriage is supposed to survive difficulties. It's a covenant commitment, in which two different people are bound together. They promise to God and to each other that they will love each other even when they don't feel like it. It's supposed to be a relationship that is broken only by death.

Now, there is more to be said about marriage and divorce. Jesus was asked a specific question here, which is why he gives a particular answer. The apostle Paul says more about marriage, erotic relations, and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. In that passage, he allows for divorce when an unbelieving spouse abandons a Christian spouse. It may be that abandonment in general can be grounds for divorce. I imagine that Jesus and Paul are laying down some broad ethical principles that need to be applied with wisdom and prayer on a case-by-case basis. God desires that people seek to forgive and reconcile. In a fallen world, this may not always be possible, since it takes both parties to reconcile.

God created the physical aspect of marriage to be something that is supposed to be part of that exclusive union. Erotic relations are not something that can be shared with just anyone. It's not like a hug or a handshake. It's the most intimate act you can share with another, and God

designed it for the context of marriage. In commenting on the nature of “one flesh,” C. S. Lewis wrote,

The inventor of the human machine was telling us that its two halves, the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined. The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union.<sup>15</sup>

The exclusiveness of this one-flesh union brings me to my second point about this passage and marriage. Though Jesus doesn't tell us more about the meaning of marriage, Paul tells us that Genesis 2:24, the verse that Jesus just quoted, is really about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). In other words, the reason that God made marriage was to give us a picture of the relationship between God and his people. Throughout the Bible, God is likened to a husband, and his people are like a bride. The relationship between God and his people is supposed to be exclusive. God's people are not supposed to worship other gods. When people worship false gods, idols, it is often called sexual immorality, or adultery, in the Bible. That's because when God's people aren't worshipping God, they are cheating on him. So, the very reason why God made marriage is to be a picture of the relationship between him and his people.

Think about it this way: God could have created people to reproduce in different ways. He could have built into humans some form of asexual reproduction. But he didn't do that. He made men and women, who must come together to procreate. He did this to give us some indication of what an exclusive, covenant relationship is like. Now also think about this: there will be a time when there are no more human marriages. In another passage, Matthew 22, Jesus said, “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” (verse 30). In the new creation, when God restores the universe, it will only be God and his people. Christians who were married in this life won't be married in the next. Why? Because the only marriage in eternity will be between God and his people. That relationship is meant to be exclusive and unbroken, just as marriage in this life is supposed to be exclusive and only broken by death. Marriage in this life is imperfect, and is sometimes ended by divorce. But it is supposed to reflect the perfect, eternal marriage in heaven.

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<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 104–105.



As a bit of a side note, you may hear that bit about no marriage, which means no physical relations, in the new creation and think, “How can one of life’s great pleasures not exist in eternity? Isn’t life supposed to be better than it is now?” Life is better then. But it’s hard for us to imagine how life in the new creation can be better and yet not have that great physical pleasure. So let me share something else that C. S. Lewis wrote:

The letter and the spirit of scripture, and of all Christianity, forbids us to suppose that life in the New Creation will be a sexual life; and this reduces our imagination to the withering alternative either of bodies which are hardly recognisable as human bodies at all or else of a perpetual fast. As regards the fast, I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer ‘No,’ he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don’t bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it.<sup>16</sup>

Lewis’s point is that life in the new creation is so much better than it is now, that we won’t miss that physical pleasure, just as if you’re married and have are enjoying that physical pleasure, you probably aren’t thinking about not eating chocolate at the same time. And if you do think about that, I don’t want to hear about it.

The third thing I want to say about this passage regards homosexuality. In this passage Jesus gives us the definition of marriage. It’s the only true definition of marriage that there is: one man, one woman, one flesh, for life. God created the institution of marriage and only he gets to define it. Also, as we have seen, all erotic relations outside of this definition of marriage are sinful. I say this because some people say that Jesus didn’t say anything about homosexuality. That’s technically true. He didn’t say anything explicit about homosexuality. But he didn’t say anything about rape or incest or bestiality, either. Yet I’m sure no one thinks he approves of such things. I think his use of the word *πορνεία* covers those issues. Also, Paul, the man Jesus commissioned to be his apostle, also clearly taught that homosexuality is sin.<sup>17</sup> Any other sexual or so-called marital situation outside of God’s creation of sex and marriage is a sin. This would

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<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 260–61.

<sup>17</sup> Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 Tim. 1:10. For a detailed defense of what the Bible says regarding homosexuality, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. For a more popular-level book written by an author trying his best to be charitable and gracious, see Preston Sprinkle, *A People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

include polygamy, polyamory, and any other arrangement outside the one-man, one-woman, one-flesh, for life conception of marriage.

I already said that all of us, because of sin, have disordered desires. People who experience same-sex attraction have desires that are disordered in a particular way. Many of us have disordered sexual desires. The person who lusts after someone who is not their spouse has disordered desires. The question is what we do with those desires. Some people who have same-sex desires will come to Christ in faith and repent of any same-sex erotic activity. From there, there are two possible paths. Some may find that their desires change by the grace of God and they go on to marry. There are a number of examples of people who do this. I personally have a friend who has same-sex attraction. But he's a Christian and he hopes to marry a woman one day. He has found that his desires have been changing, and he is becoming more attracted to women. Other people who have same-sex desires will become Christians and find that they are not attracted to members of the opposite sex. Instead of marrying, they will remain celibate. I know of at least two British pastors (and authors) who have taken that route: Sam Allberry and Vaughan Roberts. In Matthew 19, Jesus said that not everyone would be able to enter into marriage. In verse 12, he says, "there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. A eunuch is a man who has been castrated. Jesus means that some people are born without working reproductive organs. He could also mean some people simply don't have sexual desire; they're asexual. Jesus also says that some people were made eunuchs. That happened in biblical times. Usually, a eunuch was castrated in order to serve in a king's court (Est. 2:3). Others are not eunuchs but have committed themselves to celibacy and singleness for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Our society is so focused on erotic relations that we forget that one doesn't need to have such things to be a flourishing human. Let me point out the obvious: Jesus never had a physical relationship. He wasn't married. Yet he was no less of a human. Paul, Jesus' apostle, was also single. (Some believe he had been married and was a widower.) Paul even advocated for singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:25–38. So, if you're here today and single, don't think that you are anything less than what God made you to be. We don't need to be married to be complete. But we do need to have a relationship with Jesus, our true spouse, in order to be complete.

Now, at this point, many of us should feel a bit uncomfortable. Most of us, by Jesus' definition, are sexual sinners. I would be willing to guess that most of us have lusted, or longed for another spouse. Some of us have been divorced. There may be some of us who have struggled with pornography or even same-sex attraction. If we don't, I'm sure we know others who do. If we're not sexual sinners, then we are certainly all sinners. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). None of us are righteous based on our track record of obedience to God. If you're not a sexual sinner, you were adulterous. James says, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (James 4:4). James is channeling the Old Testament prophets who said that idolatry was prostitution and adultery. At one time, all of us were not worshiping God alone. We were all in the same boat.

But there is hope. In Matthew 21, Jesus taught a parable about a man and his two sons. We read this in Matthew 21:28–32:

<sup>28</sup> "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

The parable is quite easy to understand: One son said he wouldn't obey his father, but later he changed his mind and he did. He repented. The second son said he would obey his father and he didn't. To make the meaning of this clear, Jesus said that the chief priests and the elders—those were the people Jesus was talking to—were like the second son. They talked a big game but they didn't obey. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes were like the first son. They had been disobedient but they changed their mind. (Tax collectors were known for being extortionists: they collected more taxes than they should have.) They believed John the Baptist. They repented. They came to Jesus in faith. Of course, I'm sure that not all the prostitutes and tax collectors of Jesus' day repented and put their faith in him. But some did. And they became part of the kingdom of God.

The question for us is not, Are we sinners? All of us have disobeyed God. The question isn't even, Are we sexual sinners? I bet most of us have been. The question is, Are we repentant

sinner? Are we repentant sexual sinners? Have we put our trust in Jesus and started to follow him?

We must remember that we are not saved by our righteousness. We are saved by God's grace. There is nothing that we have done to contribute to our salvation. We didn't earn it through superior morality. That doesn't mean we lessen the seriousness of sin. Sin that violates God's design for love and marriage is very destructive. It destroys relationships. It cheapens the value of the physical aspect of marital love. It's selfish. It can objectify others, failing to love them as they should be loved. So, I won't say that such sin is okay. It's not. It hurts our relationship with each other and it hurts our relationship with God. But all sin can be forgiven. Jesus died to save all kinds of sinners. David was a sexual sinner and a murderer, and he is known as being the greatest king of Israel. Samson was a sexual sinner, but he ended his life by sacrificing it and he is mentioned in the famous "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11.<sup>18</sup> Another person of faith in Hebrews 11 is Rahab, a prostitute. We could go on and on with examples of sexual sinners who repented of their sin and put their trust in the living God. This gives us all hope.

If you're here today struggling with sexual sin, now is the time of repentance. If you need someone to talk to, please talk to me. We can talk confidentially. You will have my love and support. If you know others who are sexual sinners, try to give them hope. Tell them that sexual sin is wrong, but also tell them that you are a sinner saved by grace alone. We need to maintain both truth and grace on this issue. Remember these words of Paul: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Heb. 11:32. For the story of Samson, see Judges 13–16.

<sup>19</sup> For some excellent resources on the issue of sex (particularly homosexuality), see Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction* (Croydon, UK: The Good Book Company, 2013); Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*; Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012); Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; and Sprinkle, *A People to Be Loved*.