

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, May 22, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **GENESIS 1:31 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 6:19**

“God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.”

“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?”

### **SEX AND SANCTITY**

I received a letter some time ago in which the anonymous writer asked this question, “What does the Bible have to say about premarital sex? I’m sure you won’t want to touch this subject with a ten-foot pole!” Do you want to bet?!

As I preach this sermon this morning, my thought goes back a thousand years to when I was a teenager. I can remember it so vividly. I can remember the struggles; the pain; the sense of loneliness; that feeling that nobody else ever felt like I felt. And that has never left me. I feel a tremendous empathy with young people. I always have, and I always will.

We read this morning a part of the story of creation, and our first text is the culmination of that magnificent first chapter of the Bible, “God saw all that He had made and it was very good.” This leads me to say at the outset something which I think is of the utmost importance within the context of our question: Sex is something which God made, and therefore, it also is “very good.” There is nothing sordid or nasty about sexual intimacy within the context of marriage.

Dr. William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, once pointed out that it is wrong to joke about sex for the same reason that it would be wrong to joke about Holy Communion; not because either subject is nasty, but because both are sacred; and to joke about such things is profanity. So, the Christian avoids being crude about sex, not because sex is bad, but precisely because it is good. It is a gift of God to be appreciated and enjoyed according to the ground rules He has established.

Perhaps some of you are feeling a bit uncomfortable and thinking to yourself, “Is this really an appropriate subject for a Sunday morning sermon?” I would answer by simply saying this: A sermon should be something about you and your relationship to God and your relationship to your fellow human beings.

And that brings me to our second text — “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Now, you can’t have sex without using your body and someone else’s too. The Bible says that your body is God’s dwelling-place. So, you see, this subject does very much concern your relationship with God and with your fellow human beings.

Seventy years ago, a man who had been brought up as the minister’s son in a congregation in New York State which I know well, wrote a letter to be read at the 100th

anniversary of that church. In the letter he reminisced about the 1870s when he had been a teenager in that town. This is part of what he wrote: “After the Sunday evening service, the boys managed to get out first, and stood on each side of the steps and front walk of the church. Then, when the girls came out, they had to run the gauntlet, so to speak, acting all the time as if perfectly unconscious of the presence of any young men! Then, one by one, they were picked off by the boys who were enterprising enough to step up more quickly than the rest and offer an arm. It wasn’t until the boys really grew up and perhaps had been away to college that they became sophisticated enough to ask the girl before she got outside; or even had the audacity to go to church with her and sit in the same pew.”!

In those days when a girl went out with a boy, it was usually under the watchful supervision of older adults who arranged all the social events anyway, and who stayed around to see that everything went as it was supposed to. Young people could not keep their romantic interests private. Dates were arranged at the church door, or over the party line to which the whole neighborhood was listening! By the time a boy called for a girl in his shiny buggy, everyone in town knew who was going with whom, where they were going, and what time they were supposed to be back. And if they did go out alone, it was impossible for them ever to get so far away from home that they could escape people who would recognize them, or if not them, then at least the horse they were driving.

But it’s a very different ball game today, isn’t it?

But to get back to our question — “What does the Bible have to say about premarital sex?” — I will restrict myself to the New Testament and tell you that within its pages there is a word which occurs 25 times. It is the word “pornela,” from which we get our word “pornography” which means literally, “Licentious or obscene writing.”

The newer translations use the phrase “sexual immorality” to translate “pamela,” but the King James Version uses the familiar word “fornication.” Now this word has four meanings in the New Testament:

1. It is used to denote sexual intercourse between unmarried people;
2. A few times it is used of adultery, which is the union of two people, one or both of whom are married to someone else (cf. Matthew 5:32). We should note that the regular word for adultery in the New Testament is not “porneia” but “inoicheia.”
3. Once the word “pomneia” is used to describe the sin of incest (1 Cor. 5:1).
4. And once (Rev. 19:2) it is used of the sin of idolatry, which is infidelity to and the forsaking of the true God for false gods.

But broadly speaking, the word means “human sexual intercourse other than between a man and his wife.” Let me give you a typical example of the use of this word. In 1 Cor. 7:2 St. Paul issues the injunction, “To avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.” Now this does not mean that Paul entertained a low view of marriage. He did not rate the celibate state ahead of the married state. The port of Corinth was one of the most wicked and depraved cities of the ancient world. It was, in fact, a moral sewer. And Paul was simply saying to those young Christian men and women who had to live there —

Temptations abound; they are inevitable. You come under constant pressure from the horribly low standards of pagan sexual morality. It would be so easy to have premarital sex. Everyone around you is doing it. Therefore,” says Paul, “the right solution is for every Christian man and woman in Corinth to be married.”

But today this simply is not possible. The stark statistic is that there are lots more girls than fellows. And yet the Scripture is clear — “Avoid fornication.”

But why? That’s what everyone is asking; and interestingly enough, Paul gives us the answer in the previous chapter, 1 Cor. 6, in the passage from which our second text is taken. Listen to this, “The body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh’” (1 Cor. 6:13-16)

What is there about sexual intercourse that makes it wrong for unmarried people? Let Paul tell you. Sexual intercourse involves two people in a life-union; it is a life-uniting act. “Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body?” Of course, Paul is horrified that a prostitute is involved. A professing Christian man is a moral clown in a brothel. But the character of the woman involved is not his basic point. Paul might well have said today, “Do you not know that he who unites himself with the sexy secretary in the next-door apartment, or with a cheer leader for the high school football team, is one with her in body?” And the incongruity would be the same. Paul bases his remark, of course, on the statement in Genesis 2 that “the two shall become one.” He sees sexual intercourse as an act that signifies and seeks the intrinsic unity, the unbreakable, total personal unity that we call marriage.

There is no such thing as “casual sex,” no matter how casual people are about it. A man uses a woman and puts her back in a closet where he can forget her; but the reality is that he has put away a person with whom he has done something that was meant to inseparably join them. That is what is at stake for Paul in the question of sexual intercourse between unmarried people.

There is an awesome passage in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher-theologian, in which a broken-hearted girl writes to the man who had seduced her:

“John: I do not say ‘My’ John. That, I now see, you never were. I am heavily punished for ever letting such an idea be my joy. Yet — mine you are — my seducer, my deceiver, my enemy, my murderer, the spring of my calamity, the grave of my joy, the abyss of my misery. I call you mine — and I am thine — thy curse forever. Oh, do not think that I will put a dagger into you and slay you. But flee where you will, I am yours to the earth’s ends — yours. Love a hundred others, but I am yours. I am yours in your last hour. I am your, yours, yours — your curse!”

Now you can see clearly why Paul thought sexual intercourse by unmarried people was wrong. It is wrong because it violates the inner reality of the act. It is wrong because unmarried people thereby engage in a life-uniting act without a life-uniting intention and commitment. Whenever two people have sex without a commitment to life-union, something which can only

happen by the taking of a marriage vow, they commit fornication.

Not all young people have sex simply because they enjoy it. Certainly, it ought to be enjoyed when marriage has taken place. God has given us the sensations of physical love to enjoy, but it can't be enjoyed the way God meant it to be by people who are conscious of guilt while they're doing it. Why do you suppose that sense of guilt, that sense that "maybe what we're doing is wrong", is there nibbling at the conscience?

I think there are several reasons. Many girls allow boys freedoms they would actually prefer not to give them, because they think that by doing so, it will increase their popularity. Many boys with "Russian hands and Roman fingers" take liberties with girls which they might not expect that they are subconsciously urged on by the bragging of other boys about their own romantic adventures, exploits, and triumphs, which are often purely imaginary, by the way!

Most premarital sex, regardless of what the motives behind it are, is done under the constant fear of discovery by parents or others whose disapproval is inevitable. So, enjoyment of a man and woman in each other, which God meant for us to have, isn't being experienced by a couple who are allowing themselves to do it because of uncertain motivations, and who suffer nervousness and fear and guilt while they're doing it.

Now it is certainly normal to want to be near the person you love, or even like; and when you love someone, then it becomes important to share all your experiences with him or her — everything that happened to you at work or school during the day; your inner feelings and reactions and responses. You develop little private signs which mean everything to you two but are secret from the rest of the world! Then pretty soon hands are held and lips are touching, and the airspace between bodies is decreasing, and as one thing follows another, that couple is necking and petting and wondering where they should stop, and when; and as their desire for each other increases, how? Because, you see, these things are habit-forming. When you've started holding hands, you're going to continue; when you've started kissing, you're going to continue; when you've started petting, you're going to continue; and when you've started having sex, you're going to continue; not only with the person you're going around with now, but after you break up, you'll expect more from the next person you date.

I remember a girl and boy who went steady during most of their high school years. Their dating became so preoccupied with sex that anything they did was simply an abbreviated prelude to what happened when they finally got off alone. Actually, they had little but that in common, and eventually they discovered that for themselves and decided to break up. But the first girls that boy dated after that had quite a time with him, for he tried to make out with them the same way he had with his steady girl. He claimed he couldn't find any girl he really liked or wanted to date more than once or twice. I believe the reason why he felt that way was because he had gotten to the point where the only important thing to him in his relationship with a girl was the physical pleasure he got out of her. He set up a kind of standard where he took all he could get but barred himself from giving back any real love or affection. So, he never really loved any girl; he just used her body. And that is only one of the problems which premarital sex can create.

Let me make two points rather briefly:

**1. The physical responses to sexual stimulation are not always controllable.**

There's an old saying to the effect that sex has no conscience, only the compulsion to continue. And if and when you've lost control, will you tell me how you're going to keep control? I suggest the first stop sign is reached when you feel an urgency compelling you not to stop. Then one of you, if you've been foolish enough to let yourself get into such a potentially dangerous situation — one of you had better say, "Okay, let's go get a pizza now." And you had better get to the Pizza Hut on the double! There's a vast difference between really loving another person, which involves respect for that person, and going through the outward signs and motions of love just because you enjoy the excitement of sex. When you really love someone, you will love them too much to let anything ever go so far that one evening's mistakes and excesses could hurt that person and destroy that love.

**2. The second reason I think premarital sex is wrong has to do with the future.**

I know that most of you young people, maybe all of you, look forward in your life to a happy marriage, and a home built on love for the one woman or the one man with whom you decide to spend that life. I believe that in order to make a successful and lasting marriage, and build a happy home life together, you must bring yourself to it with a few of life's mysteries still undiscovered. In marriage, the guilt and fears that plague a couple making out in the back seat of a car are swept away, and the greatest happiness that God created for us to enjoy is there for a man and a woman to explore in wonder, and find together, because they love each other enough that they have pledged before God that they are going to spend the rest of their lives together developing this great love. To give yourself casually to any date you may have on any evening is to be quite unfair to the husband or wife who will one day want you in special ways which have not been shared with anyone else.

I have been a long time in the ministry now. I have had hundreds of counseling sessions with people, and I have seen them weep their hearts out because of infidelities of one kind or another. But I have never known a young person to come to his or her marriage pure and wholesome, who has ever regretted obeying God in this matter. But I have counselled with so many who have felt shopworn, tarnished, and dirty inside, especially because now they have found someone pure and good, and they wish they could come to their marriage untarnished, but they can't — it's too late!

Arnold Toynbee, the celebrated world historian, affirmed his belief that a culture that postpones rather than stimulates sexual experience in young adults, is a culture most prone to progress. In 1971, after studying 90 contemporary primitive or less-advanced cultures, anthropologist William Stephens wrote that the tribes lowest on the side of cultural evolution have the most sexual freedom.

In our new church building, we will have a beautiful sanctuary, and we will be very particular about it. No man will think of wearing his hat in it. We will talk in hushed voices as we enter it. The reason for this is, of course, because we will respect it. We will respect it because we will know it to be the House of God, and we will sense His presence in it.

Now our text says, "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You are not your own;

you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.” Not only is your body the temple of God, but so is your date’s; much more so than any building, for God dwells in people even more than in places built by people. So, it becomes sheer foolishness to act with reverence in church on Sunday morning, and then go off and make out with someone in the evening in a way that you would not do if you were really conscious that God was there watching. But that’s just the point — God is there watching! And one of the secrets of the Christian life is never to allow yourself to do things you would be ashamed of doing in the presence of Jesus Christ, for whether you like it or not, you are in His presence, no matter where you are. If you can just remember that; if you can always remember that your body is God’s temple; I don’t think you’ll have to worry about controlling yourself; I don’t think anyone will have to say, “That’s too far”; because you will have learned that God is just as much present in your life when you are enjoying the company of someone you very much like, as he is when you’re singing hymns, or praying, or reading the Bible, or attending Church.

If you remember one thing from the message this morning, just remember this: Your body is a very sacred thing. The body of your date, whoever he or she may be, is a very sacred thing. You don’t want to devastate that sacred thing, do you? I know you don’t. I know that God can trust you. I know that your parents can trust you. I know that we, your friends here in the Church, the body of Christ, can trust you. And we do because we believe that you are committed to Jesus Christ, and you will never do anything that would bring shame to Him or cause Him to be crucified afresh.

God bless you all, we love you deeply, and we want to help you. We want to encourage you in the Lord. We know the tough time it is to grow up a teenager in the world today. It was tough enough in my time, and it is ten times tougher today, I’m sure of that. But God is faithful. God will never fail you, and at the end of the day you will be eternally glad that you did what you knew Jesus Christ wanted you to do, and you will have a satisfaction that the world can never give nor take away. God be with you each one.

**AMEN.**