

## What's Love Got to Do with It?

Anybody here nervous about this sermon series? I'll be honest, I am a little bit.

I am convinced and convicted that we need to allow ourselves to be shaped by scripture in every area of our lives - including and especially in areas like romance, relationships, and sexuality - which is what we'll be reflecting on over the next several weeks before Advent.

I'm fully aware that this could get a little uncomfortable - and I've already promised my wife I'd try to limit the personal illustrations for this series. I figure I can't get as bad as some others have done though.

Doing research and study for this series I heard a story about a young pastor who was filling the pulpit at his church and was tasked to preach on sex (I guess the senior pastor didn't want take that week - by the way, you're welcome Jeff).

So he reluctantly, and nervously agreed. He apparently felt so uncomfortable that during his sermon prep he couldn't even bring himself to write the word SEX, so instead every time he came to it he just wrote a big capital S. His wife happened to walk by and see his notes with the big 'S' all over the page and asked what the sermon was about.

For whatever reason, he got nervous and just said, "s...s... sailing! It's about sailing"

She thought it was strange, but shrugged it off as some sort of metaphor for life with God.

Sunday came around and his wife ended up coming down with a flu so she wasn't even there. He started off a little rocky at first, but ended up finding it wasn't all that bad. He actually ended up feeling like he handled the matter tactfully and helpfully.

He did so well, in fact, that the following week a member of the congregation was speaking to his wife, and said, "Oh your husband preached a beautiful sermon last Sunday. He handled a difficult topic most sensibly and I found what he had to say rather helpful."

"Well, that is a surprise" said the young pastor's wife. "I'm afraid I didn't think he'd be of much help to anybody. After all, he's only ever done it twice, and both times he went overboard!"

That's good, we're all laughing now. And that's the feeling I want for us this morning - JOY!

Our world has a LOT to say about romance, sex, sexuality, and what that means for who we are and what we expect from the world around us. TOO OFTEN the response from the Church is either silence or a list of what NOT to do. Seldom do we talk about the GIFT of romantic love.

But in this series, I want us to spend some time uncovering what the bible has to say about this subject, and how the Gospel transforms and renews those desires in our lives so that we might experience the joy, hope, and freedom of God's gift for us.

Are you ready to join me in that this morning?

Just a few caveats for us this morning:

I'm not an expert at this by any means - I mean, we've got two kids so we're obviously doing SOMETHING ok - but that doesn't really mean anything.

As we explore this, just know, I'm exploring this with you - as your pastor, but also as a human with all sorts of brokenness and baggage of my own to process through. Together, I want to guide us through scripture to see what God's Word might have to say to us in this area of our lives.

ALSO, I want to acknowledge some of this can get confusing - partly because many of us have different and deeply ingrained beliefs about love, sex, and relationships - and partly because the language around all of this can be slippery.

I'll be touching on topics such as love, sexuality, romance, and marriage - sometimes using words almost synonymously, sometimes parsing them apart for greater clarity. That's just the nature of these topics. They're so interconnected that it's difficult to speak of one without speaking of the other.

So for the purpose of clarity - I want to give you my main thesis up front, and we'll try to work it out from there:

*Sex, as an expression of romantic love, is a good gift from God with very specific purposes, which find their fulfillment in a very specific context - the marriage of a man and a woman. Understanding that GOOD GIFT should draw us worship the God who gives it.*

We'll get to those purposes in a bit, but it's important that we start out with the statement that IT IS A GOOD GIFT. Sexual intimacy is not a wicked, distorted, or broken aspect of our flesh because of the Fall. It was a gift given at Creation. And so with that, although we just finished a whole series on Genesis, we're going to back to the beginning once again:

#### READING

Genesis 1:<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Skipping to verse 31...

<sup>31</sup> God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Jump ahead also to Genesis 2:18, speaking in more detail on their creation it says...

Genesis 2:<sup>18</sup> The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

<sup>19</sup> Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. <sup>21</sup> So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

<sup>23</sup> The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called 'woman,'  
for she was taken out of man."

<sup>24</sup> That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

<sup>25</sup> Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Let's pray.

In July 1984 pop singer Tina Turner released a hit song, "What's Love Got To Do With It?" - essentially making the statement that love isn't really something she wants to bring into this intimate relationship with the guy she's talking to. The song won a Grammy Award in 1985 and became the title of a 1993 movie about the life of Turner and her escape from an abusive relationship with her husband, making her hesitant to fall in love again.

That's actually a fascinating question in both directions - what DOES love have to do with our physical, sexual drives.

There are some people who, whether out of selfishness or wounded hearts, would rather have *physical* affection without bringing any sort of loving, covenantal relationship into the question.

On the flip side, there's also tendency in the Church to elevate the spiritual, friendship love of community, and to view physical affection and sexual intimacy with wariness.

So here's the question I have for us this morning...What is sex for? And what, if anything, does that tell us about the God who made it.

In just these beginning statements about humanity's creation, we already see a few profound insights about the purpose of romantic relationships:

1. First, this two-as-oneness is somehow part of humanity being made in God's image.
2. Second, this intimate relationship enables man and woman to literally continue on God's creative work by multiplying and filling the earth.
3. Third, this enfleshed creation and the intimacy that springs from it is good and pleasant.
4. Finally, this covenantal love has a unitive, healing, and de-shaming potential.

I'll tell you, each one of these could be a sermon or sermon series in and of themselves. We're just going to skim the surface for a broad picture. So let's start at the beginning...

#### I. CONSUMMATION - INTIMACY BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN REFLECTS GOD'S IMAGE IN COVENANT, PROMISE-KEEPING LOVE (1:27; 2:23-24).

The very first thing that the bible tells us about humanity is that we were made in God's image, created as two genders, male and female. There are TONS of suggestions about what exactly it means for us to have been created in God's image:

- Some believe that it means God's form actually looks something like our human form.
- Some believe that God's image in us refers to our ability to reason, or to exercise dominion.
- Another helpful view is that God created us in plural but unified relationship to represent His love that exists within the Trinity.

It doesn't say with crystal clarity what that means, probably because ALL of those and more are true about God's imprint in us. But I want to suggest that one of the most important understandings of God's image in us actually a FOUNDATIONAL PURPOSE for the gift of sex - that is CONSUMMATING - or officially sealing Covenant, Promise-Keeping Love in marriage.

LITERALLY the first thing that happens when God creates humanity is that He designs a partnership between man and woman for them to be united in some profound, covenantal way.

Man and Woman represent physically DIFFERENT individuals uniting in commitment to form a whole new identity. Likewise, from the beginning, we see God uniting Himself with humanity in a special relationship. God's character is unchanging, yet God's status has changed by creating and covenanting with humanity. He's no longer just God, or I AM, He's the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He's Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God, who has covenanted with us forever in His blood.

I hope you feel the weight of how ridiculous that seems. REALLY taking stock of all our failures as a collective whole, I have no idea why God would want to do that.

That's part of the reason why it's so easy for so many people to conceive of God as this distant Clock-Maker sort of God who created everything and then just sort of observes from a distance. Why would God WANT to be actively involved with us?

AND YET the Bible describes a God who not only set all things into motion, but who is actively involved in His Creation. Who loves us and covenants with us. Who is faithful to us even when we're not.

And from the very beginning, God gave us this gift of marriage and within it the gift of sexual intimacy as a physical symbol and reminder of the deep love and affection that He has for us. Marriage and the sexual relationship that seals and binds that promise is designed to be a physical representation of God's love.

This is beautiful to me, but it's also deeply problematic for our cultural norms for sex and romance:

We WANT our romantic lives to be private. The prevailing attitude of our world is that what happens in the bedroom is nobody else's business. But the truth is that our romantic, covenantal relationships say something to a watching world about what love truly is.

That's why it's so devastating when marriage ended or distorted. And it's why it's SO important for us to cherish and take seriously. Now I'm obviously not saying that we should be exhibitionists - BUT married people shouldn't be afraid to show in appropriate ways how this gift serves them for the better.

Here's an example: Growing up my parents were divorced, and most all my friends' parents were divorced. I remember distinctly visiting my college roommate at his house freshman year and becoming VERY uncomfortable when his dad came home from work and just starting hanging out with his mom in the dining room while Michael and I watched a movie. They were just having a pleasant conversation - and flirting even...and I was like - why aren't they fighting?

The lack of tension made me tense, and I immediately realized that I was the weird one, not them. That little interaction was probably trivial to them, but it completely reshaped the way 18-year old Cory thought about what a marriage relationship SHOULD look like.

Now you might be saying - but hey, what does that have to do with sex? Well, it's all connected. From little flirty moments to the big sha-bang, it's all affection, and it all matters. The dining room flirting affects the bedroom later, and the bedroom affects the dining room flirting.

I could go on, but the point is this: Physical affection in all its forms, and especially in the gift of sex, communicates something about what love is and what it's supposed to look like. So we need to be mindful of how we steward that gift - because it says something about the Gift-giver.

II. PROCREATION - SEXUAL INTIMACY CONTINUES GOD'S CREATIVE WORK IN BEARING NEW LIFE (1:28).

The SECOND purpose we see for the gift of sex is fairly obvious - PROCREATION. The very first command that God gives to Adam and Eve (as well as all other living creatures) was to get to it and start having some babies.

One of my favorite comedians is Pete Lee - he's a clean comic, he's not actually a Christian comedian, he's just from Wisconsin.

In one of his bits, he talks about how insane it is that so many people spend so much time "making love" when they don't actively don't want the thing that that act creates.

It's like mixing a bunch of flour, milk, sugar, and eggs up in a pan - putting it in the oven - and then 45 minutes later pulling it out quickly and being like "Oh, no, no no - Oh man, we almost made a cake. Oh man, that was close. I don't know what we would've done if there was a cake in there. That cake would've changed everything!"

Or worse - "That's not my cake, that cake doesn't even look like me!"

Now that's not to say that having kids is the ONLY reason to enjoy sex as the fruit of marriage. There are many married folks who can't have kids, and that doesn't make their marriages and their intimate lives any less valid, meaningful, or beautiful. But bearing children is obviously A purpose for sex, and an important one at that.

God gives us the gift of joining in His creative work by literally bearing and nurturing new life as an outgrowth of the affection and promises shared between two lovers. So if that's a part of the equation, then any legitimate sexual act must be open to that possible result.

I think that there can be a place for contraceptives and family planning, but I'll also say that if you aren't at least open to the possibility of bearing a child, then you should probably not be doing the thing that can result in a child. If you're not ready as a couple emotionally, financially, spiritually, physically, and relationally to have and raise a child - then you should maybe take a moment.

That's an important thing to keep in mind when seeking out sex for its 3rd PURPOSE: PLEASURE

### III. PLEASURE - SEXUAL INTIMACY IS A GOOD AND PLEASANT GIFT (1:31).

Pleasure in sex isn't so much related to a command so much as it is intrinsic to the act itself. Sex is a good and pleasing gift from God that brings good and pleasing feelings.

The Genesis passage doesn't mention specifics about sex as a gift for pleasure - but God does immediately look back upon all that He's made directly after creating man and woman and giving them this command to be fruitful and multiply and he says, "This is VERY good!"

There's something striking about the overt PHYSICALITY of the Creation narrative. God did NOT take perfect souls and spiritual bodies and entrap them in evil fleshly things - as some world faiths suggest.

God creates and calls the physical creation GOOD. Because of sin, God's gifts in creation experience distortions and brokenness, but it's important to remember that God's physical creation was called good from the beginning and is being and will be redeemed.

The Apostle Paul actually warned of false teachers who tried to make distinctions between the soul and body as if we were perfect souls trying to escape from corrupt bodies. In 1 Timothy 4:<sup>3</sup> he says, "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. <sup>4</sup> For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving"

God created the the Garden of Eden - he's the one who INVENTED pleasure! Pleasure is a good thing. But we have to be careful with pleasures of any sort because they can lead to danger if we lose control.

Song of Songs is an entire book of the bible dedicated to the pleasure of sex, and it says it well when the speaker proclaims,

2:<sup>7</sup> "Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field:

Do not arouse or awaken love  
until it so desires.

The love it's talking about here is deep, enduring romantic affection. It's saying, listen, this gift is SO good that you need to be patient and careful, because it's like playing with fire. Elsewhere it describes love saying "it's jealousy is as demanding as the grave" and "many waters cannot quench this love."

This gift can be a light and a well-spring of life, but handled poorly it can wreck you. So you need to approach this pleasure with wisdom.

I'll say this, one of the lies that our culture tells us is that you need to make sure you're physically compatible with someone before you make a commitment. [That's a dangerous lie] What if they're not a good kisser? What if they aren't good in bed?

Here's the truth that they either don't know or don't admit: You can TALK to your spouse about what's working and what isn't. You can practice and get better. Actually, it's really fun to practice.

When Lydia and I had our first kiss - it wasn't all that spectacular. I mean, yes, sparks were flying and it was great because we really cared for each other, but in terms of the mechanics of it, it

was pretty awful. It was all of like 2 and a half seconds of pursed lips and her saying, "Goodnight," and rushing into her dorm because she was so caught off guard.

It got way better, and we really enjoyed the practice. That principle has held up in other areas too!

But honestly, the COMMUNICATION part is so important because those things are going to change with time - especially as you get older and go through different seasons where those drives and desires just change.

You shouldn't just be looking for someone who brings pleasure in the moment. You should be looking for someone who you can trust enough to speak openly and honestly about the things that matter to you.

The pleasure of intimacy, romantic love, and the physical act that accompanies it is a powerful, good gift, and one that we should wait to experience with someone we trust enough to share it with for the long haul - through all the ups and downs of life.

#### IV. LOVE - SEXUAL INTIMACY CAN BRING HEALING AND UNITY THROUGH LOVE (2:25).

That brings us to the Last, and definitely not least, purpose for sexual intimacy - LOVE - particularly love that brings healing and unity.

When the bible speaks of sexual passion it is often translated as "love" - in Greek the word is *eros* and in Hebrew it's *dod*. [Can you say those with me?]

More often the bible speaks of God's unfailing and unconditional love - in Greek it's *agape*, in Hebrew it's *ahava* (a deep affection and commitment) or *hesed* (unfailing loving-kindness).

But just because there's different words for them in those languages doesn't mean they're that easy to parse apart. Eskimo tribes have more than 40 different words for snow - but it's all still snow.

It's important that as we hold up the example of God's enduring, unconditional love for one another in our communities, we also appreciate the unique gift of intimate, passionate love as an expression of that same love.

In Genesis 2:24, it said that man would leave his father and mother and be united in one flesh. And then it said that Adam and Eve were naked together, and they felt no shame.

That won't last forever - it's not long before they both mess up, and as a result they end up realizing their vulnerability and hiding their nakedness in shame.

But there's something profound about a husband and wife being the only ones who see each other at their most vulnerable, with nothing in between them.



Lydia and I often try to impress upon couples that we counsel that in their most intimate moments, they have the most opportunity to heal and the most opportunity to wound each other. With every tender word spoken, with every loving glance, and especially with every present moment in vulnerability - you bear the ability to heal the wounds and lies that your partner believes when Satan tells them they aren't good enough.

Likewise, with every careless comment, every indifferent moment, and every time you leave when things get difficult - a sexual partner has the ability to exponentially wound the other.

Those principles are true of any relationship, but when sex is thrown into the mix everything is heightened to another level. It's MEANT to enhance the love relationship of a marriage by bringing emotional and spiritual intimacy into alignment with physical intimacy.

But when that physical relationship falters, it can equally wound the other emotionally and spiritually.

Sins and wounds that involve sexual intimacy can produce some of the most intense shame that a person can experience, and it can stick with you for a long time. But on the flip side, healthy experiences of sexual intimacy in a covenantal marriage relationship can have incredible "de-shaming" potential.

To be seen at your most vulnerable, with nothing left to hide, and to be accepted and tenderly loved...it has the potential to speak a profound message of grace and acceptance that counters the lies of the Enemy that seeks to tear us down.

It mirrors the grace of a Savior who sees us and knows us more intimately than we even know ourselves and says - "You, I want YOU, I'm dying for YOU, forever and always, and there's nothing you could ever do to make me leave."

## CONCLUSION

I hope you're getting a picture of why I wanted to do this sermon series. Our culture is sex obsessed, and yet it doesn't really even understand it. We have to do a better job as the Church in reclaiming the GOOD NEWS inherent in this Gift.

The gift of sexual intimacy, as given within the context of marriage between man and wife, is meant to give a physical witness to God's image of promise-keeping love, to create new life, to bring joy and pleasure, and to bring healing and unity into the love relationship.

What's love got to do with it? EVERYTHING. Without love, sex is completely meaningless.

Sex is a wonderful gift that witnesses to the character of the loving, gift-giving God. But it's NOT THE ULTIMATE gift. The ultimate gift that God gives us is salvation and communion with Him.

If you are a married couple, or a single person hoping to experience this gift - my prayer is that God might guide you and bless you in receiving the fruits of this gift in full.

If you're single, divorced, or widowed and this is just not a part of your life - my prayer is that you might be affirmed in the fact that this is JUST ONE of the many ways that God can accomplish these purposes in your life, and that you might flourish ever the more in fidelity, creativity, joy, and love.

As Philip Yancey puts it, "the Bible uses explicit romantic images to describe God's love for us: what we feel in passing for one person, God feels eternally for the many. If we receive romantic love not as an end in itself but as God's gift, a shining grace, it can become like a shaft of light beckoning us toward what we will someday experience more fully as resurrected beings."

That love and grace that the gift of sex demonstrates in this life is just a pale reflection of the intimacy and joy we'll experience in God's Kingdom when all is made new.

May we yearn and hope for that wonderful day. Amen.