

Beyond the News

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Sex as an Appetite

By Peter Eng

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In our conversation about the need to bring the appetite for food under the lordship of Christ, just as Jesus brought his appetite under subjection, the most natural follow-up question would be: "What about the appetite for sex?"

Food and sex are the two appetites that we readily understand. They are very similar in terms of appetite, but they are different in character. Sex as an appetite in relation to food deserves a separate treatment.

The Approach

First, we should note the biblical approach to sex. It is not raw, or crass, or in isolation. The Bible talks about our sexuality in many places, but it is not the in-your-face approach of today. It is sex in the context of intimacy. There are many examples of perverted sexuality in the biblical narratives. But these narratives do not tantalize. Instead they are in the context of moral direction. Our attention is drawn to the teachings about sexuality as it ought to be.

The biblical conversation about sexuality is usually expressed in euphemisms. That is to say,

it is expressed politely and often only by inference. We don't need to be crass when we talk about sexuality as if it is some proof of our openness and enlightenment. This is especially so when we note that the Bible is not particularly engaged in the mechanics of sex, but the joy and fulfillment in such a union. Sex is embedded in the larger context of human appetite and need for intimacy.

This is rightly so.

The appetite for sex is felt more keenly at certain points in a person's life than at others. But the need for intimacy is true at all stages of life. Older people feel this need keenly as they wrestle with loneliness. Our view of sexuality should not be narrowly limited to the acute need of the young, but should also include the chronic need of older people.

Intimacy in the enjoyment of life

Ecclesiastes is about the enjoyment of life. It is about the futile quest for pleasure by King Solomon, and his final realization of what it means to enjoy this short life that we have.

"So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this! Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne! Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun."

Ecc 9: 7-9 (NLT)

Solomon tells of the "meaningless" of life. This word includes nuances like: useless, futile or transient and precarious. Seen from one angle, we seem like insignificant creatures in the large cycle of life and death. In light of such meaninglessness, and such a futile pursuit of happiness in life, wherein lies true enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes is a powerful work on how a believer can find true pleasure and enjoyment in the face of this seemingly meaningless grind. Naturally, intimacy is part of this conversation. But it is in the context of the enjoyment of life.

We are creatures with creaturely appetites. God made us this way. So Solomon tells us to learn enjoyment in four things: food, drink, work, and intimacy.

Solomon urges us, "Go on, don't hold back from enjoying the few days you have on this earth. Eat your food with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart. Don't complain when you eat and drink, just enjoy your food and drink." Instead of going about disheveled and smelly, clean up and groom yourself. Look dapper! As for you and your wife, love her, and live with her joyfully. There is no joy in being discontented with your wife, and no pleasure in philandering.

The word translated "live joyfully" is a visual word in Hebrew. It means to look with joy and to enjoy just gazing at your wife. "Enjoy life with your wife." (NIV). "Live happily with the woman you love." (NLT). The married life is indicated here. A shared bed, a shared life, shared pains and sorrows, shared joys and successes. When we share our burdens with a life partner, they are halved. When we share our joys, they are doubled.

Sexuality is not fulfilling when enjoyed only for its own sake. Even worse than sex for its own sake is sex to fulfill a mental craving, such as: control, conquest, a power trip, affirmation of some inferiority, etc.

In the Bible we see the fullness of sexuality in all its intended richness. The object of our striving is full intimacy with our spouse – the one we love. When we uncouple sex from love and fulfillment in a marriage union, we remove a pleasure from its right context, and in the process, we abuse it.

There is no perfect analogy, but there are two that come to mind. It is like a person who says sugar makes my food tasty, so I will isolate it and enjoy it by itself. Sugar is still sweet, but enjoyed by itself, it can damage our health. Another analogy may be the stimulant, alkaloids, in the coca leaves. This was used as one might use tea or coffee today, but that active ingredient is isolated to produce cocaine, an addictive and life-destroying drug.

What starts out as a gift from God becomes a curse when isolated from its right context. Sex isolated from intimacy can easily lead us down that destructive path.

Similar and Different

Sex is like food in many ways. It is a legitimate appetite. There is a legitimate satisfaction. With certain exceptions, the appetite once sated is satisfied. Sex, like food, can become an addiction. It can be perverted and made the focal point of life. Everything can become defined by a particular appetite. Because these are natural appetites, it is easy for us to justify the craving even when it becomes excessive.

God wants us to enjoy food and sex. These are his gifts to us. At the same time, when either dominates our life, we go off kilter.

Spiritual strength is not coincidental. It is cultivated. We can begin that cultivation from anywhere, in any area. For some, that discipline begins with food. For others it begins with sex.

Overindulgence

Unlike obesity from overeating, we cannot readily see our problem in sexual overindulgence. But the situation is no less significant. Overindulgence in a legitimate appetite turns God's blessing into a curse. If our society has overindulged in food, it has also overindulged in sex.

The Christian approach to sex is fulfillment, which should not be confused with indulgence.

Food and sex are appetites that require discipline. The Apostle Paul is candid. He tells us that it is better for two people to marry than to burn with unfulfilled passion. ([1 Cor 7:9](#)). We see one important reason for marriage is the satisfaction of the physical union. The entire text is helpful:

¹Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to live a celibate life. ²But because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband.

³The husband should fulfill his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should fulfill her husband's needs. ⁴The wife gives authority over her body to her husband, and the husband gives authority over his body to his wife.

⁵*Do not deprive each other of sexual relations, unless you both agree to refrain from sexual intimacy for a limited time so you can give yourselves more completely to prayer. Afterward, you should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷But I wish everyone were single, just as I am. But God gives to some the gift of marriage, and to others the gift of singleness.*

⁸*So I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. ⁹ But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust.*

1 Cor 7:1-9 NLT

Paul begins by telling us that if a person chooses the celibate life, the person has chosen a good thing. There is nothing wrong with singlehood / celibacy. Paul strongly affirms it as good.

Those without the gift of celibacy should have his or her own spouse. This is to avoid sexual immorality. Physical intimacy is a specific provision for the majority of people who need it. Husband and wife ought to give each other their dues. It simply means that husband and wife need to give each other the intimacy expected in a marriage.

When Christian couples talk to each other, this reality should not be ignored. We should not pretend that the marriage bed is secondary to emotional connection. They come together as one.

Yes, intimacy is a duty within marriage.

Intimacy is a pleasure that expresses itself more fully when it is also a duty. As a spontaneous act, the husband-wife union emphasizes passion, and the joy of such pleasure in a secure environment. As a duty, both husband and wife set aside time and energy for this union.

Duty does not detract from pleasure. Duty is the context that fulfills a purpose of marriage and duty creates time and energy for pleasure. It is like Sabbath Day rest. The duty to rest frees us to rest. But a legalistic approach can make that rest onerous. Yet an imperfect rest is better than no rest. Similarly, the duty of intimacy frees us to engage in it. If we make that duty burdensome and allow boredom to set in, the

issue lies not with the duty that frees but our legalism that entangles.

This duty is asked of both groom and bride on the wedding day when the minister queries, "Do you take this man/woman to be your wife/husband to live together in the covenant of marriage? ... Will you love him/her, comfort him/her ...?" "Comfort" is a euphemism for the mutual provision of intimacy, though not limited to it.

Americans use the term "cheating" on a relationship in a way that is mostly unchristian. For Americans, two people in a so-called committed relationship should enjoy exclusivity in sexual union, and sexual actions outside of this relationship are considered cheating. At one level, it appears sound. The problem is that this relationship can be defined anyway we want.

It can be a homosexual relationship from which a person is cheating. In the first place, there is no legitimacy in that homosexual relationship, but it is spoken as though there is legitimacy. Two unmarried people cohabiting out of wedlock can also cheat on each other when that relationship is not approved in God's eyes.

An extra-marital affair is cheating because it breaks the marriage vow. But lumping all the other relationships together with marriage and calling all failures to maintain the integrity of extra-two-person relationships "cheating" lessens the value of marriage in that it presupposes legitimacy for the other relationships.

Paul's use of the term cheating (or its equivalent) in a marriage is surprisingly different. He says, "Defraud ye not one the other." The word translated "defraud" ([KJV](#)) or "deprive" ([other translations](#)) are both correct. The sense is "to defraud by depriving." When we deprive someone of something that is due to them we are defrauding / cheating the person.

The failure to fulfill the duty of the marriage bed is considered cheating by Paul!

Here cheating is not what we do, but what we fail to do. When a spouse fails to provide the comfort, that spouse is defrauding the other party. The Bible tells us that one purpose of marriage is for two people to provide comfort to each other. A person not willing to provide this comfort should not enter into marriage.

The Bible gives us the condition for a married couple to abstain from intimacy. (1) It is with mutual consent. (2) It is only a temporary arrangement, and we should come together again so Satan will not tempt us in our lack of self-control. (3) It is for the purpose of fasting and prayer. One paraphrase of the text captures the sense by saying:

^{7:1}Now, getting down to the questions you asked in your letter to me. First, is it a good thing to have sexual relations? ²Certainly — but only within a certain context. It's good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder. ³The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality — the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. ⁴Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out. ⁵Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it, and if it's for the purposes of prayer and fasting — but only for such times. Then come back together again. Satan has an ingenious way of tempting us when we least expect it. ⁶I'm not, understand, commanding these periods of abstinence — only providing my best counsel if you should choose them.

(THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language)

There is little passion for an ascetic life in our indulgent society. There were [ascetics](#) among the Corinthians on one end of the spectrum and [libertines](#) of the other end. Paul balances these two extremes by saying that he is not commanding abstinence, and should a couple wish to abstain, they should do it because they want to give themselves completely to prayer and fasting, and then to come together again.

Here we see prayer and fasting reappearing in the context of spiritual discipline. A couple (perhaps young and hot-blooded) is not commanded to abstain from each other. But if they wish to do so as an exercise in spiritual discipline, they may do so. It should not be for an extended period of time because Satan has a way of working on our inability to abstain from sex.

We are told not to cheat each other by depriving each other of the intimacy that is part of the marriage bond. Such abstinence should be by mutual consent. It is not the unilateral declaration of one party to abstain from intimacy.

Like hunger, the desire for physical intimacy can condition and redirect our affections towards God. As our cravings increase, the spiritual discipline to focus on God also increases. People who are not gifted in celibacy can also use their sexuality as a means to spiritual strength through fasting.

Lest some get carried away and advocate celibacy for people not gifted in it, God's word tells us this deliberate discipline in abstinence is not meant to be a long-term or extended enterprise. Husband and wife should not remain in abstinence for too long. They should come together again so their unfilled craving will not become the fertile ground for Satan to tempt them.

Unlike abstinence from food, one does not die from abstinence from sex. When we are well-fed and well-clothed, the craving for sex can feel all consuming. It can hinder clear thinking. It changes our perception so we rationalize sinful action and do not see our folly. We can engage in high risk behavior to satisfy this craving. In our own lives and in the lives of others, we have seen how sexual craving has led to poor decisions and many regrets. When these cravings are not under control, Paul asks us to find satisfaction in the marriage bed.

How much we need to exercise spiritual discipline over sexual craving is proportionate to the craving. It is ironic that the one with the strongest craving is also the one who is in most urgent need to bring that under the lordship of Christ. It is like food. The one blessed with an excellent appetite is also the one who needs to bring it under control. The one with the gift of celibacy may find abstinence to be easily achievable, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

The precise opposite of what we should do is to incite a craving. If we indulge in activities that fan sexual passion outside of marriage, we are creating a weakened spiritual will and a strengthened lust. All sexual cravings should be directed within marriage.

There are many motivations for sexual adventurism in addition to an overstimulated appetite. Such as, the desire to feel romantic love again, the need to feel attractive, the desire to control another person, anger at one's own spouse, the desire to explore the dark side, etc. These are specialized topics beyond our current scope. Instead, it is more useful for us to address a forgotten aspect of sexuality as we look at sex as an appetite.

A Forgotten Aspect

Our sexuality is fully expressed and enjoyed in procreation. In the past, every act of sexual union carries with it the possibility of pregnancy. The invention and use of contraceptives changed that. The Roman Catholic Church is almost alone in their objection to the use of contraceptives. While their objection is unnecessary, there is one aspect of their reasoning worth considering. That is, the union between a man and a woman should naturally carry with it the possibility of having a child through that union.

"Sex is for reproduction," a pious Christian might say some fifty years ago. This must sound extreme to us. We balk at this because it disregards God's intention for us to enjoy this union. But the other reason why it sounds so alien to us is that we have swung to the other extreme as a society. The use of contraceptives (not wrong in itself), has given rise to a new social culture that is capable of uncoupling sex from procreation.

Sex has become so recreational that procreational sex is considered strange.

It is our Christian calling to produce godly descendants. When a Christian couple engages in procreation, they are fulfilling a spiritual calling. As Christians living in a society of recreational sex, we have forgotten the worth of procreational sex.

Imagine, if you will, the fullness of Christian sexuality. It is the culmination of the love two people have for each other. It is a joyful act of obedience in producing a new generation of children who love the Lord. And it is the enjoyment of the intimacy itself.

Conclusion

In the past, intimacy is so obscure that we are not supposed to talk about it. In the present,

sex is indulged for its own sake, that we are cast adrift from our moorings of sex in the context of intimacy and procreation.

Our conversation on sex as an appetite cannot be examined apart from this fuller context. It is a gift from God that can be abused. It should be enjoyed in its fullness, and not isolated from its context of marital intimacy and procreation.

As an appetite, we need to bring it under control as the need may be. From time to time, we need to realign our passions so that our sexuality is at its optimum in God's design. Our sexuality is rightly and fully developed within marriage.

How did we get so far off-track as a society? Sex is outside marriage. Sex is an isolated pleasure. Sex is recreational and not procreational. Is it any wonder that surveys have discovered that as a people, we have more sex than in the past, but we are cursed with less satisfaction than ever.

If there is a time to return to God's intended design for our sexuality, it must surely be now. Let every sexual frustration become one call more strident than the other to return to God's design for us to find true satisfaction.

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