

Biblical Sexual Ethics: What Sexual Activity Is Permitted Before Or Outside Of Marriage?



The Bible teaches us that God has reserved all forms of sexual activity as His gift to those who join to one another in marriage covenant relationship. As such, any sexual act performed before marriage is considered sexual immorality, is strictly prohibited and serious sin. Additionally, all extra-marital sexual activity that is physical, constitutes a capital crime¹.

“Scripture necessitates reserving any and all sexual activity for the marriage relationship. Or to state again, the New Testament conveys – both theologically and exegetically – that all premarital relationships are to be completely non-sexual... Our problem is not that we have failed to recognize the New Testament’s prohibition against premarital sexual activity; rather we have failed to fully reckon with the reality that there is more to sexual activity than intercourse. Oral sex, fondling, and mutual masturbation, for example, are all sexual activities. It is inconceivable that the New Testament’s ethic – insofar as it is an extension of the Torah – intends to leave room for such activities outside of marriage. Once we embrace the biblical ideal that sexual activity must be reserved for the marriage relationship, the question, ‘How far is too far?’ – a perennially vexing question for singles – is easily answered. If an activity is sexual, it is to be reserved for the marriage relationship.” – Gerald Hiestand (“Biblical-Theological Approach To Premarital Sexual Ethics: Or, What Would Paul Say About Making Out,” *Bulletin of Ecclesiastical Theology*)

“Sex outside of marriage is never moral. This includes all forms of intimate sexual stimulation that stir up sexual passion between unmarried partners.” – The Colorado Statement On Biblical Sexual Morality

Support:

1. Sexual activity – which includes all forms of sexual behavior, including but not limited to sexual intercourse, are the exclusive rights and divine gift of only those who have entered into an acceptable marriage covenant before God² (Gen 2:24-25 – “not ashamed” to give their naked beauty to one another and become “one flesh”).

2. The words (πορνεία/πόρνος = pornography) translated in the New Testament as “sexual immorality” or “immorality”:

2.1. In the most general sense, refer to the act of giving your (sexual/naked) beauty to someone other than your spouse (see Eze 16:15 – “whorings” = πορνεία)

2.2. Were terms used in first century to refer to **all** extra-marital sexual activity (kissing, fondling, masturbation, intercourse, etc).³

3. Both terms represent that which is always condemned by God (e.g. Mat 5:32, 19:9; Mar 7:21; Joh 8:41; Act 15:29; 1Co 5:1, 9-11, 6:9, 13, 18, 7:2; 2Co 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; 1Th 4:3; 1Ti 1:10; Heb 12:16; Rev 2:21, 14:8, 17:2, 4, 19:2, 22:15).

4. The Judaism of Jesus’ day taught that marriage is the only allowable outlet for men and women to express their sexuality. “Bli yadayim” (hands off) is the term used by orthodox Jews today to describe this practice/prohibition.

5. Those activities considered (sexually) inappropriate between biological relatives are equally considered (in Scripture) to be inappropriate activities between individuals who are not married. In other words, God sees such actions as sexually immoral (Gen 26:8-9; “laughing w/” = lit. caressing/fondling; Notice – Abimelech immediately concludes that such activity must mean Isaac and Rebekah are married – an assumption not refuted by Isaac or the text; 1Ti 5:2).

6. This is why there is no distinction within Scripture between kissing or sexual intercourse. It is either sexually immoral or sexually pure with the determining factor being who it is with (versus) what act is taking place (1Th 4:3-6 – Notice, the issue is not *what* [what kind of sexual act has been performed?], but who [who has been wronged?]).

7. All sexual activity symbolizes Christ’s relationship to His Church (Eph 5:22-32). This too confirms such activity as restricted to marriage since Christ has no intimacy of any kind with those who are not His Bride (or Church).

¹ The designation, physical is necessary to distinguish such activity from that which is only mental or “in the heart” (Mat 5:27). Like murder, sexual crimes which are capital in nature relate only to those that involve physical activity.

² The only marriages acceptable and recognized by God are covenant relationships established between a man and a woman for the purpose of sharing life and sexual intimacy. Though marriage can assume other purposes (e.g. the propagation of the race/family), this is not the primary reason God gave it to man (see Gen 2:18-24). The entirety of this paper assumes this as the definition of marriage.

³ “In both the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, sexual immorality would have included any kind of sexual activity between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman... Πορνεία was a catch-all word used to reference any kind of sexual activity outside the bounds of proper sexual conduct. In Paul’s day avoiding πορνεία would have entailed avoiding any kind of sexual activity – even light sexual activity – between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman...When the biblical authors wrote, ‘Abstain from sexual immorality,’ their hearers knew exactly what they meant. In the first century context, appropriate conduct meant treating members of the opposite sex in a completely non-sexual way. For further analysis of πορνεία or πόρνος see Raymond Collins, *Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief*, or William Loader, *Sexuality and the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts*.

8. When God's people participate in extra-marital sexual activity with pagans, they are also guilty of idolatry (sexual idolatry - i.e. creating a spiritual bond to the false gods of those persons; Num 25:1ff [LXX = ἐκπορνεύω = indulge in sexual immorality – Jud 1:7] w/1Co 10:8 w/1Co 6:15-20 = sexual activity equals spiritual activity; see also 2Co 6:14-7:1 w/12:21 – Notice [7:1], “defilement of body *and* spirit” = both are defiled in sexual immorality)⁴.
9. 1Corinthians 7:16 reveals another reason extra-marital sexual activity is sin: it is an attempt to unite households without the necessary covenant or consent of the householders (i.e. the parents/father). In this respect, it is also an act of rebellion against ones' parents (i.e. dishonoring your father and mother) whose household a person belongs to until marriage (Rut 1:8; Consider also - Jesus' submission to His mother even at 30 yrs of age – Joh 2:3-7).
10. In ancient times, the economic benefit and severe consequences associated with providing a virgin bride kept Jewish fathers from allowing their daughters into environments where there was any possibility of pre-marital sexual activity (e.g. Deu 22:13-21). As such, this reveals (and further re-enforces) the kind of precautionary measures God expects will be taken to avoid sexual sin (Mat 5:27-30 – Notice, Jesus gives this command w/relation to sexual sins of the mind. How much more the admonition as it regards physical sin!)⁵
11. Considering Jesus' teaching on our eternal state in heaven (i.e. celibate – Mat 22:30) provides yet additional support to the prohibition of any sexual activity before marriage since everyone assumes that to also be what Jesus is inferring by such words. In other words, because there will be no marriage in heaven, there will also be no sexual activity whatsoever (i.e. the angels don't make out, masturbate or fondle one another).
12. Paul's response to those experiencing strong sexual desire: Get married (1Co 7:7-9)! Never then, the exercising of our passions in any form of extra-marital sexual activity (1Co 7:1 – “not to have sexual relations” = lit. not to touch, as in sexually)⁶.
13. Paul's response to those exercising their passions in some form of extra-marital sexual activity: Stop it/Flee from it or go to Hell (1Co 6:9-10, 18 – “Flee” [φεύγω, “fugitive”] = to seek safety through putting distance between you and the danger, e.g. Act 27:30; see also Eph 5:5-7).
14. The Old Testament phrase, “lies with” (e.g. Exo 22:19) is a figure of speech referring to all physical sexual activity and not simply sexual intercourse. This can be easily surmised by considering that:
- 14.1. A literal understanding of the phrase proves both salacious (i.e. God cares about sexual positions) - even non-sensical (e.g. Consider: Lev 18:22, 20:13 -How does a man have vaginal intercourse with another man?)
- 14.2. Scripture bears evidence of using a different phrase (e.g. “goes in to her”) when referring specifically to sexual intercourse in a context that also uses “lies with”. Hence confirming the broader the scope of this phrase (Deu 22:13-15 w/22-29).
15. Therefore, all deviant forms of physical sexual activity - not just intercourse (i.e. adultery, homosexuality, sexual-idolatry, bestiality, non-spousal masturbation), qualify as a capital crime (Exo 22:19, Lev 18:22-23, 20:11-16).
16. Considering that πορνεία is grounds for divorce (Mat 5:32), furthers strengthens the fact that God also views it as a capital crime.

⁴ In the case of Christians already married to pagans, Paul makes it clear that this principle no longer applies as the unbelieving spouse is “sanctified” by the believing spouse (see 1Co 7:14).

⁵ “Indeed, the ability of a respectable young woman to find a suitable partner was, in no small part, contingent upon her father's ability to prove her chastity. Since a daughter's contribution to the family was often found in her ability to secure a socially or economically advantageous marriage, a father in the ancient world typically took great pains to protect the moral integrity of her reputation until the day of her marriage...Respectable young women, even in the pagan culture, did not spend time alone with males who were not part of their household, nor did they engage in even light sexual activity prior to marriage. In fact, respectable unmarried women in the ancient world were, in many respects, not easily afforded the opportunity to engage in sexual misconduct. (this explains why the commands in the Bible regarding sexual purity are almost all directed toward men, who, unlike young women, would have more social license to visit prostitutes to take a mistress.)” – G. Hiestand (*Sex, Dating and Relationships*)

⁶ “For Paul the marriage relationship is the only legitimate context for satisfying one's sexual passions. Paul not only recommends marriage as a bulwark against sexual temptation, but in fact commands it (note Paul's use of the imperative form of “to marry” in verse 9). Failure to seek legitimate means of sexual release places oneself in harm's way, and creates temptation toward illegitimate sexual activity. Those who have a strong desire for sexual intimacy must not continue to ‘burn’ indefinitely, not seek to quench that burning in illegitimate ways outside the marriage bounds. The sexual ethic is clear: sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage relationship.” – G. Hiestand (“Biblical-Theological Approach To Premarital Sexual Ethics: Or, What Would Paul Say About Making Out,” *Bulletin of Ecclesiastical Theology*)