

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

This is the sixth article in a series examining the counsel God's word gives single men and women in the process of finding a marriage partner while relating to other single men and women. Last month we considered some of God's good purposes for sexual union in marriage. This month we want to establish God's definition of sexual immorality. It is critical that we state as clearly as possible what kinds of physical contact God prohibits because of the culture that we live in. Sexual contact between unmarried people is considered normal and even desirable in our culture. To be 19 and a virgin is considered shameful in the broader culture. Sexual contact is no longer even limited by being "in love". "Hooking up" is normative within the current youth culture. Over 60% of 18 year olds report having had sexual intercourse. In this oversexed climate the church must unapologetically declare God's standard for sexual purity.

The NT says that those who live sexually immoral lives will not go to heaven, no matter how much they say they believe in Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:3-6, Colossians 3:5-6, etc.). This does not mean that those who have been sexually immoral cannot be forgiven but rather that a true Christian hates sexual immorality and is in an all out war to avoid it, just as he or she is in an all out war to avoid all sin (Romans 6:1-14, Galatians 5:16-18). If a person continues to live in sexual immorality and does not view it as hell-deserving sin, which must be repented of, then that person is most likely not a Christian. Perhaps the most straight forward command regarding sexual immorality is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "It is God's will that you be sanctified: that you avoid sexual immorality..."

However, what is sexual immorality? What is it that we are to avoid? Over the years as I have talked with hundreds of men about this subject and as I have wrestled with the biblical text I have come up with a definition of what sexual immorality is that is not simply a list of forbidden actions. The problem with listing behaviors is that while the big bad behaviors are obvious, i.e., adultery, bestiality, homosexuality, etc., as you come closer to simple acts of affection, like holding hands, you run into trouble unless you are prepared to say that there can be absolutely no physical expressions of affection between unmarried and unrelated men and women, which I don't think you can do in light of biblical injunctions to "greet one another with a holy kiss."

There have been three texts that have helped me to form this definition. First and most importantly, Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28 that simply looking a woman "lustfully" is the same as committing adultery in God's eyes. This means that sexual immorality can take place without actually doing anything besides look at a woman. What is a "lustful look"? A look that stimulates sexual desire in the one looking is a lustful look. It is the stimulation of sexual desire for someone to whom you are not married that is at the heart of sexual immorality. This can happen by merely looking as well as through a whole host of other behaviors like flirting, immodest dress, holding hands, romantic/sensual emails, etc. This verse leads me to define sexual immorality as "*any intentional act or thought designed to create or stimulate sexual desire in myself or another person unless I am married to the other person.*" It is necessary to put that word "intentional" in the

definition because there will be occasions when we become sexually stimulated simply by virtue of living in this world and relating to people of the opposite sex. The key is that when I discover something I am seeing or some relationship that I am in or some way that I am dressing is stimulating sexual desire in myself or others, then I immediately desist because I desire to be sexually pure.

There are two other verses that help give clarity to this basic definition particularly for single people who are relating to other singles or who are involved in “dating” relationships. The first is 1 Timothy 5:1-2 where Paul says to his young apprentice Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers and the younger women as sisters in all purity.” Paul is giving to young Timothy, who is single, a paradigm for evaluating the appropriateness of his relationships to other members of the body of Christ by using familial terms. In particular women are to be treated as mothers and sisters. I think it is a clear deduction from this verse that Christian sexual ethics can be stated this way: “if you can’t do it with your mother (father) or biological sister (brother) then you can’t do it with your girlfriend (boyfriend).”

Finally, Hebrews 13:4 says, “Let marriage be held in honor by all and let the marriage bed be undefiled for God will punish the adulterous and sexually immoral.” Honoring marriage and maintaining sexual purity are related but different things in this verse. Thus you have not fully honored marriage simply by remaining sexually pure. Rather, there is a way of relating to other men and women in every aspect of our lives that communicates the sacredness and honor of marriage. All of us are responsible to evaluate how our relationships to those men and women to whom we are not married either honor or dishonor marriage. In addition, married couples have a responsibility to honor marriage by how they relate to one another and talk about one another. In our next article we will begin to consider together what are some practical ways in which single men and women can relate to one another in such a way that marriage is honored while marriage partners are found, if God so leads.

Fighting for purity with you,