

Finding Our Voice: Sex, Marriage and Christian Vision

The Beauty of Chastity: Reclaiming Sexual Virtue

Doxology Insight Conference
St Louis, August 12-13, 2015
Dr John W. Kleinig

Chastity, which was once prized and praised as an excellent virtue, is now regarded almost as a vice. Marital chastity is no longer portrayed in novels and films as something beautiful, something to be admired. Many sexually inexperienced young people are ashamed of their virginity and refuse to admit to their lack of sexual experience for fear of ridicule. Some, in fact, regard their virginity as a burden to be discarded as quickly and efficiently as possible before they go to college. While it is true that there are many in our society who oppose this denigration of chastity and virginity, they are obviously very much on the defensive. They are held in contempt. Their views are barely heard on the media except in distorted form. They rarely influence public opinion.

There was a time when the admission of extra-marital sexual adultery was regarded as an exercise in shamelessness, and the defence of it was taken as evidence of a desire to justify bad behavior. But now the tables are turned. People openly admit their sexual misbehavior without feeling any apparent need to defend themselves and their actions. We have, it seems, a new set of values which regards chastity as something undesirable, if not evil. It champions consensual sexual intercourse as something inherently good, perhaps even the highest good. Promiscuity is taken as the mark of a warm, passionate, caring person, while chastity is to be found only in cold, bloodless, miserly souls. The profession of chastity is regarded as an exercise in fearful, sanctimonious hypocrisy or else a shameful admission of frigid sexual inadequacy.

Now it is true that even though chastity is related to virginity, it is not identical with it, nor is it the same as sexual abstinence. You can be an unchaste virgin. I would therefore

like to distinguish between two kinds of chastity: the sexual chastity of an unmarried single person and the sexual chastity of a married person. Both are related and both are equally important. Both are closely aligned with sexual faithfulness in marriage. So the emphasis in the Bible and in the church has been mainly on the promotion of chastity in marriage in keeping with Luther's explanation of the sixth commandment that we should lead chaste and disciplined lives in word and deed and each love and honor our spouse. While sexuality is a good gift from God, marriage is an even greater gift. So you can't consider the virtue of chastity without also considering the beauty of marriage in itself and as a reflection of the union of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, with his bride, the church.

I would therefore like to examine chastity as a virtue which, as Chesterton once remarked, is by no means as old-fashioned as unchastity. My first series of arguments are moral and rational since I am convinced that physical chastity, bodily sexual purity, is not merely a Christian virtue but is integral to the right enjoyment of human sexuality. My second series of arguments are theological, for I hold that spiritual chastity, purity of heart, is a truly Christian virtue and a great gift from God.

A. A Moral Case for Chastity: Keeping Sex Beautiful for Ourselves and Others

This argument for chastity both before marriage and in marriage has as its foundation the conviction that sex, though obviously physical, is also a deeply personal matter. For better or worse, it touches and affects me in my very self. It has as much, if not more, to do with my mind than with my body. It affects what I think, how I feel and what grips my imagination. It has, in fact, more to do with my soul, my sense of self, me as a whole person rather than me as a man. Thus if sex is not properly personalised, it can depersonalise those who engage in it.

There are those who argue that sex is a natural, physical need, like eating, and it should be similarly satisfied (cf. 1 Cor 6:12-13). They maintain that they merely give some parts of their bodies to another person, when they have sexual intercourse with each other. Their soul, their self, however, remains as uninvolved and detached from the other person, as it is from the food that it eats. So, for them, chastity has no higher moral value than refraining from eating or drinking.

Now the analogy of eating food does not quite hold, since we must eat to remain alive. What's more, any kind of sexual intercourse, except masturbation, necessarily takes in another person, which is not the case with eating, unless you happen to be a cannibal. It is true that a person can become mentally and emotionally detached from the process of sexual intercourse, so that it becomes little more than an exercise in physical mechanics, like the transaction between a prostitute and her client or working out at the gym. But that detachment can be achieved only by violating the unity of body and soul, and at great cost to both. In schizoid fashion the mind splits itself off from the body and takes control of the sexual process, so that desire is willed and sex is made to follow the dictates of the mind and the imagination with its pornographic scenarios. Paradoxically, sex then increasingly becomes a discarnate, mental matter, what DH Lawrence once memorably described as sex on the brain (which is of course the wrong place to have it!). Emotionally disengaged sex divides the soul from the body, and disconnects it from the natural world and natural, physical sexuality. The body is then regarded as a mere thing, the focus of adoration as something beautiful or else an object of disgust as something ugly. In that way it is thoroughly depersonalised and largely abused. Such activity leads to the denial of natural sexuality. It does not yield sexual enjoyment but actually produces sexual frustration.

At best, casual sex, in which people deliberately withhold themselves from each other, devalues and destroys the currency of physical intimacy. It is then no longer capable of enacting those levels of personal intimacy and affection which cannot otherwise be

enacted. At worst, it leads to a division within the self which either retains some shreds of its integrity by retreating into the fortress of the mind, or else it disintegrates as it loses the sense of its own unity and continuity. The soul is no longer of one piece but is made up of bits and pieces. Depersonalised sex depersonalises the people who engage in it.

Another group of people agree that sex is in some sense a personal matter. For them it is a means, if not the means, by which they achieve their personhood. It is a rite of passage into personal fulfilment and wholeness.

Unlike most traditional societies, we have few clearly sanctioned rites of passage for young people in our society which bridge the transition from childhood to adulthood. So sexual intercourse is regarded by many young people as a rite of passage by which they achieve the status, identity, wisdom, and authority of an adult. By it they expect to find themselves and fulfilment for themselves.

In my lifetime this rather crude notion has been refined under the influence of certain kinds of psychology by borrowing some aspects of oriental mysticism such as tantric sex. In these circles sexual intercourse is held to aid the passage from a lower trammelled state of consciousness to a higher, liberated consciousness. By it people are initiated into a larger, superior sphere of being in which they gain greater energy, better health, fuller freedom, clearer bliss, and higher consciousness. By submitting to the cosmic current of sexuality in and about them, they have arrived; their souls have become whole. They are at harmony with themselves and their environment. They have both come to themselves and have gone beyond themselves. So sexual intercourse is prized as a kind of therapy, perhaps even an act of religious devotion, which promises salvation and transcendence to those who participate in it. Such sex has value apart from another person and a committed relationship with a particular person of the opposite sex. It is part of the cosmic order which gives us life and shapes our being. In this philosophy chastity is anomaly, a denial of the demand for maturity and growth.

Now there are considerable problems with this view of sexual intercourse as a rite of passage, as everyone who has made this transition knows. Most people feel no such transformation of themselves. They often feel little or nothing but some intangible sense of loss. Some feel disillusioned by the whole business and wonder what the fuss was all about, especially as initial attempts at sexual intercourse are so often botched. Some fear that they have compromised themselves and have perhaps even lost part of themselves in some inexplicable way.

Sex in itself does not make me somebody. It does not give me my self, nor does it heal my soul; it merely enhances or diminishes, refines or corrodes my existing self-esteem and sense of self. If I am unsettled, uncertain, or deficient in myself, sexual intercourse will confront me most powerfully with the truth about myself and may even prove to be rather destructive. This is especially so with young people who become sexually involved before they have a firm sense of themselves as persons in their own right, and before they are emotionally ready for those kinds of interaction with the opposite sex which make sexual intercourse so much more than mere physical intimacy. Urged on by public pressure and a sense of their own deficiency, they expect to find themselves and prove themselves in sexual intercourse, only to experience disillusionment and damage to their fragile self-esteem. Premature sexual intercourse is therefore much more likely to lead to a loss of self than its gain. Hence most sensitive people view it with fear as much as with desire.

Sexual intercourse is part of a relationship between two people of the opposite sex who join together and complement each other physically. Whether they know it or not, they always give something of themselves to each other in sexual intercourse. In many cases they give much more than they first plan to do, as they often come to appreciate, when they lose each other after a period of sexual cohabitation. Ideally, two people in a sexual relationship give themselves totally and unreservedly to each other. That is the Christian

ideal, the positive side to its more frequently voiced negative strictures, the reason for its advocacy of chastity. Sexual intercourse therefore involves the gift of the self physically in love to another person of the opposite sex.

Such self-giving is not complete at any one point in time, nor on any one occasion. My soul, my sense of self, is not a static fixed entity, but an historical continuum which stretches back and reaches forward in time. The gift of myself sexually thus includes my past and foreshadows my future. If that is so, then the acceptance of marriage as a process of mutual giving and receiving in marriage necessarily gives rise to the demand for chastity before and within marriage. Both fornication and adultery damage and inhibit this self-surrender. They may, in fact, prevent it from happening or diminish it when it does happen.

Chastity before marriage frees two people to give themselves totally with their whole past to each other. In a sense, they are in possession of themselves by virtue of their chastity. They have not yet been given to another, but still have themselves, unencumbered, to give wholly to the person they love. There is, theoretically speaking, no part of themselves which is sexually reserved for another and cannot therefore be shared. There is no root for sexual jealousy which inflicts and afflicts even the most rational and enlightened people. People who have not yet engaged in sexual intercourse do not bring with them the fear of recurring sexual failure and any cause for unwelcome sexual comparisons. Couples may, of course, chose to confess their previous sexual liaisons, so that their marriage is to be set on a firm basis, but that necessarily involves a partial repudiation of their past, which, I maintain, remains outside their marriage, even though it is still part of themselves and their experience. Chastity, which reserves itself sexually for marriage, cannot then by any means be equated in itself with a lack of passion and emotional generosity. Rather, it clears the way for total and passionate self-abandonment to another without any suspicious reservations and the haunting fear of hurt or failure from

previous sexual experiences. Chastity creates trust, that precious prerequisite of all personal relationships.

Don't get me wrong! I don't at all claim that people who have had no sexual experience before marriage will therefore automatically have better sexual relationships with each other. That may or may not be so. We have no way of telling, as so many diverse factors influence sexual adequacy and the capacity for sexual enjoyment. Chastity does not guarantee super-sex, but ensures that sex does not become an end in itself, a beautiful but destructive idol. It sets sex firmly within the context of a stable, personal relationship where it is a token, pledge and means of continuous self-giving and self-giveness. It subordinates sexual intercourse to the relationship between husband and wife. It personalizes sex which otherwise threatens to depersonalise people.

B. A Theological Case for Chastity: Sex as a Reflection of God's Beauty

People have always sensed a close link, if not an overlap, between sex and religion. This was especially so in the ancient world with its fertility cults, stories about the marriage of its deities, and the notion of sex as a cosmic power. What's more, sex is still the one area of life where apparently secularised people sense something sacred. In it they experience something of the captivating, yet frightening power of holiness which has so fascinated and frightened the human race for most of its chequered history. In both religion and sex we are threatened and gripped more deeply as persons in our souls than in any other areas of experience, except perhaps the mysteries of parenthood and death. In sex we come upon something mysterious, something larger than us, something beyond our control, something that takes us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves.

In contrast with that view Paul argues in Romans 1:24-25 that people don't just dishonour each other's bodies by engaging in unchastity; they dishonour God. They exchange the truth of God for a lie; they worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. In other words he argues that unchastity in all its manifestations involves idolatry and apostasy from the living God (cf. Eph 5:6; Col 3:5). And in this he merely echoes the teaching of the Old Testament. Unchastity is rebellion against God and a denial of our creaturely status. It is false worship, for it seeks from a body what no body can give. It makes an idol of a body and puts it in God's place.

This warning against sexual idolatry can only be understood in the light of God's creation of us in His image bodily as either a male or female person for cohabitation and life together with each other in marriage. We are made to mirror Him in a relationship with the opposite sex that culminates in sexual intercourse and the birth of children. In fact, God not only creates people through sexual intercourse but actually shows us a little of what He is like by marriage and the family that grows up from it. That's why sexual unchastity not only contradicts our status as people made in God's image but also impairs our relationship with God. It dims our vision of God and ourselves as people made in His image.

If unchastity damages our relationship with God, then the opposite must be also true. Chastity enhances our relationship with God. That is what gives chastity its spiritual value. Its value differs slightly, depending on whether a person is single or married, but ultimately it is the same for both.

It should therefore come as no surprise that sexual chastity is prized in the New Testament as something good and beautiful and desirable. Thus St Paul compares the relationship of the congregation in Corinth to Christ with a pure virgin who is presented to her husband in all her beauty and devoted entirely to him (2 Cor 11:2-3). Paul also presents himself to the same congregation as a model of chastity (2 Cor 6:7). Likewise, he

urges young pastor Timothy to keep himself chaste (1 Tim 5:12) and encourage younger women by treating them with absolute chastity as sisters in Christ (1 Tim 5:2). In fact, Timothy is encouraged to be a model of chastity to all believers in the way he lives with them, speaks to them, and loves them (1 Tim 4:12). In a similar vein St Peter encourages Christian women who are married to unbelievers, to win them over by the beauty of their chaste character and behaviour (1 Pet 3:1-6). He also argues that since all Christians have been made chaste and kept chaste by their obedience to the truth of the gospel, they can love each other sincerely and deeply from the heart as brothers and sisters in Christ without sexual interference (1 Pet 1:22). That's why Paul does not scold the Christians in Philippi for their sexual unchastity but, instead, makes this appeal to their imagination (Phil 4:8): **Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is chaste, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things.**

Chastity has great spiritual value for an unmarried person. This is spelt out most clearly by our Lord in Matthew 19:10-12 and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8 and 25-35. Neither of them sees being single and unmarried as a matter of shame for a Christian, as it was so often in the ancient world and is, perhaps, even more so today. Under certain circumstances, it could even be a good thing, a charisma, a special gift of grace, for those who have a special vocation from God (1 Cor 7:7). The purpose of celibate chastity is threefold. First, it frees single people to serve the Lord more simply, directly, and more whole-heartedly than married people, whose loyalty is necessarily divided between their spouse and their Lord. Secondly, it acknowledges that the chief loyalty of Christians is to their Lord who has reclaimed them totally for himself and his service. It is, lastly, a reminder that marriage, even at its best, is a provisional reality limited to this age. The union of husband and wife prefigures the ultimate, perfect physical union with Christ and

intimacy with each other in the communion of saints. So the celibacy of single Christians is a by-product of their physical devotion to the Lord and an aid to it.

Chastity in the form of marital fidelity has an equally important spiritual value for those who are married. According to Paul in Ephesians 5:17-33 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, marital chastity has to do with the bodily sanctification of those who are holy in Christ. It is the byproduct of sanctification and an aid for further participation in God's holiness. It is God's will that all our relationships should be grounded on Christ and consistent with his relationship with us. God's fidelity requires and inspires the fidelity of husband and wife to each other in marriage. Where that kind of fidelity glues a couple together in the body of Christ, there the Holy Spirit can get on with his work of sanctifying people bodily for increasing participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. Through their chaste fidelity a couple is not only refined for closer fellowship with each other but also prepared for deeper intimacy with God. So, although sexual intercourse, in itself, neither consecrates nor defiles two married people, they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit in their physical fidelity to each other and their Lord. On the other hand, sexual infidelity and impurity defile a Christian marriage by desecrating its holiness (Heb 13:4). It gives Satan a foothold in their lives. He uses it to do his destructive work with them in the bedroom.

Ultimately the demand for chastity is, as St Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, linked with the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Since God created the body, and with it our sexuality, our bodies and their sexuality are in themselves good (1 Tim 4:1-5). But, like all created things, they can be abused and defiled. We are called to be sanctified in body and soul and spirit for fellowship with God (1 Thess 5:23). This is so because our souls are closely and intimately connected with our bodies. We don't just possess bodies; we are embodied souls. Hence salvation involves our bodies, and with them the whole physical world. What we do with our bodies affects our relationship with God. Any split within ourselves between our bodies and souls damages this relationship

with Him. Since our bodies are consecrated as shrines of God's presence and temples of the Holy Spirit, they can be desecrated and defiled by sexual unchastity, and thus be made unfit for God. They, however, already now share in the eternal life of God and convey something of this physically to others. Thus we are to glorify God in our bodies which have been redeemed for sacred intimacy with a holy God.

Chastity is thus a fine virtue and an excellent gift, because in it we have a preview and foretaste of the resurrection of our fully personalised, humanised, glorified bodies (cf. Rev 14:1-5). By the hope of the resurrection our bodies acquire a dignity and glory which far exceeds the glorification of lovely human bodies by the depiction of their nakedness. In fact, the whole cult of nudity tends to trivialize, depersonalise, and ultimately desecrate the body beautiful that it seems to idolize. At the resurrection our bodies will be unveiled in such wholesome, yet dazzling splendour as will make the ritual disrobings at nudist beaches seem rather sad attempts to achieve purely physical innocence and a wholly desacralised chastity. They will no longer mask our true selves, as they have since the fall of our first parents, for we will have nothing to hide and nothing to fear from disclosing ourselves. We shall be fully at home in our bodies. They will be utterly translucent and able to show us fully as we are in Christ. Then at last we shall be truly chaste. We shall be as totally and radiantly chaste before God as Christ would have us be and as He promises to make us. St John says that we shall be as chaste as Christ is chaste (1 John 3:3). Our Lord will present us to his Father holy and splendid, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph 5:27). In the final count that is what makes chastity so beautiful and desirable.

C. Conclusion

In spite of all that I have said I must add two final qualifications. First, at the end of the chapter on "Sexual Morality" in *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis reminds his readers that Christians should not consider unchastity as the supreme vice as some zealous Christians

seem to do. Unchastity is not an unforgivable sin, nor does it spoil us permanently. Sins of the flesh may be bad, but the sins of the Spirit, such as unbelief and pride, are far worse. Conversely, chastity is by no means the supreme Christian virtue. In fact, St Paul doesn't even mention it among the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, even though he lists sexual impurity among the works of the flesh. The greatest virtue, the most important gift of the Spirit, is selfgiving love, and Christian chastity is a by-product of that kind of love.

Secondly, unlike virginity which, once lost, can never be regained, chastity can be regained through the forgiveness of sins that comes through the cleansing blood of Jesus. Those who confess their unchastity and put their trust in Christ's purity are as chaste and pure as Christ himself, for 'the blood of Jesus. . . cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). And that includes all kinds of sexual impurity.

In conclusion: we would do well champion the beauty of marriage and of marital chastity. That's what needs to grip our imagination, shape our sexual desires, and govern our sexual behaviour. That's our message to our sexually confused and disillusioned society. Let's follow Luther's example in his explanation of the sixth commandment which focuses entirely on the role of sexual chastity in our enjoyment of God's good gift of marriage. He gives this sage advice in the Large Catechism (1.219):

Wherever marital chastity is maintained, above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity. This is one of the chief ways of making chastity attractive and desirable. Under such conditions chastity always follows spontaneously without any command.

So, let's enjoy those lovely gifts without spoiling them for ourselves and others. Let's honour marriage and prize sexual purity as the author of Hebrews advises us to do when he says (13:4): **Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.**

