

(As we begin this new series, I want to read the text it comes from before I start preaching on it. So after my opening prayer, I will read this text)

Galatians 5:16-26 New International Version (NIV)

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

[remove bible verse]

We need to have “the talk”. Everyone is already having “the talk”. Every movie is talking about it. The most popular songs are talking about it. Just check the top 50 songs on Spotify. “The talk” is happening all over YouTube, which is where most young people are learning about sex. “The talk” is happening on college campuses, on playgrounds. It’s happening in your marriage. It’s happening with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Everywhere you turn people are having “the talk”, accept here in church. So it is time we talk about intimacy, about sex.

Now this is a very sensitive subject for many reasons. For many it is a subject of deep pain because of abuse. There was a study done in the best of communities in the US, and they found that one out of four women have been sexually abuse and one out of six men. This is sensitive because we have young people and even children in church.

I will do my best to just say what God’s Word says, hopefully in a caring and compassionate way.

We need to have the talk because everyone else is. And there is so much bad information out there. Not just in movies, music, and YouTube, but in our own hearts. Even our hearts have deceived us. So, let’s start by searching God’s Word and see what he says and doesn’t say about intimacy.

First of all, your life and your identity is more than who you are sleeping with. On the first page of the Bible we hear what it means to be human.

**So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)**

Your most basic identity, the most important part of who you are is that you bear the image of God. You were created to reflect the character of God. Where you are single, married, male or female. No matter what your sexual life looks like or how you feel, who you really are is an image bearer of God.

Then on the second page of the Bible, right after he creates the heavens and the earth, the plants and animals and people, he creates marriage and right after marriage he creates intimacy.

It went something like this. God created the first human named Adam. Then he created the second human named Eve. He brought them together in the covenant of marriage. Then he blessed them with the gift of sex.

In one simple, and concise declaration, the Lord defines marriage with these words. **That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)**

Notice first human leaves his previous family, and is united to their spouse. They get unified. They get married. Then they express this unification in the marriage bed.

First a man and woman make a covenant before God. I promise to be devoted to you in sickness and in health for richer or poorer, until death do us part. In other words, I'm completely open to you in every way possible. Then the man and woman act that out in the marriage bed. They are completely open, vulnerable, and devoted to each other in every way possible.

As Pastor Timothy Keller put it, **"If you have sex inside a covenant, then the sex becomes a covenant renewal ceremony...You're getting married all over again...You are really saying, "I belong completely and exclusively to you and I'm acting it out."**

Not only are you confirming your vows, you are also acting out something much deeper, more cosmic. The union of one man and one woman ultimately points to the ultimate desire of the human heart: to once again be one with God.

So you see, intimacy is a good gift of God, one of his first and many gifts he gave us when he created a good world.

1. Sex is a good gift from God, dramatizing the love of marriage and the love of God.

But if intimacy is a good gift from God, why is it a source of so much pain, suffering, trauma, guilt, shame, confusion, and frustration?

Well, we need to remember what happened right after Adam and Eve's wedding ceremony. They lived in the joy and happiness of God and each other in the Garden. But also in this Garden, God put a tree called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was God's tree and it was in the center of the Garden. In a way God was saying, "That is my tree. I know what is truly good and evil. So don't take my place. Don't eat from that tree."

But that is just what happened. Adam and Eve were enticed by Satan and ate from the Tree. They wanted to decide what was really good and what was evil.

All of God's good creation has been affected by their choice. We all have tried to dethrone God. We all want to decide what is good and evil. We are all born dead in sin. This has changed everything, even and especially the gift of sex.

That means all of us are sexually broken at some level. All of us have been corrupted by sin. For too long, the church tried to reduce purity to just "not having sex until your married." And if you could just make it to marriage, you were pure. But then people got married, and they saw they still had a struggle. We all are sexually broken at some level. And marriage can't make you pure and clean. Only Jesus can.

So, let me repeat. Sex is a good gift of God, dramatizing the love of marriage and the love of God. But we all have played a part of tarnishing God's original design at some level. So what can we do?

Let me make an illustration that at first might seem trivial. And I don't mean to trivialize marriage.

God designed food. He makes good food. And one of the foods that God designs is an apple. It's red. It's delicious. It's full of fiber and vitamins and antioxidants. But humans take an apple, and we make Apple Jacks. We slap the name Apple on the box, but there is hardly anything in the cereal that resembles an apple. The first few ingredients are genetically modified grain, then white sugar, then some artificial chemicals and artificial colors. Then they spray some apple juice on the cereal, which is basically just the sugar from the apple without the nutrients.

Now when you eat a bowl of Apple Jacks Cereal you immediately get the buzz of the sugar and the warm feelings of sweetness. But it doesn't satisfy because it's fake. So you keep eating. I can eat a whole box, even a few boxes of sugary cereal, always wanting more because it never really feels filling. I finally stop, not when I'm satisfied, but when I'm bloated or bored.

It's not a perfect illustration, but do you see the comparison? God gave us the good gift of sex. And we have settled for sexual immorality. For what's fake and even harmful. We settle for sex outside marriage without the commitment. We have settled for pornography. We have used it to harm and manipulate. God designed something good. We have changed it. Twisted it. And used it selfishly inside and outside of marriage.

Now there is this whole movement in our society around food. We have woken up to the reality that fake food is killing us. You can see it in how the grocery stores are changing. There are many more organic choices. There is this renewed belief that we can NOT manufacture fake food that is better than the original. So more and more people are trying to go back to eating food how it was originally designed. More and more people are seeing the beauty, nutrition, and value of an apple.

What I'm saying is: What has happened with the food industry needs to happen around the topic of sex. We need to wake up and see that we can't improve upon God's original design. We need to go back to see the beauty and value of sex as God originally designed it.

So, in the next few moments I want to answer the question: **How can we honor God's design of intimacy?**

To answer this question we will look at Galatians 5. This is a letter written by a man named Paul. We are starting a new series today that focuses on Galatians chapter five, usually called "the fruits of the Spirit", but we are calling this series "Fueled" **(Show graphic)** because we want to focus on being fueled by the Spirit.

So how can we honor God's design according to Paul's words to the Galatians? **So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16)** If you want to live a sexually pure life, inside and outside of marriage, if you want to honor God's amazing design of sex, Paul says, "walk by the Spirit". Live by the power of the Holy Spirit. The last few weeks we have been talking about God pouring out the Spirit on Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit coming on the church and on all believers. So you have the Holy

Spirit. Just live in the power of the Holy Spirit and you will not gratify any of your sinful desires. Sounds easy enough right?

Then why is there so much sexual confusion and sexual wickedness and sexual sin even among Christians? Paul goes on to explain: **For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. (Galatians 5:17)**

Before we look at these verses, remember God created marriage and sexual desire. Desires for food, friendship, love, and even sex are not bad desires. Our desires are good and come from a good God.

But we also need to remember that all humans are children of Adam and Eve. We all have a sinful nature. When you become a Christian, you don't lose your sinful nature. But a conflict begins inside of you. You have a desire for sexual intimacy, and your sinful nature and the Spirit inside of you start wrestling over how to act out on this desire.

So what are the desires that come from the flesh and what are the desires that come from the Holy Spirit? Paul says, **The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. (Galatians 5:19-21)**

Paul says that sinful desires are obvious. What makes them obvious? Can you recognize something that all of these desires have in common? They are all selfish. They are all about just gratifying ourselves. They put us in the center of our world. They are about taking and getting and having. They are about control of the spiritual world and about control over others.

But then Paul says, **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)** This is what it looks like when our hearts are fueled by the Holy Spirit. It's not so much about what we get from others and what we take. It's not about gratifying an addictive desire. It's about what comes out of us. When we are fueled by the Spirit love comes out of us. Joy and peace pour out of us. When we are fueled by the Spirit, we become givers of what's really good. And in the process, God begins to satisfy our souls.

So how can we honor God's gift of sex? How can we be fueled by the Spirit? Isn't it just as easy as not having sex until you are married, and then just get married and all your sinful sexual desires will be gone?

No. It is not easy. The acts of the flesh might be obvious, but they are not easy to overcome. We all know apples are better for you than Apple Jacks. But who wants to eat apples? As I was preparing this message this week, I kept talking with Pastor Bill, who to his own admission has a huge sweet tooth. As I was trying to explain my metaphor of Apple Jacks he kept pushing back, "But I like Apple Jacks. And I need carbs, don't I? And what's so bad with some fake food every once and a while?" We had a lot of laughs. And eating Apple Jacks is not going to destroy your soul.

But our conversation sounded a lot like the battle in our hearts when it comes to sexual sin. We tell ourselves, "But I like sex. My body has needs, and what's so bad about taking care of my needs? So what if I look at some pictures on the internet some times? So what if my boyfriend and I experiment a little. We need to see if we are capable, right?"

Like with food, just because it feels good and tastes good in the moment, doesn't mean it is good for your soul. When Eve look at the Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, the Bible says, she saw it was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and useful for gaining wisdom." It looked good, tasted good, promised to give her blessing, but in the end it destroyed everything.

So what do we do about all our guilt and shame and failure in this area? In the next verse Paul says, **"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."** (Galatians 5:24). You belong to Christ. You used to belong to your sin. You used to be sexually immoral. You used to be dirty. You used to be unfaithful. You used to be a slave to sin. But then a literal Jesus, literally died, and literally rose. He bought you with his own blood. Now you belong to him.

This is a big deal. We are tempted to find our identity in the sin we do have. Or in the marital blessings we don't have. We might think, I feel dirty. Horrible sexual things have been done to you. Or you have done horrible sexual sins. But you no longer belong to your sexual past. You belong to Christ.

Maybe you long to be married or to have your marriage work the way it's supposed to. You feel like you have no true identity until real marriage happens. But you already belong to Christ. You have been betrothed to him. It happened at your baptism. He covered you in the white dress, the white tuxedo of his grace. And when you take the Lord's Supper, he is renewing this promise to you. You don't belong to your sin. You are not waiting for marriage to give you an identity. You belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to you.

Now Jesus lives in you through the Holy Spirit. There is a new power in you. **Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.** (Galatians 5:24) That means you don't need to keep living in the old way of life. You don't need to keep giving yourself over to the passions of the flesh. You don't need to keep settling for fake sex and dishonoring the gift of intimacy. You have crucified your sinful nature with its passions and desires.

But how do you do that? What does that look like? **Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.** (Galatians 5:25). You were made alive by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brought you to faith in Jesus. Now keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

Did you ever have to march? Were you ever in a parade? Or on a dance team? Or in the military? Or did you ever play army? You had to follow the steps of the leader. You had to keep in step with the leader. That is what Paul is saying. Keep time, Keep marching with your leader, the Holy Spirit.

2. March in line with the Spirit.

You are going to have all sorts of desires that flood your body every day. And you must identify those desires. Then you must act on them based on what the Spirit is leading you to do. Don't just say, "Well if it feels good, I'll do it."

So, you are a single man. And bam, a flood of testosterone dumps into your blood and you are filled with desire to be with a woman. There might be something inside of you that says, "You deserve to have a release. Do whatever you need to. Hang out with girls that you could take from." Or maybe your flesh says, "Just click on that Youtube video and let yourself have some release." But don't you see? Those thoughts are all about taking. They're all about personal gratification. Those don't come from Jesus and the Spirit. They come from Adam and your sinful flesh.

When you have a bunch of testosterone dumped into your system, the Spirit inside of you is saying, “It’s time to man up. It’s time to get a job. It’s time win the heart of that woman. It’s time to give her my best. And when I’m ready to give her everything. My money, my time, my heart, my whole life in marriage. Then I can be with her body.”

If you are a single woman, and a man comes into you life. You might think, “If I don’t sleep with him, he will run away. Then I will be left alone. He just wants me because of my body. If I don’t give him my body, I have nothing left to give.” But that is a spirit of fear, a spirit of the flesh.

Instead when you have this deep desire to be loved and known, the Spirit inside of you tells you that God is in control. He will take care of you. And in the words of the great theologian, Beyonce, “If you like it, you can put a ring on it.” Those are Spirit-filled words.

But don’t think that getting married will solve all your issues with intimacy. If you could speak to all the married couples here, you would hear stories of brokenness. Some have been abused, and sex still feels dirty. Some are still dealing with a pornography addiction.

If you are married, marching with the Spirit, would mean going back to God’s original design. Sex is a covenant renewal ceremony. It is acting out the commitment of marriage and is a picture of the love of God.

So husbands, when the testosterone is dumped into your blood, the flesh says, “I need something from my wife. She owes me.” But that is about taking. That is not reflecting the love of God. That doesn’t come from the Spirit. When the testosterone floods your system, I heard one pastor say, “That is God’s way of telling you, “Be nice to the girl”. Love her like Christ has loved the Church. Win her heart again through service and sacrifice.

Wives, if you long to be known and loved inside a marriage, intimacy is not just about satisfying your husband’s urges. It is about connecting on a deeper level. He wants to be with you. Giving yourself over to each other, honors God’s great gift of intimacy.

There is so much more I could say and needs to be said. But intimacy and sex and relationships is a lifelong work of following Jesus. So in the worship folder I’ve added some tools and resources that I have found to be incredibly valuable.

Even with this advice, it is hard to discern what desires come from the flesh and which desires are fueled by the Spirit. That is why in all cases, we need each other. We need our church family. We need good Christian friends, and in many cases, good Christian counselors to help us navigate the difficult waters of our desires.

All of us need to talk to somebody. That is the only way you are going to break Satan’s chains of guilt and shame. I know a pastor who struggled with an addiction to pornography. He prayed constantly, memorized loads of Bible passages, and went to every church service possible. But he didn’t find freedom until he talked to someone.

So if you been abused and you are looking for freedom, talk to somebody. Talk to Pastor Bill or myself. If you are addicted to pornography, talk to somebody. If you’ve been sexually active and you just can’t seem to stop, talk to somebody. If you are really struggling in your marriage, talk to somebody.

The Holy Spirit uses other human beings to help us put to death the sins of the flesh, so that we can be fueled by the Spirit.

I'm passionate about his topic because I believe it is one worth fighting for. I believe that is why Satan has worked so hard to twist sex into something selfish and dirty. God cares about sex, not just because he wants marriages to flourish and prisoners to be set free. God cares about sex because of what it ultimately points to. You see on the last page of the Bible, John sees what will happen on the Last Day. Jesus is going to come down to this world. And he is pictured as a royal bridegroom, and God's people, the church is his bride. Jesus comes down to this earth, resurrects all things and begins this renewed relationship with God's people again. God's people are again one with God. He will dwell with them and they will be his people. And he will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Your deepest longings are not just for intimacy and belonging. Your deepest longings are to be with God in a renewed and resurrected world. That is why we want to honor God's design for intimacy. Because it points to what we really want and need, for God to dwell with us again. Come Lord Jesus! Amen.