

Set Appropriate Physical Limits

Jenny and Dave had been dating for a while. They were having fun, spending more and more time together, sharing more thoughts and feelings, and naturally feeling closer. They spent a lot of time together enjoying mutual interests like movies, sports, and spiritual activities. They felt like they were falling in love.

Physically, they were becoming more affectionate also. Hugs were turning into kisses. They enjoyed the closeness, never thinking they would get into trouble. But kisses were turning into more desire. They were both committed to their values of abstinence before marriage. So, always before it got too heated, they would back off. They both felt comfortable with each other.

Their relationship went along for a while like this, until one night they went too far. They had been lying on the floor watching videos and feeling very warm and close. Beginning with innocent affection, they moved on from there.

Jenny felt as if it had happened almost without her. Her values about physical limits before marriage were strong, but that night her values seemed to be somewhere far away from her awareness as she got lost in the closeness with Dave. It was a little like a whirlwind inside her head, and she really wondered in a way how it had happened.

Afterwards, she felt bad, and was remorseful about having given herself away. She had had no intention of going that far. The guilt was pretty strong, but at the same time she felt confused. Very aware of her feelings for Dave, she began to wonder why loving him physically was so wrong. Everything had felt so right, even if it was wrong. Confusion and doubt began to take over in her mind. She felt herself drifting away from him, even as she was drawn closer. Now she was feeling not at all like her old self, and she wondered what to do from there.

Sounds familiar?

Okay, let's talk. Here is the issue. You are past thirteen, single, and have a body that is ready for sex. But you are not married. You are probably dating, find yourself in situations where either your partner, yourself, both of you, or just your body is saying, Go for it. What do you do? How far is too far? Why should you wait? Are you missing out on something good and depriving yourself for no reason? Or is there a good reason to have limits on sexual expression? What will it hurt, you ask yourself, at the same time knowing that something is wrong.

Or, the issue takes on meaning in your dating relationship. Will he still love you if you say no? Or, if you really loved him, wouldn't you say yes? Or, if you are in love, are you missing out on a natural expression that would enhance your closeness?

All of these are very good questions that singles ask, and are the topic of this chapter. Let's take a look.

The Big Rule and More

If you have hung around the church for very long, you have probably heard that God wants people to reserve sex for marriage. If you haven't and that is news to you, then I can understand the shock you might be feeling. For many people, both inside and outside of the church, it does not make sense. If it feels so good, and is good for the relationship, and both people are consenting, then what is the problem?

For many people sexual abstinence is just a religious rule that makes no sense. But for others, it has real value from their experience in dating and the single life. They have reaped the consequences of pain that sex out of the commitment of marriage can bring. They feel that there are good reasons to wait. And as clinicians who have worked with many of those who have made such a decision, we agree. So, let's see why.

First of all, let's see what the rule is, and then let's talk about it in the context of dating. Here it is:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

In this passage is not only the rule, but the reasons as well. Let's look at them one by one.

Holy and Honorable

Okay, so you don't want to wear a white robe and be a holy person. But there is more to holiness and honor than that. Basically, holiness means purity and to be set aside for a high purpose. Honor means that something has great weight. Literally, when I looked up the Greek word used here for honor it means things like dignity, precious, of high price or value, or high esteem. Basically, God is not saying for you to become a weird person roaming in the desert who is not romantic or sexual or passionate. He loves those things. He created them. He wants you to have them, and he is very much like that himself.

But what he begins with saying here is that sex is not a casual thing. It is holy, set apart for a high purpose, and has great value, dignity, and esteem. In fact, it is the highest form of expression that you can give another person of your romantic love for him. It is the highest value that your body possesses to give to someone you are in a romantic relationship with. And, for that reason, like other things of high value, to spend it casually or unwisely is foolish, and you will be cheated in the end. You will have spent all that you have, and maybe have nothing to show for it after the music has died.

Amanda felt that way when she and Monte broke up. She had thought that he was the one. He had seemed that way to her, and they had talked a lot about being together forever. She was sure that he loved her, and he talked about one day getting engaged, when he was really ready. What that meant for him was when his career was a little more settled down. He wanted to be stable in his profession before he got married and wanted to wait. It sounded good to her. She knew that she loved him.

But he did not want to wait for sex. Marriage and commitment could be in the future, but why should they wait to enjoy each other? So they began sleeping together. After all, they would one day get married.

But, as this common story goes, Monte decided later that he just did not see marriage in his immediate future. In fact, being in a relationship at that time in his life was beginning to feel too confining to him as well. So they broke up.

Amanda was devastated. She felt as if her heart was ripped out of her. This, to her, was not just a breakup. It was more than that. She felt as if she had lost a part of herself when Monte left. She thought they would be together forever and she had given all of herself to him. So she felt as if a lot of her went away as well. In short, she had spent it all, and was left with nothing to show for giving herself away. She felt cheated, empty, and betrayed.

In contrast, I talked to a man recently who had also found the one. They were headed for marriage. But, having had a few experiences like Amanda, he had decided to wait. They were planning to get married later in the year.

As things began to get more serious, this man's girlfriend also decided that marriage was not for her at that time in her life. So she broke up with him. He was grieved, as he loved her and wanted to be with her. But, in contrast to other times in his life, he was not broken. He was able to go through the missing in a different way than he had before. Part of the reason he was able to move on with his heart intact was because of his decision to not have sex. It was as if he had held on to himself until it was safe to let go, and since it never was safe, he had lost her, but he still had himself intact. He felt more whole, and like he had more integrity. Why? Because sex and your heart are connected

What is the first lesson here? It is that sex is set apart for a purpose, and has great value. It is for life long commitment and needs to be esteemed. In a physical and spiritual sense, it is all you can give someone. Therefore, it should not be given away lightly. In the same way that you do not give your life away to anyone but the person you marry, so your body should belong only to the person you marry as well. It is all you have. Don't throw it away. Give it to someone who is going to give himself to you forever.

Self - Control

Josh had made a commitment to wait on sex. Then he started dating Marty. Fun-loving and spontaneous, smart and full of life, she was getting his attention. In fact, what he liked most about her was how full of life she seemed, and the way that she went after life itself.

He liked her free-spirited nature, but when it came to the physical, she wanted to go further than he felt comfortable with. He would stop their interactions, and she would try to continue. He would tell her no and she would first get coy and flirtatious, and then push harder. When he said no to that, she would get annoyed at him or hurt and pout.

He tried to talk to her and she would say: What's the big deal? Why can't we have a little fun? It's okay if we like each other. He talked to her about his spiritual commitment and what he believed about sex, and she said she agreed, but still thought it was okay if you really liked someone. He did not quite understand her thinking.

Then he began to notice something. In other areas of their relationship she did the same thing. When he would want to do something different than she wanted, she had a difficult time respecting his wishes. He did not want to have total control; he just wanted some mutual give-and-take. And it seemed that things were only okay with her if they were what she wanted as well. She had a difficult time doing what he wanted if it wasn't her first choice.

Finally, although he loved her going for it attitude, he realized that she was unable to be happy if she was not getting her own way, and sex was just a sign of an overall character issue that she had in delaying gratification. He loved her gusto for life, but it was beginning to look self-serving. It saddened him to see, but he was being honest with himself. He could not continue with someone who could not respect his choices and the word no.

Like Josh was realizing, self-control has serious implications for your life. As Paul says, each of you should learn to control his own body (1 Thessalonians 4:4). Why is that important? Basically it is a sign to you that a person is capable of delay of gratification and self control, which are prerequisites of the ability to love. If someone cannot delay gratification and control him or herself in this area, what makes you think that they can delay their own gratification in other areas of sacrifice for you? What is going to curb the want? What I want now mentality in the rest of life? If someone is able to respect the limit of hearing no for sex, then that is a character sign of someone who can say no to their own desires and hungers in order to serve a higher purpose, or to love another person.

You fall in love with a person and think about making a real, committed relationship with him or her. Naturally, that is going to mean some sacrifice down the road. You are going to want to be with a person who can deny himself or herself for the sake of the relationship in many areas. Think of the areas of sacrifice that a relationship takes. There are sacrifices of time, when you might want to spend time on your favorite hobby, and yet the family needs you. There are sacrifices of money. One person may want to buy a new car, and yet the family needs money for the home. There are sacrifices of getting one's way. One person may want to go to one place for dinner and the others want something different.

And then most importantly, there is the sacrifice that it takes to work out conflict. One person is hurt and wants to strike back in anger or hurt, yet to reconcile, the ability to put one's own desires aside for the sake of the relationship is necessary. If someone does not have self-control and delay of gratification in pleasure, can they delay the gratification of getting his or her own way in conflict?

Think about it. You want to be with a person who can hear and respect the no of others. Having a boundary in sex while you are dating is a very important test to see if the person loves you. We have all heard people refer to the line "if you love me, you will". In reality, you should say back, you love me, you won't make demands that I do not feel comfortable with. Love waits and respects, but lust must have what it wants now. Are you being loved, or are you an object of self-serving lust? Saying no is the only way to know.

We cannot overemphasize the value of your picking a person who has the ability to delay their own gratification. If you are with someone who ultimately has to have what they want when they want it, you are in for a long time of misery. Choose someone who can delay gratification for the sake of you and the relationship. To the extent that he or she says I must have what I want now, you are in trouble. Boundaries with sex are a sure-fire test to know if someone loves you for you.

Passionate Lust

Paul also teaches against passionate lust (1 Thessalonians 4:5). What does that mean? Does it mean that God wants you to not be a passionate person with strong desires? Not at all. In fact, He himself has a passionate desire for you. The meaning here is a lust for that which is forbidden outside of marriage. Why is that important?

Basically, a healthy person is someone who is integrated. What that means is that all aspects of a person are connected and working together. Sex is connected to love, relationship, and commitment. The body, the soul, and the mind are all working together. Like we said above, the body is given 100 percent to someone who gives you 100 percent of everything else. If someone has not married you, then they have given less than 100 percent, so they get less than 100 percent of your body. With the way that some people treat the people they are dating, they would be lucky to get a kiss once a month, much less casual sex! We have heard so many stories of people being used for sex when there is absolutely no intent by the person to make a commitment. Yet 100 percent of the body is taken.

This is a very disintegrating way to live, and if you are giving yourself to someone who is a luster and not a lover, you are headed for trouble. Lusters are people who have divided souls, and do not develop the deeper aspects of themselves which are necessary for a lasting relationship. Many lusters have sexual addictions that are trying to meet deeper needs that they cannot express in a healthy way.

Janet found this out the hard way. She loved Steve and wanted to be with him. So she gave in to sleeping with him. Even though it was against her values, she liked the fact that he wanted her so desperately. But what she found was that he did not have the ability to connect in other ways. When she would want deep talking, or sharing of feelings, he would

withdraw from her. He was unable to be vulnerable on a level of needs or emotions. But when it came to sex, he was all for it.

This is the case with lust. It often occurs in a person who is not developing in other areas of intimacy. Sex during dating often hides a person's lack of relational skills. Skills needed in marriage. In all the heat and romance of dating and sex, the inabilities in the relational realm are never noticed. Then a person finds himself or herself serious with or marrying a sex addict who is incapable of a real relationship. Instead of expressing love through sex, the lust replaces love with sex.

Do not allow dating to be a place where you act out lust and avoid relationship. And do not allow it to be a place where you have no boundaries with another person and allow them to do that with you. Remember, for every sex addict, there is someone allowing that person to continue in that pattern. Say no before it is too late and you find yourself with a non relational person.

In terms of yourself, sexual abstinence is a great way to find out how fulfilled you are as a person. The reason that you have acted out in a sexual way may well have been to fulfill deep longings and hurts that are still unhealed in your soul. There is always a need driving lust, and you do not want to allow that to continue.

Sally was like that. She came into counseling because of her recurring tendency to act out sexually. She wanted to be committed to her spiritual values, but kept finding herself sleeping around. She realized that she was unable to stop.

As we began to explore the issue, I got a commitment from her to get some support that she could call in case of an emergency, and to promise me that she would commit to abstinence so that we could find out what was driving her to this dangerous behavior. (The risk of HIV is higher than many realize when engaging in promiscuity, and it does not mean anything that the person has passed a test recently. The virus could be in the undetectable time period).

When she was dating, she found that she was especially lured by the attention that guys would give her when they were hitting on her. She liked the chase, as it made her feel wanted. As we worked with that, and she began to analyze the drives and the feelings behind the sexuality, she began to see that she was trying to compensate for some deep feelings that she had of not being wanted and desired.

Sally's dad had left the home when she was young, and she had basically grown up without a lot of male attention and affection. When a man would come on to her and pursue her, she felt wanted, and it temporarily took her away from the inner loneliness and lack of closeness she experienced with her dad until she felt it again and was driven to another liaison.

When she was dating someone more steadily, it was even tougher to say no. It seemed that she just could not live with the risk of not having a man be attuned to her.

This is an example of a need that drives someone into sensuality. Ephesians tells us that along with this, there is a continual lust for more (Ephesians 4:19). Lust, or uncommitted sex, will never heal the longing in your soul for whatever is driving it. Sally needed some healthy male validation in her life that her father never gave her. As she began to find that in a good support group and in counseling, her sexual addiction went away. She felt more whole, more loved, and more in control of herself. She was also beginning to be more able to pick good men to date. Her addiction was not making her choices for her any longer.

I had one woman I worked with tell me once that she had spent years making decisions about men with her crotch. As she worked through her underlying needs, she began to make decisions based on her values instead.

Here are some things that drive passionate lust:

- The need for intimacy and connection
- The need for power
- The need to feel admired and desired
- The need to be free from parental control (something many adults are still under)
- The need to avoid working through pain and loss
- The need to overcome shame and bad feelings about oneself

If you are caught up in passionate lust or with someone who is, then chances are that these issues are not being worked out. The lust is keeping you from integrating your soul. Just like a drug addict is not growing when he or she is using drugs, your soul is not growing if you are acting out lust.

That is what passionate lust does. It splits you from your real heart, your mind, your values, and the life that you truly desire. Lust gains momentary pleasure at the expense of lasting gain. You will never find the fulfillment that your soul needs if you let your lust dictate your life and choices. Nor will you find what you need if you give in to the lust of someone else. Giving in to a sex addict (even though the person may not look like one), is giving yourself to someone who is ignoring growth, and the deeper deficits of their own character.

We have listened to countless stories of married women, especially, who gave themselves to someone who could not wait, only to find out later in marriage that the person was incapable of real relationship. Learn from their experience.

Wronging Someone

Paul also teaches that when sex occurs outside of marriage, someone is always wronged. Remember the verse: In this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him (1 Thessalonians 4:6). When someone sleeps with someone whom he or she is not married to, he or she is hurting that person. Why is that? For all the reasons that we talked about earlier.

When people sleep together outside of marriage, here is what is happening to them.

- They are splitting their soul and body. A real division takes place inside of a person that is very difficult to repair for later relationship. The body is given 100 percent, and the soul is only given or connected with to some lesser degree. That requires a split in the person.
- They are taking away a very precious aspect of themselves and someone else which is of great value and esteem, and cheapening it. It becomes casual, of lesser value, and will have less value later with someone they really care about. In a sense, they are making casual or non lasting people as important as the one they commit to for life.
- They are causing a person to not develop deeper aspects of relatedness and spirituality. They are potentially helping someone to remain shallow, and making certain aspects of the person's soul unavailable for relationship.
- They are coming in between a person and God. God has asked everyone to submit their sexuality to him so that he can develop it and guide it to marriage. Sleeping with someone causes them to disobey God and creates a barrier between them and God.

- They are helping a person deny hurt and pain, thus keeping them stuck in an addictive cycle which sets them up for later trouble.

- They are using them for their own pleasure and lust, and that is a long way from love.

- While they are using them, they are keeping them back from finding someone who will truly value them.

- They are setting them up for heartbreak and devastation if they break up with them and leave them, having taken something so precious.

If you say that you are a person of love, then you won't wrong someone you love. You will wait. You will respect them enough to not push them or use them in this way. And vice versa, do not allow anyone else to wrong you. Love waits to give, but lust can't wait to get.

Accepting God

Finally, Paul teaches us in 1 Thessalonians where the authority for sexuality comes from. Ultimately it does not belong to us. It belongs to God. In a sense, our bodies are not ours, they are his. So, the question gets into a bigger realm than just who someone is going to sleep with or not. It gets into the question of who someone is going to obey or not.

There are few better tests for whether or not someone lives a life in submission to God than what he or she does with their sexuality. Sex is such a powerful and meaningful desire, that to give it up and obey God in that area is a true sign of worship. It is a true sign that someone is willing to say. Not my will, but Thine is done. And that becomes important for a serious reason later on.

In a long-term relationship, you want to be with a person who knows that they are not God and always place themselves in a position of submitting to God. What if your spouse, for example, is angry and wants to punish you or strike back at you in hurt or revenge? Or is tempted in some area of lust or addiction? Or wants to blow off all responsibility and revert to a carefree teenage life? Or is tempted to avoid paying taxes? If that person is the ruler of his or her own soul, what is going to stop him?

If he or she is a person who no matter what the temptation is or desire of the flesh can be counted on to say: Not my will but Thine, then you are with a safe person. If you can trust him or her to do it God's way, you will always be a beneficiary.

But if you are with a person who does it God's way only as long as that does not interfere with his or her desires, then you are with a self-ruled person, and you will always lose. To the extent that any person lives to please himself and not God, others around him lose in the long run, because when push comes to shove, that person's will reigns supreme.

So, in this passage we see a litmus test for who rules one's life:

That person or God: If you are with a person, who says that he or she is spiritual, and yet when spirituality runs into conflict with his or her desires and the desires win, you are with a person who puts God into a category called self-made. They are not worshiping him as he is, but as they want him to be. They are recreating God into their own image. They are not adapting to him but having him adapt to them. All of these are signs of the 'I will submit to God as long as I agree with him club. And that is no submission at all.

So, as the passage says, if someone rejects this teaching, and reworks it to fit their desires, then they are rejecting God. He wants to be accepted as he really is rules and all. He wants to be trusted for what he says. And when someone rewrites his values, they are not accepting who he really is.

You will be much safer with a person who fulfills one of the key things required of mankind: to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8). Such a person can in the long run truly be trusted to look out for your interests as well. Trust a person who trusts God. And if he or she is truly trusting God, that person will uphold God's value of sex within marriage.

Reminders of Reasons to Say No

So, lest we begin to sound like church lady, we will stop preaching. We do not want to sound like prudes, and we do not think the Bible wants you to sound or appear that way either. Sexuality is a part of God's good creation.

But, as you embrace your sexuality, do so with self-control, sanctity, high esteem, lovingly and not lustfully, sacrificially and not wronging someone, and in submission to God. Then, when you are dating, you will have built in some very good limits and expression of your sexual person. You will know, for example, how far is too far. You cannot act out inappropriately with these guidelines in place. They are appropriately confining.

And, if you say no to sex outside of marriage, you will be able to discover a few crucial things while you are dating:

1. Does he or she want you for you, or just sex?
2. Is he or she capable of the other aspects of relating and intimacy, or has this person avoided developing those by just having sex? In other words, are you with an addict?
3. Is the person carrying around a lot of baggage inside that has never been healed?
4. Can this person delay gratification as we mentioned above?
5. And, most importantly, does the person have the ability to submit to God?

We beg you. Please find out these things before you allow someone into your heart. We can promise you that you do not want to have someone residing in your heart long-term who does not love you, cannot relate to you on a soul level, has a lot of unresolved baggage, cannot delay gratification, and ignores God. And it is difficult to keep someone out of your heart who has invaded your body. Living according to lust, or allowing yourself to be used as the object of lust, is a sign that a lot of things are wrong. Get those things right, and dating can lead to some good places.

The Boundary of Forgiveness

Angie was twenty-four and disillusioned about sex in relationships. Having slept with more guys than she even wanted to think about, she had a "what's the use feeling". And it started, she said, when she was fifteen. As she put it, once I had made a mistake, I thought that I had already blown it. I had not saved myself for that one person whom I would give my life to. So, with the next boyfriend, and the ones after him, I thought, what's the difference? I already blew it.

That was before she understood the way that God looks at our failures. He does not look at us like a piece of porcelain that, once broken, is always broken. He looks at us all as broken people whom he makes new again. With his forgiveness, you can start all over and be as clean as when you began.

As the psalmist puts it, 'As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us' (Psalm 103:12). Or as Hebrews puts it, their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more (Hebrews 10:17). And even further, 'Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:22)

If you ask God to forgive you through Jesus, he sees you as a completely new person. You are clean, washed with pure water, and whatever you might have done is forgotten and put away as the east is from the west. And as Paul says, ‘there is no condemnation’ for those who have asked for the forgiveness that Jesus gives (Romans 8:1)

So, as Angie learned, your past failure does not have to doom you to further sexual brokenness. Just because you have fallen in the past does not mean that you have ruined yourself and cannot start over. You can become clean again. You can become pure again. And as you do, you can commit to remaining pure and enjoying all of the benefits of that state.

You can develop the inner life and your ability to love. You can know if someone really loves you. You can learn how to delay gratification and give to others. You can have your underlying splits, needs, hurts, and needs healed and fulfilled so that you will not have unsatisfying relationships. And you can finally give up being God and allow him to be God for you.

If you know you are forgiven, that clean slate is a powerful boundary. You can stand upon that solid ground. You don't have to worry about the cracks in your armor because of feeling dirty from the past, or a "what's the use now feeling". You have a new state of cleanness to protect, and dating can now be about building deeper things than a one-night experience. It can be a place of growth instead of brokenness.

So, ask him for that forgiveness now. If you do not know Jesus, ask him to be your Lord. Turn to him in faith and he will cleanse you. And then walk in that state of being guilt-free. It is a strong state indeed. And if you do, then you can wait on the real thing.

Take-Away Tips

- You need a boundary against sex outside of marriage. God gives you this boundary to protect you, and it will, in a number of ways.
- Sex has a very high purpose, great value, dignity, and esteem. Do not treat it or your sexuality lightly, failing to give it the place it deserves.
- Sex is the highest way of expressing romantic love for a person; therefore it must be reserved for the highest romantic relationship you will have the one with your spouse.
- Keeping your sexual boundaries will let you know of the other persons self-control, delay of gratification, ability to love sacrificially, and willingness to submit to God.
- Do not act out of lust. It prevents love, integration, and healing. And, it guarantees relational problems.
- No matter what your partner says, saying no to sex will be the only way you find out what he or she is like when he or she has to respect a limit.
- God's forgiveness is available to anyone, no matter what you have done. It will allow you to have a clean slate and start over with good sexual boundaries.

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