



Love and Truth: Navigating Relationships with God's Grace

by Jim and Christa Lord

Concept adapted from *Ships: The Relationships of Life* by Frank Hamrick, Bill Coffey, and Steve Braswell

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REFLECTING GOD'S LOVE

Objectives

- Demonstrate the need for love in relationships and ministry
- Define what love is and what it is not
- Review Christ's example of love

Lesson

In the lessons thus far, we've looked at God's character and how He chooses to interact with us. As we read of God's work, it's impossible not to notice His love for us. We've taken the time to dwell on God's love in part because it is so different from our own love.

We simply cannot muster His kind of love in our own strength. His love is a miracle as amazing and incomprehensible as the creation of the world, the parting of the Red Sea, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

So we must first receive God's love, abide in it, understand it, and grow in it. As we do, God will change us to better *reflect* His kind of love to others. To share God's love, we must depend on Him.

This process takes effort, yes, but God's grace makes it happen. It doesn't depend on our own determination and strength.

A New Commandment

The night before Jesus gave His life for us, just hours before He was arrested, beaten, and falsely accused, He gave His disciples a new commandment—to love each other, just like Christ loved them.

Read John 13:34–35. By this love would people forever recognize the followers of Jesus.

Christ had talked about love before. He told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment was to love God, and the second was to love other people as much as we loved ourselves (Matt. 22:34–40).

But on that last night with the disciples, Christ told them to reflect the same kind of love that He would show on the cross—pure, sacrificial, enduring love. Christ would submit Himself to pain, rejection, and shame, all to bring people back to their Creator Father

(John 17:20–26). Like any good leader, Christ did not ask His followers to do something until He showed them it could be done.

We could never reflect that kind of love without God’s help. So God pours His love into us through the gift of His Spirit (Rom. 5:5), and that love grows around us like fruit on a tree (Gal. 5:22–24). When people see that love, they know that something or Someone special is working through us.

We must serve with love—we cannot survive without it.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–3. Note what is useless without love. Paul writes that . . .

- Even if he could speak in all the languages of Earth and heaven
- Even if he had the power of prophecy
- Even if he understood all the knowledge and mysteries of the universe
- Even if he had faith enough to move a mountain
- Even if he sacrificed everything, including his own life
- Even if he had all these things—if he had no love, if the goodness of God did not flow through him, all his knowledge and power and faith and sacrifice would be utterly *worthless*

To be truly godly, we must reflect all of God’s character. We must be just, true, and righteous, yes, but we must also be loving. If we do not love others, we do not give them a complete picture of God.

People rarely listen to others who don’t care for them. If we try to serve without love, we might fool some people in the short term, but over time, our lack of love will become more obvious. Our true motivations—selfishness, a desire for reward or recognition, a need to *be needed*—will appear.

What Love Is

Discussion: So what *is* love?

Definition of Love

Love is the decision to reflect God’s goodness to others. By God’s grace, we help people, we encourage them, we challenge them, and we connect them to His truth. Everything good is a gift of God, so true love points people to God’s character and work.

Illustration—Different Forms of Love

This love can take many forms in many different situations:

- There’s the compassionate love parents have for their children
- The brotherly love among friends
- The intimacy and desire within marriage

Love animates many different kinds of good, and since what is good for one relationship may not be good for another, true love can look radically different in one place or the other.

We connect with many different people, but love is the decision to make those relationships healthy and good—even if it means we step back from the other person. Love doesn't necessarily mean *attachment*. Sometimes it's best to love from a distance.

Discussion: When can separation or distance be loving?

Love appreciates the good God placed in others, and it seeks to add good, as well.

What Love Is Not

Yet much of what people call love does not reflect God. Culture can define love so broadly that it includes attitudes and actions which do not seek the good of others.

Love is not a feeling.

Love includes feeling, but we shouldn't reflect goodness to others only when we feel like it. Some kinds of love are good only if they are absolute and unconditional, such as the love of a parent or a spouse. Feelings of affection or romance, therefore, cannot be the foundation of love. Our feelings will change over time. Our love must reflect the love that God shares with us—unlike our feelings, God will never change.

Love is not a god.

Some people tend to deify love to the point of worshiping it—saying that love is all a person ever needs, or that love is the answer to everything.

Yes, God is love (1 John 4:8), but He is also holy, just, and true. Since true love reflects God's goodness, we must study God to know what our love should look like—and what it should *not* look like. Some things are simply bad for us, so true love will pull away from those things. Ignorance and sin can, over time, corrupt our so-called “love” into something hurtful.

Love is not lust.

Definition of Lust

Lust is the desire to possess something regardless of the hurt it may cause others—including oneself.

Whereas true love *finds* good and *adds* good, lust merely finds good and grabs at it—even when doing so is sin. Lust treats people like objects to be consumed, and it rots away at our ability to cherish other people as *people*, as image-bearers of God. Instead of loving people as beautiful, worthy creations of God, lust treats them like tools—like ways to fill our appetite.

Unfortunately, some people will call a relationship “loving” when it is actually selfish, hurtful, and demeaning. Beware of people who call their lust “love”—they do not understand what makes relationships healthy.

Love is not abuse.

Finally, we do not show love by abusing others—or by allowing others to abuse us.

Definition of Abuse

Abuse is using something for a hurtful purpose that its maker did not intend.

Illustration—Abuse of Purpose

Abuse is simple to explain in the realm of objects:

- You can abuse an aircraft by pushing it to speeds and stresses above the intended limits.
- You can abuse a desk by scratching your name onto it.

But we can't really "hurt" objects—at least, not in a moral sense. And many times tinkering is a *good* thing, if we want to make our world better.

But remember, people are not objects—and we should not treat them like objects. They have a will and an image we should respect. We should not use them for our own sinful desires—that is, for purposes that God, their Creator, did not intend.

Does that mean we try to avoid all suffering? Can we avoid all abuse in this world? No.

But when Christ told His disciples that they would suffer for His sake—that they should "turn the other cheek" (Matt. 5:39)—He did not mean that Christians should willingly stay close to people that demean, assault, or violate them. Just as Christ did not allow Himself to be killed before His crucifixion (cf. John 10:39), we have no reason to submit to violence unless we must do so to serve God.

Within each of us is the image of God. Each of us is a person that God loves, and we disrespect that love when we allow others to hurt us needlessly.

Context—The Command to Love

Remember the first and second great commandments taught by Jesus (Matt. 22:36–40):

- Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.
- Love your neighbor *as yourself*.

If you do not appreciate the goodness of God, you will not see the goodness He has placed in you. And if you do not see the goodness He has placed in you, you will not see the goodness He has placed in others.

God is not only loving—He is also *just*. So the most godly thing to do in an abusive relationship is to leave, seek help, and pursue justice so that no one else need fear hurt from that person again.

It is never loving to abuse people—or to accommodate those who do.

The Perfect Example

If we want to understand true love, we must look at the Person who created love and embodies love.

Read 1 John 4:7–8.

God—The Origin of Love

From God flows all grace, goodness, and truth. To truly *love* people, therefore, we should connect them to the goodness of God. We should give them comfort, rest, and encouragement. We should help them understand God’s Word. We should help them seek God’s will for their lives.

This highest form of love makes no sense apart from God. This love is a decision that can only be made by those who abide in Christ—by those who represent His love to others.

This is the love that lasts beyond physical attraction or other forms of bonding. Its foundation is not sin—nor is it even built on good things like fun, companionship, or desire. Rather, this love is built on God’s love for us.

God defines what is good, so God defines what is love. To love others, therefore, we must know God and rest in His love for us.

God—The Personification of Love

Again, to be clear—to say that “God is love” does not mean that love is a god. God is the epitome, the embodiment of true love. All His attributes work in harmony with perfect love—even if we don’t always understand *how*.

God’s love permeates all His other attributes.

Teacher’s Note: Depending on your students’ background, you may need to offer a brief definition for some attributes.

God's Attribute	Expressed with Love
Self-existence	God loved us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)—and not for anything we did.
Eternality	God will love us forever (Ps. 100:5).
Justice and Righteousness	God's love is true, equitable, and offered to all (Ps. 116:5; John 3:16).
Infinity	God's love is great and boundless (Eph. 2:4–7).
Holiness	God's love is spotlessly pure (1 John 1:5–9).
Omniscience	God loves us despite His perfect knowledge of our sin (Ps. 139:1–6; Rom. 5:8).
Omnipresence	God's love can reach us anywhere we go (Ps. 139:7–10).
Omnipotence	Nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:31–39).
Mercy and Grace	He loves us not because of anything we have done (Titus 3:5).
Immutability	God's love never changes (Ps. 136; Jer. 31:3).

But we will never understand love if we study only abstract concepts and terms. Thankfully, God gave us the perfect picture of love in Jesus Christ.

Read 1 John 4:9. God sent us His Son to show us His love. It's no wonder then that we see God's love shine through Christ's compassion and miracles, through His patience and teaching, and even through the way He corrected falsehood and sin.

Focus—The Gospel of Love

As we discussed in the last lesson, the clearest act of love was also the clearest reflection of God's character. Christ, the holy Son of God, fulfilled His own justice by taking the punishment we deserved. He gave Himself up to die on a cross, severing His relationship to the Father, becoming our very sin, our curse, the object of all justified hate, so that we could know God. At the same time, He showed His power, rising from the dead and establishing forever a spiritual kingdom of truth and hope.

Conclusion

Today, we have the privilege of obeying His new commandment—to love others with that same grace, truth, and hope.

Read 1 Peter 4:8–11. Each of us can serve and help others. Love should animate that service so that God is glorified in everything we do.

In your student exercises for this week, you'll explore 1 Corinthians 13, which will help you understand what love should look like. And in the next lesson, we'll discuss how to pair love with truth.

L E S S O N 5

REFLECTING GOD'S LOVE

Lesson Notes

A New Commandment

- We should love each other as Christ loved us (John 13:34–35).
- All ministry is worthless without love (1 Cor. 13: 1–3).

What Love Is

Love is the decision to reflect God's goodness to others.

What Love Is Not

- Love is not a feeling.
- Love is not a god.
- Love is not lust.

Lust is the desire to possess something regardless of the hurt it may cause others—including oneself.

- Love is not abuse.

Abuse is using something for a hurtful purpose that its maker did not intend.

People are not objects, and we should not treat them like objects. They have a will and an image we should respect. We should not use them for our own sinful desires—that is, for purposes that God, their Creator, did not intend.

The Perfect Example

- God—The Origin _____ of Love (1 John 4:7)
- God—The Personification _____ of Love (1 John 4:8–9)

God’s Attribute Expressed with Love

Self-existence	God loved us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)—and not for anything we did.
Eternality	God will love us forever (Ps. 100:5).
Justice and Righteousness	God’s love is true, equitable, and offered to all (Ps. 116:5; John 3:16).
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Immutability	God’s love never changes (Ps. 136; Jer. 31:3).

We find the clearest expression of love in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Exercises

Read Matthew 22:34–40.

In an effort to confuse and embarrass Jesus, the Pharisees asked him a question: out of all the commandments in the Old Testament Law, which is the most important?

What did Jesus say (vv. 37–39)?

- The Greatest Command:
Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. _____
- The Second Greatest Command:
Love your neighbor as yourself. _____

The rest of God’s moral laws are simply expressions of these two basic commands (cf. Gal. 5:14). If our entire being—our heart, soul, and mind—radiated with a love for God, we would naturally reflect the rest of His character.

You will spend much of this book learning about true love and what it looks like in different relationships. But as you study love, never forget its Source.

- Read 1 John 4:19–21. Why can we love (v. 19)?
Because God first loved us _____
- And what is a sure sign that we do *not* love God (vv. 20–21)?
If we hate our “brother”—that is, the people we see around us _____

God’s love is the foundation for our love. And if people do not see love flowing from us, they have no reason to believe that we are God’s children.

- Remember the new commandment Jesus gave His disciples, as described in the teacher’s lesson (John 13:34–35). According to this passage, how will people know that we are disciples of Christ?
If we have love for each other _____

Read 1 Corinthians 13.

This passage is often called the “Love Chapter”—because it describes Christ-like love in a clear, concise way.

The Need for Love (vv. 1–3)

- Using verses 1–3, list at least three things that are useless without love.
Answers will vary. Could include tongues (languages), prophecy, the understanding of mysteries, knowledge, faith, service, personal sacrifice.

The Form of Love (vv. 4–8)

What should our love look like? Summarize each of the verses below in your own words.

- v. 4 – Answers will vary.
- v. 5 – _____
- v. 6 – _____
- v. 7 – _____
- v. 8 – _____

The Preeminence of Love (vv. 9–13)

Love will remain long after faith and hope are no more.

- Faith is necessary now because we must trust that God is working, even when we do not see Him.
- Hope is necessary because without God’s promises, the world around us seems bleak and desperate.

But one day, our hope will be realized, and our faith will become sight—we will meet God face-to-face (v. 12). We won’t need to trust Him anymore because all His goodness and majesty will be right there in front of us.

We will, however, continue to love Him—and even more so, since we’ll know Him perfectly. Now and for eternity, *love* is what marks a child of God.

Reflections

Of all the descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13, which three do you think are the most difficult to reflect?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- Read these three descriptions again, and give an example of someone that once showed this kind of love to you. What did it mean to you?

Peace in the Storm

Meditating on Your Most Important Relationship

Read Romans 12.

- In verse 1, Paul uses an interesting image to describe the Christian life. How should we present ourselves to God?
- In verses 3–8, Paul writes that all believers are “one body” because of Christ. How can this imagery help us appreciate our individual differences?
- What does true love *hate* (v. 9)? Is this a contradiction?
- How can we show love differently to different people (v. 15)? In what ways should it be consistent (vv. 16–21)?

FAMILY AND THE HOME

Objectives

- Describe the environment of a godly home
- Appreciate God's work even in difficult environments

Lesson

This study is about relationships, but all relationships occur in a certain *context*. Through relationships, we shape our environment, just as our environment can shape our relationships.

Illustration—Guards and Officers

For example, imagine the relationship between a prisoner and a prison guard. The relationship between them involves authority. The prisoner must obey the prison guard or face consequences. But there are other dimensions to the relationship. The prisoner doesn't want to be in prison, so he may resent the guard. The guard probably thinks the prisoner deserves to be in prison, so he may resent the prisoner.

Compare this to the relationship between a child and a friendly police officer. The relationship still involves authority—that is, the officer represents the government to keep the peace, so the officer can give people reasonable orders to protect lives and property.

But the relationship is different. In general, there should be a lot less resentment between a child and a police officer than there would be between a prisoner and a guard. The officer and the guard have similar duties—they serve, they protect, they represent civil authority—but their environments are very different. One environment may represent a place of trust and cooperation—another environment can be a place of tension and resentment.

If the environment is bad, trust can break down, and distrust can poison a relationship.

Our relationships with family are among the most important we have, and likewise, our home environment is critically important. If we try to connect with family members in an environment that feels like a prison, our relationships will suffer. But if we love, serve, and submit to our family in a place of rest and peace, our relationships can flourish.

The love for home is one of the most powerful forces in society. Entire nations have migrated, fought, and died over the idea of *home*. For good or evil, few other concepts

have so inspired people to change, grow, or take up arms. What is it about *home* that can spark such action?

Definition of Home

For the purposes of this study, *home* is the environment for the relationships we build with our family. It's the soil for our family tree, so to speak.

Ideally, home is our refuge, the place we start our day and the place we return to at night. It's where we're from, or where we're headed. Home is the place we gather together God's greatest blessings to share with the people we love the most.

The most important blessings aren't physical—they're not money, food, appliances, furniture, entertainment, or even four walls and a roof. They are the blessings only God can provide—love, joy, peace, truth.

A good home is therefore one in which people depend on God. It's the kind of home that helps people find rest, look upward, celebrate God's goodness, and then share that goodness with each other. Home makes a family, and family makes a home, but God makes both good.

Read Psalm 127:1. Unless God builds and sustains your home, it will not be a refuge of peace and joy. His blessings cover the home of those who reflect Him, but those who reject Him face insecurity and destruction (Prov. 3:33; 12:7; 14:11). To build—or re-build—a good home, we must depend on God.

Discussion: What's essential to a good home?

Using Scripture, let's explore how our homes should reflect God's own love and truth.

A Place of Care

One of the truest expressions of our love for God is our love for our family. Our home should be a place of care and comfort, where we do our best to provide good things to the people we love.

We can't overstate the importance of this idea. **Read 1 Timothy 5:8.** Here Paul wrote that if a person did not provide for his relatives, and especially for the members of his own household, he has essentially denied his entire faith. He's *worse* than an unbeliever. For anyone to claim to be a Christian and then neglect his family—that person is a hypocrite, more offensive than someone who openly rejects God.

There are many ways to show care in the home. God commands children to obey and honor their parents (Eph. 6:1–3), while parents are to nurture, instruct, and provide for their children. Most importantly, parents and children should all encourage each other's walk with God—by reading Scripture together, by sharing each other's joys and burdens, and by praying for each other.

From the tiniest baby to the most gigantic teenager, children need the love and care of their parents. They may not like every form this love takes—after all, instruction is burdensome,

and correction is unpleasant—but they should appreciate the effort their parents make to love them, even if that love is imperfect.

Focus—God’s Work in Us

As a teenager, you learn that your parents aren’t perfect. As an adult, you realize that no one is—not even yourself.

As you grow in wisdom and maturity, however, you learn to accept and forgive all these imperfections—and try to see how God uses imperfect people anyway.

A Place of Security

Home should be the place where we can rest unafraid of the world’s dangers. It’s the kind of place God promised to His people.

Read 2 Samuel 7:10–11. Here God promised to fulfill His covenant to Israel by giving them a house and a home that would remain untouched by their enemies. There they could worship God in peace.

Some scholars say this promise is already fulfilled, while others believe it is a reference to the New Jerusalem that God will build after His final coming. A similar promise is recorded in Isaiah 32:18.

Regardless, we can learn from these passages that our homes—our resting places here on Earth—will best reflect God when they reflect His provision of safety.

Many children take their safety for granted, but we cannot understate its importance. A safe, godly home can help produce a healthy, loving adult, but a dangerous, insecure home can push a child to grow up afraid and distrustful. Kids who constantly face this kind of stress often develop a wide variety of health issues. Danger can help us mature, but only when we face it in small, occasional doses.

When we think of dangers and threats to the home, we may first think of physical threats—like thieves, disastrous weather, poverty, or hunger. But those are only some of the obvious threats.

Illustration—Discouragement

More subtle and more pernicious are the threats that grow inside the home. Parents or siblings can demean us or discourage our walk with God. This discouragement can take many forms—like when family members get angry, say something unkind, or mock us for doing something they don’t like.

We can stand against these threats by . . .

- Reflecting God’s love in our words and actions
- Trying to understand our family members’ viewpoint before explaining our own
- Seeking outside counsel when needed

Illustration—Abuse

More serious, however, is when family members abuse others in the home. Hitting, slapping, unnecessary forced restraint—these are all physical abuse. They reflect sinful anger, not God’s commands for discipline. It’s impossible for a parent to teach a child discipline and self-control without *showing* discipline and self-control.

Sexual abuse is also extremely harmful. This occurs when an adult exposes a minor to sexual situations, or otherwise uses, touches, or harasses a minor in a sexual way.

If this happens in your home—or at your church, school, or anywhere else—or even if someone tells you it happened, you must *immediately* find outside help. Report all physical and sexual abuse to the police, and seek help and counsel from adults you can trust. You are not responsible for finding out if it “really” occurred before reporting. For the sake of yourself and others who may be silent around you, please do not hesitate. If you’re not comfortable reporting it alone, find an adult you can trust to help you.

We have a responsibility to stop abuse no matter the consequences. This sin should be allowed no foothold among Christians. To excuse it or cover it up is to allow it to continue.

A God-focused, God-fearing, God-reflecting home should protect those in it from danger—whether those threats come from outside or from inside.

A Place of Hospitality

The blessings of a godly home won’t contain themselves to your family—God’s goodness should also flow out to others in your community.

Read Hebrews 13:2. God commands us to show hospitality to strangers—to welcome them and care for their needs. It’s simply a reflection of the mercy and grace God shows us.

Illustration—The Shunammite Woman

We can see a good example of this in 2 Kings 4. A prominent Shunammite woman regularly gave food and shelter to the prophet Elisha when he passed by her home (vv. 8–10).

Burdened for the prophet’s ministry, the woman worked with her husband to build an extra room on their house so that the prophet could have some comfort and privacy when he traveled nearby. This woman’s example of faith and love became a model for many ministries that today provide “prophet’s chambers” to ministers who travel away from home.

Not every family needs to build an addition to their house, but all of us should seek out ways to share the blessings of home with those who need it most.

A Place of Growth

We touched on this briefly earlier, but a godly home will be a place where each family member can grow closer to God.

Read Proverbs 24:3–4. A house should be built with wisdom and understanding, and knowledge should be the treasure stored within. As we seek God’s truth in His Word, we should share it with our family.

Illustration—Daily Instruction in the Law

Deuteronomy 6 gives us an idea of what this learning looked like in Old Testament Israel. In this passage, God commands parents to teach His Word diligently to their children—speaking to them when they sat together at home, when they walked together in the way, when they went to sleep, and when they rose up in the morning (vv. 6–9). God’s Word remained in front of them all day, practically hung on their foreheads or written on their front door.

But your parents will teach you more than Scripture. Your father will be the first reference point in your relationships to men, and your mother will likewise set your expectations of women. How they talk, act, and react will impact you in ways you probably won’t understand until much later in life.

Moreover, your parents can provide you with all kinds of wisdom about life, relationships, work, and the world around you. As you compare their teaching with God’s Word, you’ll get a better understanding of how to learn and grow in the years to come.

A Place of Hope

It’s no wonder that Christ gave us a picture of heaven as a home.

Read John 14:1–4. All of us long for a place we can rest—a place where we belong, where we’ll find love, joy, and peace. God is preparing that place for us right now, and when we see Him face to face one day, we will finally, truly be home.

This gives hope to those of us that haven’t had a good home—either now or in the past.

- Many people live in homes that struggle on without love or peace.
- Many homes ache with the absence of a mother or father.
- Many homes can barely be called a home—they provide shelter from the wind and weather, but little else.

A godly home, however, will reflect the future home we’ll have with Christ. It will be a place of love and joy, where people fellowship freely with God, and where they can learn and explore and celebrate God’s gifts.

Illustration—Ruth and Naomi

When Ruth and Naomi left Moab, they didn’t seem to have much of a home. They had both lost their husbands, and they were returning to an Israel that had just survived

a famine. Naomi was a hopeless, bitter shadow of her former self. Ruth was a Gentile that most people in Israel would mistrust.

Why were these two women even still together? Yes, because of their shared grief—but more importantly, because of their shared God.

God took care of them. He gave them a full measure of grace and hope. Their faith grew as God met their needs, and when Ruth married Boaz, she joined the line that would eventually bear God Himself in the flesh—Jesus Christ. Both spiritually and literally, God brought Naomi and Ruth into His own family.

Conclusion

Wherever we can, we should build up our homes for God's glory. We should depend on God to uplift our earthly places of rest into places that reflect His love and truth.

We cannot do this alone. Much of the responsibility for the home environment rests on the parents or the guardians. Children—even teenagers—cannot be expected to rebuild a perfect home, or to mend relationships that have been torn apart by issues you don't yet understand. As we discussed before, if you live in a hurtful home environment—regardless of who made it that way—seek help.

Focus—God's Family

You never have to be alone. Whether you have a loving family or an unloving one, you can depend on God to secure your future and uphold you with His grace. His light will outshine any darkness, and His grace will remain with us even in our weakness. Through God we have a true heritage, a true place to belong, a true identity as heirs, and a true destiny in heaven. Your earthly family may fail you, but your spiritual family—the true family all godly families represent—will never fall apart.

For this lesson, we looked at an ideal environment. In the coming lessons, we'll explore how family relationships can build up this kind of home. First, we'll examine the duties of parents, and then we'll look at the role of children in the home.

L E S S O N 7

FAMILY AND THE HOME

Lesson Notes

Home is the environment for the relationships we build with our family.

What Should the Home Be?

- **A Place of Care**
A good home reflects God's love with care and concern (cf. Luke 11:11–13; 1 Tim. 5:8).
- **A Place of Security**
Like the safe home that God promised His people (2 Sam. 7:10–11; Isa. 32:18), a good home guards against threats, both external and internal.
- **A Place of Hospitality**
A good home will bless more than one family. We can also welcome others (Heb. 13:2).
- **A Place of Growth**
A good home is built with wisdom and understanding—and its riches are measured in knowledge (Prov. 24:3–4).
- **A Place of Hope**
A good home will reflect the rest and fellowship we'll have with God in heaven.

Exercises

The teacher’s lesson described what an ideal, godly home might look like. Unfortunately, no home matches this picture perfectly. We all come from flawed, imperfect homes because they’re all filled with flawed, imperfect people.

But home is also where we learn many of the habits and patterns we take with us into adulthood. Our families are the template for many future relationships. It’s vital, therefore, that we place our early home life—with the good *and* the bad—into a godly perspective. That is the goal of this unit.

To begin, let’s look at the example of Christ. What was His home life like?

How do the Gospels first describe Jesus’ earthly parents?

- Joseph (Matt. 1:18–21):
He was a just man. He did not wish to shame Mary publicly when she was found to be pregnant outside of marriage.

Joseph the Carpenter

The Gospels tell us that Joseph was a carpenter (Matt. 13:55), but this profession was not like the master craftspeople we think of today. The Greek word *tekton* could refer to a construction worker, handyman, or stone mason.

Joseph did not have a glamorous job by his culture’s standards, and he likely provided for his family through hard labor. It seems that Joseph passed on his trade to his sons, given that the people called Jesus a carpenter in Mark 6:3.

- Mary (Luke 1:26–30):
She was somehow favored by God.

Mary and Joseph were not perfect by any means, but given their actions in the Gospels, they showed a willingness to be used by God to care for His Son. To pursue this mission, they faced some incredible challenges.

- According to Luke 1:34–37, what was unique about the birth of Jesus?
Mary was an unmarried virgin. The Holy Spirit caused her to become pregnant.

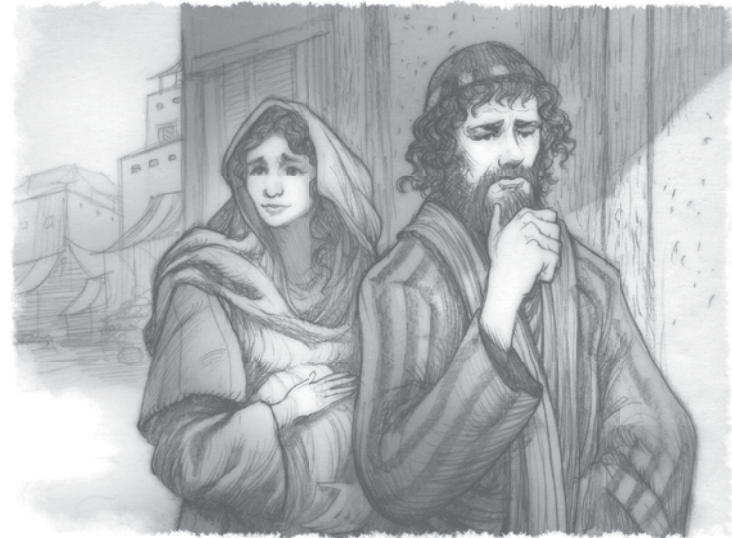
As explained in Isaiah 7:14, this miracle served as a sign that Jesus would be special. He would be called Immanuel—that is, *God with us*. This is how God chose to take on humanity and fellowship with us.

Unfortunately, this miracle would not be accepted by everyone. Many people preferred a less supernatural explanation for Mary’s pregnancy—that she had been with another man. Regardless, at the encouragement of Gabriel, Joseph accepted Mary as his wife—instead of putting her away as his culture expected him to do.

- Mary and Joseph continued to face hardship. What happened shortly before Jesus was born (Luke 2:1–6)?

Caesar called for a universal tax and registration, which required Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem.

Mary gave birth in a stable because the local inn—likely a courtyard set aside for travelers—was too full (Luke 2:7). Somewhere in the darkness of that village, a new mother laid the Messiah, the King of Kings, in a feeding trough. It’s hard to imagine a humbler setting for the One who would save God’s people.



God took care of this fledgling family. When King Herod decided to kill all children of the same age as the prophesied Messiah, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt. Sometime later, they returned to the village of Nazareth in Israel, where the child Jesus grew up.

Jesus probably received the basic education expected of Jewish boys in His day—but, as implied in John 7:15, He likely did not have access to advanced instruction in the Law.

- At the young age of 12, however, how did He show His knowledge (Luke 2:46–47)?

By listening to the teachers at the Temple, questioning them, and showing wisdom by His own answers.

- Mary and Joseph did not understand why or how Jesus did this (vv. 48–50). But did He disrespect His parents? Write Luke 2:51–52 below.

Text will vary by translation.

Jesus, the all-knowing God, submitted Himself to His parents and to the process of learning, perhaps to be an example for us.

- Though Jesus amazed people by teaching with power and authority, not everyone was impressed. How did Nathanael dismiss Jesus in John 1:45–46?

He said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

In Christ’s day, Nazareth was a small backwater village—not a place people expected to see a great leader or teacher. Unfortunately, even people in Nazareth rejected Jesus (Matthew 13:53–58). They couldn’t believe that this carpenter’s son, whom they had watched grow up, was the Messiah.

- How did Jesus explain their unbelief (Matt. 13:57)?

He said that a prophet is not without honor—except in his hometown.

Many people judged Jesus by His background for the rest of His ministry. Some people called Him the “son of Mary” (Mark 6:3)—not the “son of Joseph,” because they assumed that Jesus was fathered by another man. In John 8, when Jesus told the people that they were not actually children of God, they shot back, crudely and pointedly, “We weren’t born out of sexual immorality” (v. 41).

But Jesus remained faithful to His earthly family. He showed respect and honor where appropriate. Even in death, He cared for His mother.

- Read John 19:25–27. At this incredibly painful moment, what did Jesus take the time to do for His mother?

He had one of His disciples (likely John) take her into his home.

People may dismiss us or make fun of us because of our background, education, or social status, but we should trust God’s work in us. If He could entrust the ministry of His Son to such humble, difficult beginnings, He can use your home life to build you up for His glory (Rom. 8:28–29). That’s not to say that you should stay in a dangerous or abusive home, but you should reflect the truth and love of God wherever possible.

Reflections

- What parts of your upbringing have helped bring you closer to God?

- What parts have been discouraging or hurtful?

Assuming you build your own home someday, list three ways that you can keep God and His peace at the center of your home life. For ideas, look at Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Proverbs 15:1-6; 31:10-31; Ephesians 5:15-21; and 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

- _____

- _____

- _____

Peace in the Storm

Meditating on Your Most Important Relationship

Read John 1:1-18.

- What names is Christ given in this passage? What do they tell us about Him?
- Was Jesus widely accepted by His own people (v. 11)?
- Who then became His true family (v. 12-13)? Note also Matthew 12:46-50.
- God used Moses to give us the impossible standards of the Law, but what did Jesus show us (vv. 17-18)?

INTIMACY: PART 2

Objectives

- Define and distinguish *sexual activity* and *sexuality*
- Emphasize the purpose of sex as the expression of loving intimacy
- Describe and justify the appropriate context for sexual activity

Lesson

In the previous lesson, we looked at the areas of intimacy a wife and a husband can share:

- Their spirituality
- Their emotions
- Their time, energy, and interests
- Their dreams and goals
- And their physical affection

A lot of people get confused about the last one, specifically about sexual intimacy, which is why we'll spend this lesson carefully going over what Scripture has to say.

First of all, don't be too uncomfortable. We're approaching this topic from a philosophical point of view, and we won't delve into practical or biological matters. That's something you should tackle more and more as you step toward adulthood and marriage. But in the meantime, each of us has to build up a philosophy toward our own sexuality . . .

- To discipline ourselves
- To grow ourselves
- To protect ourselves
- To be moral not out of ignorance, but out of knowledge and grace

As Christ wanted for His disciples, we should be wise like serpents, but innocent like doves (Matt. 10:16).

Discussion: This brings up a question—why is it so uncomfortable to talk about sexuality? It might seem obvious, but it can be difficult to explain in simple terms.

Our sexuality represents a deeply personal and vulnerable part of ourselves. And since we can all be very, very different, it's almost impossible to talk about that part of ourselves without a good deal of social awkwardness.

It makes sense. Just like our spiritual struggles or other sensitive topics, our sexuality connects to many parts of our personhood. We don't want *just anyone* knowing that part of us, nor do we want to know that about just anyone else.

But the topic is important. How you view sex can greatly affect . . .

- Your place in society
- Your understanding of marriage and morality
- And your relationship with your future spouse

Misunderstanding sex can lead to great harm, but understanding it can lead to great good.

Context—An Imbalanced Outlook

That's why when people talk about sex, they tend toward one of two extremes:

Some people act like sex is *everything*. They say it's the most important part of a relationship, or that it's the greatest need or desire of any person. They connect sex to every single part of life, as if sexual expression were the window to the soul.

So they flaunt their opinions about sex, despite how awkward it makes the rest of us feel. They encourage people to talk about anything and everything sexual in front of anyone.

On the other hand, some people barely acknowledge sex at all. It is a difficult and personal topic, so these people basically pretend it doesn't exist. If the subject does come up, they say anything to make it go away.

If they have children, those kids might grow up with the idea that sex is some dark, shameful, unknowable part of life. They think that any sexual activity means giving in to their worst uncontrollable urges.

Both of these views fail to understand the role of sex within loving intimacy.

So today we'll try to put sex in its place, so to speak. This gift is a very personal gift, but it has a meaning and a purpose. If we don't understand that purpose, we won't realize when people twist the gift into something harmful or abusive.

The Definitions

Unfortunately, in English, the word *sex* is used too generally. Before we go too far, let's take a minute to define a few terms.

Definition of Sexual Activity

Sexual activity includes the acts by which people express physical attraction toward each other. This can include *sexual intercourse*—that is, the act required for human

reproduction. But more broadly, sexual activity includes everything intended to stir up or fulfill sexual desire—like touch, sight, speech, or anything else.

Definition of Sexuality

Since the 1800s, we've used the term *sexuality* to mean our capacity to express sexual desire and respond to sexual activity. If sexual activity is what we *do*, sexuality is part of who we *are*.

As humans, we are designed by God to appreciate and respond to the goodness and beauty of another person. That natural response, when disciplined toward good, is not sinful. Sexual desire is one part of our God-given urge to know and connect with another person—someone good, someone different than us, someone we can trust with our own vulnerability.

Focus—God's Gift of Sexuality

Our sexuality is therefore the sum of a variety of gifts—physical, mental, cultural—all of which God gave us so that we could cling to our spouse. Sexuality is the sliver of our personhood that makes us feel incomplete—like half of something even better. It's our capacity to be intimate with someone on a level that we don't intend to share with anyone else.

Not everyone's sexuality develops in the same way, however. Sexuality is as unique and as varied as the rest of our personalities. And a small percentage of people, for a variety of reasons, do not develop or experience sexual feelings at all. Biology and environment both play a big role in sexual development.

So just to review—

- Sexual activity is what we choose to do
- Sexuality is part of our God-given identity

Illustration—Sexuality as Connectivity

Please excuse a terrible comparison, but we could say that if a person were a radio, their sexuality is like their antenna. It's not always something you see from the outside, but it's part of who they are. It's designed to receive messages from another transmitter, then transmit its own messages in return.

What we communicate with our antenna is a matter of choice—just like sexual activity is a choice. But the antenna itself is something our Designer built into us. It doesn't really activate until we reach puberty, and it can take a while to understand, discipline, and tune, so to speak. The way we respond sexually stems partly from our biology, partly from our gender, and partly from the way we adapt to the world around us.

Though our sexuality is a very personal thing, it's not shameful. It is not the center of our identity, nor is it the measure of our success as a person, but it is an important expression of our self, one that reflects much of our personality.

The Purpose

Rightly understood, sexual activity must be an expression of loving intimacy. It is one way a husband and wife can cling to each other—to celebrate love and truth in an awesome way.

Read Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:4–6. Sexual activity is the physical dimension of the one-flesh relationship—that spiritual, emotional, and existential bond found in a loving marriage.

Context—Sex as *Knowing*

This is why the Scriptures often describe sexual activity by saying that someone “knew” their spouse (Heb. *yada*; cf. Gen. 4:1; Matt. 1:25). For example, when we read that Adam “knew” Eve in Genesis 4:1, we understand that the verse is politely referring to sexual activity, while at the same time describing the value of sex in that relationship.

God designed sexuality as a way for spouses to explore and celebrate their shared knowledge of each other—to experience in a close, personal, and incredibly vulnerable way, the beauty of each other as man and woman.

That means it’s almost impossible to talk about “sex” as if it were its own separate thing, as if it were a substance or a perfume or a drink you could bottle up and then share with someone. The true good a person finds during sexual activity does not come from some abstract feeling—it comes from the spouse. The good comes from her enjoying him enjoying her enjoying him—it’s a mutual awareness of each other’s love.

Read Proverbs 5:18 and Song of Solomon 5:16; 7:10. As exemplified by the pictures of intimacy in Proverbs and Song of Solomon, we should focus our desire on our spouse.

Properly speaking, we do not enjoy *sex*—we enjoy our *spouse*.

Discussion: Why might that distinction be important?

Because we should not *use* our spouse to enjoy sex. We express our sexuality so that we as spouses can enjoy each other. Sexual activity is only good so long as it encourages your spouse. You should not pursue sex if doing so is discouraging, unhelpful, or undesirable to your spouse. You shouldn’t get married because you love sex—you get married because you’ve chosen to show love and truth to your spouse.

Sexual activity is a means by which a husband and wife cherish their bond together—it’s just one way they explore and celebrate each other.

Context—Functions vs. Purpose

You’ll remember that we’ve discussed functions and purpose before when talking about friendship, the church, and marriage. Unfortunately, some people—even good, intelligent people—confuse the *functions* of sexual activity with its *purpose*.

For example . . .

- Some people might say that sex exists solely to produce children. It exists to create the next generation, and pleasure and intimacy are just side effects.
- Or some people might argue that the primary goal of sex is pleasure. You don't really need a good relationship to surround sex. And children? Sometimes they just *happen*.

To be clear—procreation and pleasure are both very important *functions* of sex:

- Sexual intercourse can result in pregnancy and childbirth.
- And sexual activity *should* be enjoyable for both husbands and wives. Barring health issues, both men and women have the ability to enjoy sex, though that enjoyment might develop and express itself in different ways.

But far more important than these *functions* is the *purpose* of sex—intimacy. Gentle love and gentle truth—this should be the motivation behind sex, and this should be the measure of what is good and fulfilling.

Discussion: If a married couple, for whatever reason, cannot have children—does that make sexual activity between them wrong?

Of course not. Husbands and wives can still express love and desire even if they do not have children.

Discussion: And on the flip side, is sexual activity always good, so long as it eventually produces children?

No. Immoral and abusive sexual activity can still produce children. Even married couples with children can treat each other in selfish ways.

Likewise, while pleasure is certainly an important part of sex, pleasure shouldn't be pursued at the cost of intimacy. If people value fun for its own sake . . .

- One partner's desires may dominate the other.
- One partner may suppress what is good and true about herself or himself in order to meet the whims of the other.
- Or both partners may pursue sex without first establishing intimacy. They may wonder why sex alone doesn't make them feel more connected or fulfilled.

We cannot take a superficial attitude toward sex—we cannot ignore the emotional complexities. We must first pursue intimacy, which encourages cooperation and truthful, loving care.

The Context

If pleasure was the primary goal of sex—couldn't we pursue sexual activity with just about anyone? If it's all about fun, why is Scripture so serious about the consequences of sex?

Our sexuality is very precious and delicate—we don't share that part of ourselves with just anyone. Our sexuality represents one of the most vulnerable parts of our personhood. As sensitive as it is to ridicule and harm, we must be careful about how we express it.

Context—Touch and Choice

Discussion: Imagine you were sitting alone in a room reading a book, and suddenly you felt someone's hand resting on your shoulder. How might you interpret that touch? How would you feel because of it?

With touch, context is everything.

- Who's touching me?
- What is my relationship to that person?
- What are they trying to communicate?
- How have I learned to respond to that kind of touch?

A kiss received from one person can be wonderful, but horrifying from another. A hug can be encouraging from someone you love, but stifling from someone who mistreats you. The exact same action can mean different things, depending on the relationship and how you feel.

Touch is bad and discouraging when we do not want to be touched—even if we don't understand the reason why. But we, as stewards of our own bodies, can pull away from those things that discourage us or our walk with God (1 Cor. 6:12–20).

So let's look quickly at the appropriate context for sexual activity. Remember the three principles of a godly marriage:

- First, we submit our marriage to God.
- Second, we love our spouses and submit our needs to theirs.
- Third, we are intimate with our spouses—we seek to understand them better.

Again, sex is an overflowing of love and intimacy that a married couple *has already built up*. This is important—sex is not the foundation of a healthy relationship. It's not the first step. It is the loving expression of an intimacy that already exists.

We talked a little about what intimacy looks like back in Lesson 26—it's sharing every part of yourself with your spouse. But what kind of environment encourages healthy intimacy?

Privacy

Spouses show care for each other by helping conceal each other's sexual activity from other people—not because it's bad or shameful, but because it's meant only for each other. In order to be completely vulnerable to each other, they shouldn't have to worry about the ridicule or judgment or presence of others outside the marriage. A husband and wife should be free to be completely absorbed only with each other.

Context—Outside Help

Does that mean certain details of your sexuality can never be shared outside of your marriage? There are a few cases in which waiving privacy is totally appropriate—like when you need to discuss issues with your doctor or a specialist, or if you need to report violence or abuse. Privacy is only important so long as it supports your relationships, your health, and your wellbeing.

Fidelity

Intimacy grows also through commitment. Spouses shouldn't need to worry about future rejection—they should know that their spouse will remain faithful to them, and *only* to them.

- A wife should have every reason to be confident that her husband loves her now—and will for the rest of their lives.
- And a husband should know that his wife will love him always, as well.

If one or both believed that their marriage might fall apart someday . . .

- They'd be tempted to hold back part of themselves.
- They might keep their feelings or emotions in check.
- They'd want to protect their hearts from being ripped apart whenever they get separated.

That's no way to build true, loving intimacy. What God joins together, we shouldn't tear apart (Matt. 19:6).

Safety and Trust

Not only should the relationship continue—it should also be filled with love and care. Spouses should convince each other that they can trust each other, that they can be vulnerable to each other.

Of course, it's difficult to let ourselves be vulnerable. And especially for people who have grown up under mockery and fear, sexual vulnerability is a terrific challenge.

But husbands and wives should do everything in their power to make each other feel safe and secure together. They should let each other freely express their emotions, their feelings, and their spiritual struggles. Spouses shouldn't fear mockery or judgment. They should expect grace and understanding. Only then will they trust each other in a healthy and encouraging way.

Cooperation

The fundamental expression of intimacy is cooperation and sharing. This is complete *openness* and *oneness* on all levels—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical. We build each other up by sharing and affirming each other—we take time to know our spouse and then show our spouse their own goodness, their own strength, their own beauty.

- We honor them for who they are.
- We fulfill their desire for us.
- We delight in their own pleasure.
- We celebrate what makes us different—and what makes us one together.

This context for intimacy—privacy, fidelity, trust, vulnerability, and cooperation—is found exclusively within a godly, loving marriage.

- Marriage doesn't automatically result in godly intimacy.
- But marriage is the only place where godly sexual intimacy can grow.

Focus—God's Provision Through Marriage

It's no surprise, therefore, that God designed sexual activity to take place only within a loving, intimate marriage (cf. Deut. 22:13–30; 1 Cor. 7:1–16). God did not design marriage arbitrarily. He instituted this relationship to reflect the kind of love and truth that He made us to express.

A good marriage is . . .

- The ideal way for men and women to connect wholly with one another
- The ideal way to bridge the differences between men and women in love—to in fact *celebrate* those differences
- And the ideal way to pass on all that love and truth to the next generation

So we intertwine our sexuality only around the sexuality of our spouse. Everything else rejects the reason God gave us this gift.

- Unmarried people should refrain from sexual activity in part so that they can attune their sexuality toward a future spouse—that is, the person with whom they can be safe and intimate.
- And even married couples should express their sexuality only in a way that is loving and true to each other. They should not harm or demean each other—but rather cherish each other.

Sex should be the way we *express* intimacy—not the way we *coerce* it. We don't trade our sexuality for attention or love. Trust is so fragile—it takes a long time to build, and it can be torn apart in an instant.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:2–8. We must discipline ourselves to be loving and true. Healthy sexual activity requires *gentleness*—that is, strength under control.

Sexual immorality demeans and harms us, but perhaps even worse, it disrespects the God who gave us this gift.

The Commitment

Our sexuality takes a long time to develop, discipline, and focus, and it can be harmed when . . .

- People abuse or demean us, whether physically or emotionally
- People tear away from us after we've tried to be vulnerable and intimate with them
- Or we are exposed to unhealthy, sexually-charged situations that distort our thinking about sex

All that said, God offers grace and healing, despite the harm we've faced in the past. We may—through our actions or the actions of others—bear scars. We may face challenges others don't understand. If we seek help and healing, these burdens need not prevent us from serving God or connecting with the people we love.

So in a godly marriage, we take steps to show our spouse that we will not betray the trust needed for healthy sexual activity. Through humility, love, and grace, we assure them that we cherish them.

- **We assure our spouse that we will love and accept all of them**—their feelings, their struggles, their body, their desires—and intertwine them with our own.
- **We assure our spouse that we will not force them to do what they should not do—or do not want to do.** Sexual intimacy is freely given. To force intimacy or coerce intimacy is to turn it into abuse. More on this in the student exercises.
- **We assure our spouse that they can open up to us completely**—that we will not leave them, rip apart the relationship, and tear away part of their heart. We are committed to understanding and loving them for a lifetime.
- **We assure them that we want to attune our sexuality to theirs**—that we do not expect them to fit some preconceived notion of sex. We won't tune our desires toward other people, toward sexually-explicit entertainment, or to anything else. Instead, we will both express our sexualities uniquely, together, in order to know and celebrate each other alone.

Conclusion

You'll cover more about this topic in the student exercises, and in the next lesson, we'll discuss the kinds of relationships that build up to marriage. Now that we've gotten a glimpse of what marriage should look like, we can talk about how God might lead us there.

INTIMACY: PART 2

Lesson Notes

This lesson outlines a philosophy toward sexual intimacy without delving into matters of biology. We study God's thoughts on this topic so that we can be moral—not out of ignorance, but by His wisdom and grace. As Christ wanted for His disciples, we should be wise like serpents, but innocent like doves (Matt. 10:16).

The Definitions

Sexual activity includes the acts by which people express physical attraction toward each other.

- This can include sexual intercourse, the act required for human reproduction.
- This also includes every act intended to stir up or fulfil sexual desire.

Sexuality is our capacity to express sexual desire and respond to sexual activity.

- This includes a variety of gifts—physical, mental, cultural—all of which God gave us so that we could cling to our spouse.
- This part of our identity develops differently in each person. A small percentage of people do not develop sexual feelings at all.

The Purpose

- Sexual activity must be an expression of loving intimacy.

- Sexual activity is the physical dimension of the one-flesh relationship between a wife and husband (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4–6; cf. Gen. 4:1; Matt. 1:25).
- We should focus our sexual desire on our spouse (Prov. 5:18; Song of Sol. 5:16; 7:10).
- We do not use our spouse to enjoy sex. Rather, a husband and wife should express their sexuality to enjoy each other.

The Functions

- Procreation
- Pleasure

As important as these functions are, we should not confuse them with the purpose of sex.

The Context

A husband and wife should nurture a healthy environment for sexual expression.

- Privacy

Spouses show care for each other by helping conceal each other's sexual activity from other people—not because it's bad or shameful, but because it's meant only for each other.

- Fidelity

Intimacy grows through commitment. Spouses should not have reason to worry about future betrayal.

- Safety and Trust

Spouses should convince each other that they can be vulnerable together.

- Cooperation

The fundamental expression of intimacy is sharing. This is complete *openness* and *oneness* on all levels—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical. We build each other up by sharing and affirming each other. We take time

to know our spouse and then show them their own goodness, their own strength, their own beauty.

- We honor them for who they are.
- We fulfill their desire for us.
- We delight in their own pleasure.
- We celebrate what makes us different—and what makes us one together.

To encourage this context, God designed sexual activity to take place only within a loving, intimate marriage (cf. Deut. 22:13–30; 1 Cor. 7:1–16; 1 Thess. 4:2–8).

- Unmarried people should refrain from sexual activity, in part so that they can attune their sexuality toward their future spouse.
- Married couples should express their sexuality only in a way that is loving and true to each other. They should not harm or demean each other—but rather cherish each other.

The Commitment

Our sexuality can be harmed when . . .

- People abuse or demean us, whether physically or emotionally
- People tear away from us after we've tried to be vulnerable and intimate with them
- We are exposed to unhealthy, sexually-charged situations that distort our thinking about sex

Thankfully, God redeems and heals us. With help and grace, we will not let our scars prevent us from reflecting God's grace or pursuing healthy intimacy.

So as spouses, we commit ourselves to each other's good:

- **We assure our spouse that we will love and accept all of them**—their feelings, their struggles, their body, their desires—and intertwine them with our own.

- **We assure our spouse that we will not force them to do what they should not do—or do not want to do.** Sexual intimacy is freely given. To force intimacy or coerce intimacy is to turn it into abuse.
- **We assure our spouse that they can open up to us completely**—that we will not leave them, rip apart the relationship, and tear away part of their heart. We are committed to understanding and loving them for a lifetime.
- **We assure them that we want to attune our sexuality to theirs**—that we do not expect them to fit some pre-conceived notion of sex. We won't tune our desires toward other people, toward sexually explicit entertainment, or to anything else. Instead, we will both express our sexualities uniquely, together, in order to know and celebrate each other alone.

Exercises

Mutual Submission

We've already noted that husbands and wives can reflect Christ by sacrificing themselves for each other (cf. Eph. 5:1, 21–33). We submit to each other our time, our effort, and our will. But how is this kind of love expressed sexually?

Intimacy and Responsibility

To be clear—it's not your job to keep your spouse faithful to you. If your spouse is consumed with lust, you should not pander to their sin by demeaning yourself and fighting for their corrupted affection. You do not want that kind of attention.

It is not your fault if your spouse lusts after someone else. One person alone cannot keep a couple together (cf. 1 Cor. 7:15). Reflect love and truth, and trust God to work in your spouse's heart.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1–5. Here Paul responds to a letter written to him by the believers in Corinth. From verse 1, it seems that they wondered if there were any spiritual benefits to abstaining from sex. Is it good for a man to simply never touch a woman?

- But Paul writes that each husband should cling to his own wife, and each wife should cling to her own husband. What does this help guard against (v. 2)?

Sexual immorality / fornication

There's no spiritual reason for husbands and wives to hold back from each other sexually, unless they decide it's best for a time (v. 5). Abstinence alone doesn't make a couple more spiritual. If anything, it might tempt some people to sin.

We should respond to our spouse's sexuality whenever such intimacy is good for both of us. We offer our spouse the good they see in us (v. 3).

How does verse 4 describe the way a husband and wife can show love?

- The husband has power over the wife's body.
- The wife has power over the husband's body.

Each spouse submits to the desire of the other. Neither dominates the other—and yet *both* do, at each other's request.

With this view, neither spouse should push the other into sexual activity. If a husband submits to his wife's power, he will approach her only at her pleasure—and likewise the wife to her husband. We do not build intimacy by coercing sex *against* our spouse's desire. That ignores the entire point. Do we want sex, or do we want what is best for our spouse?

Perversion

Unfortunately, we cannot study intimacy without addressing some of the many lies and corruptions that creep into our thoughts. If intimacy is love and truth, then its enemy is selfishness and falsehood.

Consent and Submission

Healthy sexuality does not include coercion or violence.

- *Rape* is sexual intercourse without explicit, informed consent. In many Western countries, minors and intoxicated persons cannot legally offer informed consent.
- *Sexual assault* is any sexual contact without explicit, informed consent. This may or may not involve violence.

Examples of these sins are found throughout Scripture (cf. Gen. 19:30–38; 2 Sam. 13) and in society today. Many people therefore stress the importance of consent to sexual activity.

But consent is a minimum requirement. Sexual activity doesn't become *good* simply because one person begrudgingly agrees in the moment. Rather, Christians should share their sexuality only with a loving, trustworthy spouse—someone with whom they share an ongoing commitment to intimacy.

The abuse of sexuality is called *perversion*. People use this term loosely—often as an insult—but the true meaning is specific. Perversion is the corruption of sexuality against its true purpose. It is sexuality driven by *lust*—uncontrolled, sinful desire—not the loving intimacy that God intended.

- Read 1 Corinthians 6:18–20. How should we respond to sexual immorality (v. 18)? Flee
- Since the Holy Spirit moves and works through us (v. 19), what should we rather do with our bodies (v. 20)?
Honor / glorify God

This reflects the advice Solomon gives in Proverbs 5. We should turn from those who would draw us into sin (vv. 1–14), focusing our desire instead on our spouse (vv. 15–19).

We should remove ourselves from sexual temptation when possible. We often succeed by denying ourselves chances to fail (cf. Rom. 13:14).

- Read Matthew 5:27–30. We know from the Law that adultery is sinful (v. 27), but what did Jesus say is just as bad (v. 28)?
Looking at a woman in order to lust after her

Christ did not condemn the natural physical response to a person we find attractive—but rather the desire to consume, to control, and to sin. Just as bad as adultery is the desire to commit adultery *if we could*. Some people go their entire lives without touching another person inappropriately, but they still curse themselves with a sinful view of others.

- According to verses 29–30, what would be better than letting an eye or hand lead us into *Gehenna*—that is, hell?
Cutting them off

Can we avoid everything that might provoke lust? Of course not. You could lock yourself in a barren room for the rest of your life and *still* sin. But thankfully, nothing in this world can force you to do wrong.

Read Matthew 15:1–20. Here the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His followers for not following certain religious traditions—practices meant to keep people from accidentally breaking the Law.

- Jesus then accuses the Pharisees of valuing their traditions more than the Law itself (vv. 3–6). How did Isaiah describe this kind of hypocrisy (vv. 7–9)?
People honor God by what they say—but not by how they think. They teach human rules as if God gave them.

The Old Testament Law included many rules regarding hygiene and cleanliness, and the Pharisees took this to mean that some kinds of food were inherently evil. Christ corrected them, saying that impurity doesn't go *into* our mouths, but *out* (v. 11).

- What did He mean by that statement (vv. 18–20)?
The mouth speaks from the heart, which can hold wickedness that defiles a person.

If we nurture within our mind a degrading, unloving, objectifying view of others, we will sin no matter how much we shield ourselves from temptation. Impurity doesn't come from the world around us, but from our mind.

- Read James 1:12–15. What shouldn't we accuse God of doing (v. 13)?
Tempting us

We can't blame Him for the situations He places us in. It's not His fault that we sin. No matter where we find ourselves, we can do right (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13).

The Nature of Impurity

True impurity is *spiritual*, not physical. We're not impure because of something we ate or something another person did to us, however terrible that feels. Spiritual impurity has only one cause—a heart that does not worship God.

Thankfully, Christ offers to cleanse our hearts from sin. Other people may still hurt and demean us, but no one can defile us in God's sight.

- What is it that truly tempts us and carries us away (v. 14)?

Our desire / lust

- According to verse 15, this gives birth to sin, which leads to death

Our lust is no one's fault but our own—because the battle lies within our thoughts. And if we want to win this battle—if we want to change ourselves for the better—we must rely on Christ.

We do not choose every thought that pops into our head from moment to moment, but we can refuse to entertain thoughts that degrade others. As Christians, we seek . . .

- **Holiness** – Put away things that feed your lust. Guard your heart, and focus on what is good.
- **Truth** – Ask God to dispel fantasy and give you His perspective on the situation. How does He view others?
- **Love** – Turn from destructive, degrading thoughts toward respect and compassion. Care for people—don't exploit them.
- **Joy** – Nurture the good that God's already given you. Find fulfillment by serving, connecting, and creating.

Objectification

Instead of appreciating people as image-bearers of God—as people with a will and purpose of their own—we can sometimes objectify people. We can think of others as mere tools for our own pleasure—as commodities to be used, thrown away, and exchanged for another.

Lust treats people as less than people—as *things* with no identity and no will. Lust hides the face of others in order to depersonalize and dominate. Lust therefore isolates us within a fantasy, destroying our ability to connect with people in any meaningful way.

We should discipline our thoughts and our eyes to respect the dignity of other people—no matter what they do or how they look. As we walk with the Spirit, we will reject the sins of the flesh (Gal. 5:16–24). Lust will not grow in our hearts when we view other people as image-bearers.

The Example of Solomon and the Shulammite – Part 2

Commitment and Rejection – Song of Solomon 7:11–8:14

Beyond the early passages covered in the previous lesson, the Song of Songs continues to explore the intimacy shared by the Shulammite and Solomon. They describe each other in sensuous terms (4:1–15; 5:10–16), and they are intoxicated with each other's attention (4:9–11; 5:1; 6:5). They nurture their shared sexuality like a garden (4:16; 6:2–3)—a place of privacy, rest, and pleasure.

The Shulammite gives herself to her beloved, knowing that his desire focuses on her (7:10). She views her sexuality as her own vineyard, one she's kept for her husband to enjoy (7:11–13; 8:12). Unfortunately, this intimacy was not to last.

Read Song of Solomon 8:1–7. Here the Shulammite aches for Solomon, who has apparently turned away from her:

- **Verses 1–2** – She wishes they could be together somehow, even if only as siblings or friends.
- **Verses 3–5** – The feelings she awakened with Solomon—the apple tree (cf. 2:3)—have not left her.
- **Verses 6–7a** – She therefore challenges us, her listeners, to remember her words in this song. We should carry her message like a seal on our heart and a mark on our arm. We should not take intimacy lightly because desire feels as strong as death—it burns brightly, and it cannot be quenched easily.
- **Verse 7b** – Intimacy is worth far more than wealth. It is insulting for someone to offer money for this kind of desire—to treat people like objects in trade.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what Solomon chose to do. He bought and traded the sexuality of others for pleasure and for political gain (1 Kings 11:1–8). He turned away from the Shulammite, and he turned away from God.

Read Song of Solomon 8:8–14. Some scholars believe the song technically ends at verse 7, with these remaining verses serving as advice and a thematic recap.

- **Verses 8–9** – In a possible flashback to the Shulammitte’s early years, a family wonders what to do for their daughter when she reaches the age of marriage. They decide that if she is careful with her sexuality—if she is a “wall”—they will honor her. But if she is not careful, they will try to protect her.
- **Verse 10** – The Shulammitte states that she was careful with her sexuality. She was a wall—a symbol of strength and protection. In her, therefore, Solomon could find *shalom*—peace and rest.
- But note verse 11. How did Solomon reject intimacy? What did he do with his own vineyard?

He rented it out to keepers/caretakers. He accepted money for marriage.

In verse 12, the Shulammitte responds by letting Solomon go his way. Her vineyard is her own. Solomon can keep the money he desires, and his other wives can keep his vineyard for him.

It’s unclear if the last two verses (vv. 13–14) represent a reunion of the two lovers—or a summary of the intimacy they once had (cf. 2:17; 4:16). Since this song is not a narrative, we’re not sure how their relationship unfolded.

Regardless, it’s difficult to read the Song of Songs without a sense of sadness. The Shulammitte was not Solomon’s first wife (cf. 6:8–9), nor was she Solomon’s last. Solomon sold himself into seven hundred marriages while keeping three hundred concubines in his harem. He had a chance at intimacy—he knew the good that could come from a single, loving marriage—and he turned it all down.

But we shouldn’t be too quick to criticize him. As a powerful king, Solomon had plenty of chances to sin, but we have just as many today. We might not marry hundreds of people, but we can degrade countless more with our thoughts. Not all self-harm is physical.

Thankfully, we have access to a greater wisdom than Solomon understood then.

- We have the advice of the Shulammitte, who understood how precious and powerful intimacy could be (8:6–7).
- We have the Book of Ecclesiastes, likely written by Solomon later in life, when he understood his political and sexual pursuits to be worthless (Eccles. 2:1–11). It appears from this book that he eventually turned from his sin.
- We have Christ, who taught that a wife and husband could cling together as one-flesh (Mark 10:6–9). Jesus showed us what true love looks like (Eph. 3:14–19; 1 John 4:9).

We therefore cherish our sexuality so that we can better cherish our spouse.

Reflections

The following are a few pieces of personal advice as you step toward adulthood and maturity. Consider which areas require more thought and study from you.

1. Pay Attention

Through your adolescent years and beyond, you have a lot to learn about your sexuality. As you follow the principles of love, intimacy, and respect, you should learn what you can from Scripture, from your parents, from school, from your doctor, and from other trustworthy sources.

- **Philosophy** – Understand the value of sexual intimacy to marriage and personal well-being. Avoid corrupt thinking, and pursue love and truth.
- **Biology** – Study and appreciate the human reproductive system, along with the changes common to men and women during puberty.
- **Health and Hygiene** – Practice care and cleanliness. Talk to your doctor about necessary check-ups, and do not hesitate to ask questions. Study how sexually transmitted infections (STIs) spread and present themselves.
- **Safety** – Your culture has unique risks and dangers, so practice common sense to avoid harm and abuse. Walk away from people that isolate you or make you feel unsafe. Let no one touch you without your permission. Listen to the advice of your family, law enforcement, and mature believers, even if they seem overprotective.

You can ignore philosophical advice from people who think of sex as a mindless playground, and you should pull away from anyone that objectifies and demeans others. Follow Christ first.

2. Relax

Your sexuality is growing and developing throughout your adolescence. In fact, it'll keep changing throughout your entire life. You'll have to adapt, but you don't need to be afraid or ashamed of your sexuality.

Develop a healthy respect for your own body. Treat it well with good food and exercise, but don't let others' standards of beauty drive you to loathe yourself or abuse yourself. Don't demean other people, and just as importantly, don't demean yourself for their sake.

3. Love

Until and after God leads you into marriage, follow Christ's command to love. Show respect to others as image-bearers, not objects, and show grace even to people that mock and deride you.

Meditate on God's love for you. Treasure the image He gave you, and learn to cherish others as brothers and sisters first.

Corrupt Views of Sexual Activity

When people do not value sex as an expression of intimacy, they will turn sex into a weapon, a burden, or an idol.

As Control

Some people use their sexuality to dominate or manipulate others. Sex is their path to power, so they do not *share* their desire, but *assert* it. They do not want others to express their will.

Response: We do not control our spouse for the sake of our sexuality—but the other way around. We submit ourselves to each other (1 Cor. 7:4).

As a Right

Some people think of sex as a need—like food, oxygen, or water—so they believe someone *owes* them sex. Like the mobs of Sodom, they demand pleasure from whatever catches their eye (cf. Gen. 19:4–11).

Response: Spouses have a responsibility to be intimate with each other, but this intimacy does not always include sexual activity. Sometimes our spouse simply needs our presence, our emotional support, and a sense of security and hope. We can decline sex, yet still embrace each other.

As Inconsequential

Some people view sex as mindless pleasure because they view themselves as little more than animals, driven by irrepressible desires (cf. 1 Pet. 4:1–5). They strip all purpose and meaning from sexual activity.

They often ignore the emotional and physical consequences of sex, and therefore view pregnancy as an unwelcome surprise. They might be willing to support a woman through an abortion—but not through pregnancy and parenthood.

Response: We confine sex to marriage on purpose—to deepen intimacy and to support our spouse no matter what happens. If we face illness, sexual dysfunction, pregnancy, or anything else that might interrupt sexual activity, we should not have to worry about our partner leaving us. As spouses, we cherish each other, and we cherish each new life.

As Impurity

Some people think sexual activity is inherently impure—that it somehow hinders our walk with God, even when expressed in a loving marriage. Others may believe that victims of sexual assault, despite no fault of their own, are irreparably damaged and incapable of intimacy.

Response: God blessed sexuality within the very first human relationship (Gen. 2:22–25). We corrupt this gift only when we choose to use it in a way He did not intend.

Other people may hurt us, but they cannot defile us. We may face great challenges because of past sexual experiences, but God can grow, heal, and redeem us (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–11).

As Public Identity

To combat the shame sometimes associated with sex, some people flaunt their sexuality (cf. Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:19), as if a public sexuality is a healthy one. They do not merely educate others about sex—they make sex part of their public image. They expect sex to grant them status and prestige.

Response: Once we make sexuality part of our public image, it's difficult to get people to notice anything else about us. Our sexuality is private, not shameful—secretive, not mysterious. We can understand and enjoy our sexuality in marriage without exposing it to public judgment.

As a Panacea

Some people think of sex as a “cure-all” for relationships, as if physical attraction was the foundation of intimacy. People in failing marriages might think that if they can just enjoy sex the way they once did, their relationship would be better.

Response: Sex is only as good as its context. Healthy sexual activity overflows from the good already in a relationship. The sexuality we share with our spouse can be sweet, beautiful, overwhelming, even *hilarious*—but only if we love and understand each other. If our marriage suffers, we should rebuild trust and emotional intimacy before worrying about sexual activity.

As Fulfillment

Some people describe sex as “consummation,” as if it were the end goal or highest point of a relationship. Sex will disappoint these people because sexual pleasure is neither the deepest part of marriage, nor the most enduring. By making sexual activity a primary goal or standard for marriage, they undermine the free, playful expressions of true intimacy.

Response: Intimacy is more than sex, and intimacy can exist without sex. Above all, we pursue godly intimacy with our spouse, knowing that sexual activity is just one way to show love, among many. We follow love and truth first—because those stars will shine brightly even when the rest of life fades to twilight.

Peace in the Storm

Meditating on Your Most Important Relationship

Read 1 Corinthians 6.

- Why should we believers pursue unity (vv. 1–8)?
- What were we once? And what are we now by God's grace (vv. 9–11)?
- How is sexual immorality a betrayal of God's love (vv. 12–20)?