

Sex: Using God's Gift for His Purposes

Fr Jeremy Davis

This booklet is adapted from the talk I give young people in the Sex and God Education (SaGE) Program. It summarizes the Church's teaching on sex in order to help you as parents accurately convey that teaching to your children. They don't need to hear all of this at once. Rather, I encourage you to discuss the various topics as opportunities arise over the course of your child's development. Familiarize yourself with this material now so that you can speak to these subjects when they come up. (And they often come up when you least expect them!)

Sex Is a Gift from God

Sex is a good thing, a blessing from God. He created sex, and "everything created by God is good."¹

He created our bodies with all their sexual parts. He made sex necessary for the human race to continue from one generation to the next. He designed our bodies so that sex gives us pleasure. He designed our minds so that we desire sex and are attracted to members of the opposite sex.

God made us this way for a reason: to draw men and women together into the sacrament of marriage and to encourage them to seek from Him the gift of children.

At the same time, sex is not a need. Having sex is not necessary for fulfillment or happiness. In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ, His Mother and many saints lived the most fulfilled and truly happy lives without ever having sex. They prove that growing closer to God is infinitely more satisfying than sex could ever be.

1 1 Timothy 4:4, RSV

God's Commandments are Instructions

Along with the gift of sex, God has given us commandments that are instructions for its use.

Whenever you buy something, it comes with instructions that tell you how to use it safely and for the greatest benefit. God's commandments have a similar purpose. When He tells us to do something or not to do something, it's because He's trying to keep us safe and helping us to fully enjoy His blessings.

God's instructions about how to use sex are very simple: Only a man and woman who are married to each other should have sex. So:

- People should not have sex before getting married (this is called "fornication");
- After they are married, they shouldn't have sex with anyone but their husband or wife (this is called "adultery").

Restricting sex to marriage helps it fulfill God's purposes, and thereby makes the experience of sex safer and more meaningful.

The Purposes of Sex: Bonding and Procreation

Sex has two purposes in God's plan: bonding and procreation.

Bonding. Sex can help bond a man and a woman in a uniquely close relationship that is unlike any other – closer than the closest friendship. To fulfill this purpose it needs to be preceded and surrounded by the support of an honest, caring and committed marriage. In this way sex and marriage are like icing and cake—the icing is overpoweringly sweet by itself, but it completes and improves the cake when added on top.

To do its job of bonding, sex also needs to be a uniquely shared experience – something these two people only share with one another. When husband and wife discover sex for the first time together on their wedding night, it becomes their special secret that can bring them much joy and keep them close to one another. Sharing that special experience

is like a secret handshake between friends, confirming the love and loyalty they share.

But what if you don't wait until marriage? With each failed relationship you will experience heartbreak that is much more intense than it needs to be. Sex is a powerful experience that makes a person emotionally vulnerable to his or her partner. By having sex you share a part of yourself with the other person, and give a piece of yourself to them forever. If that person leaves you, then it causes even greater pain and sadness. The ordinary feelings of loss and betrayal when a relationship ends are hard, but if sex was involved the pain is much greater.

And then when it comes time for you to marry, sex will not be as special or as secret as it could have been. It becomes more commonplace and ordinary the more widely you experience it, and therefore will not be as effective a bond as it could have been. The bonding power of sex then becomes like a Post-it note that is used over and over again until it can barely stick to anything. It won't be as effective in holding you and your spouse together.

Procreation. Sex can also bring children into the world, and God created it for this purpose. It fulfills His desire to have more and more people He can love and who might love Him in return. As was true with bonding, procreation is happier and more secure with the support of the marriage relationship.

In His love, God made marriage a safe harbor for the raising of children. The loving, Christian marriage of parents gives children the security and guidance they need as they grow up. Children who are raised by married parents generally grow up happier and healthier than those who are not, as has been shown in scientific studies.² This is because married parents support one another. If one parent loses a job or gets sick, the other can pick up the slack. Also, each parent has different knowledge

² *The State of Our Unions* 2010. 89-97. Accessed online at stateofourunions.org.

and skills to help their children, and working together they can help them in different ways.

Don't get me wrong. With God's help single parents can do a great job, and they often make amazing sacrifices out of love for their children. But it is an extremely difficult situation, and far from ideal. Christian parents in a loving marriage provide the best support for children to mature both physically and spiritually. That's why God wants us to wait until after marriage to have children.

Finding Your Way: God's Plan for You

So far we've talked generically about God's purposes for sex in the human race. But God also has specific plans and purposes for each of our lives. He knows each of you, and wants to help you grow into the best possible version of you.

For most of you that plan includes marriage and children, but for some of you it might not. For Orthodox Christians, there is another path of life that is blessed by God called monasticism. Monks and nuns give up marriage and family life in order to be single-mindedly devoted to God. Let God guide you as you grow up, and His specific plan for you will become clearer year by year.

In the meantime, puberty is introducing you to a whole new sexual aspect of life, and you need to learn how to navigate through its challenges and avoid its dangers. The challenges are new kinds of feelings, thoughts and desires that can be persistent and demanding. The dangers are sins that can derail your spiritual life, and lead to other painful consequences.

Adjusting to New Feelings and Thoughts

You will start to experience sexual feelings and thoughts after puberty begins. They can be both attractive and frightening—attractive because they give pleasure, and frightening because they are new and can be insistent and strong.

As you grow up you are going to start having sexual desires. You will start feeling sexual attraction to people and sexual excitement. You will also have sexual thoughts that come into your mind seemingly out of the blue. All of this is natural and normal. God designed you as a human being to have sexual desire and to be interested in sex—it's part of our nature.

You can't prevent these feelings, desires and thoughts, nor do you need to. But be careful how you respond to them after they appear. Sex is so powerful that it can take over our hearts and minds if we aren't careful.

So don't give much attention to sexual feelings and thoughts, and especially don't seek them out. Instead try to focus on all the other important parts of your life: church, family, friends, education, sports.

If God wills for you to be married, then a time will come when you can begin to seek out relationships with potential spouses. But don't rush into that part of your life. God is preparing you to become an adult, and only after that will you be ready for marriage and sex.

Curiosity

During puberty you will also begin to feel a natural curiosity about sex. Again, don't let the subject take up too much of your time and attention. Sexual curiosity can lead us into danger.

Nevertheless, some amount of curiosity is healthy. You just need to be smart about where you look for answers. Certain sources of information are more reliable than others: a priest, parents, a doctor, or another trustworthy adult. These are people who will usually give you truthful and helpful answers.

Other sources of information about sex are usually unreliable, so avoid them:

- Internet – anybody can post anything online, even if it isn't true.
- Friends and other kids at school – your peers don't know any better than you do.

- TV & magazines – in general, TV networks and magazines are in the business of making money; their goal is not to help us, but rather to use our sexual curiosity and interest to make money.

Avoiding the Dangers of Sexual Sins

We have learned how God intends for sex to be used. Unfortunately, many people ignore God’s will and give their minds, hearts and bodies to sex in ways that displease God and lead to painful consequences. These are sexual sins, and you need to be aware of their dangers and how to avoid them.

But before we get into that, I want to make an important clarification. Sometimes people force other people to do sexual things that they don’t want to do. This is called “sexual abuse”, or “molesting”, or “rape”. Sometimes this even happens to young children, who don’t know anything about sex. The abuser—the one who forces—is guilty of a very serious sin, but the victim—the one who is forced—is not guilty at all. It is not a sin to be made to do things you don’t want to do. If someone has suffered abuse, God does not judge them but rather compassionately wants to heal them.

Returning to the subject of sexual sins, I’ve already mentioned two: fornication and adultery. Fornication is premarital sex; adultery is sex between a married person and someone beside their husband or wife. There are also other kinds of sexual sins.

Sexual Fantasizing

I encouraged you earlier not to dwell on sexual thoughts and feelings, and not to seek them out. Doing so is called sexual fantasizing.

Jesus Christ taught us to avoid not just impure actions, but also impure fantasizing and lustful looking: “everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). So, it is a sin to daydream about sex or look at people’s bodies in order to cultivate sexual desire.

Pornography

Pornography includes books, magazines, websites or movies that are designed to provoke and feed sexual desire.

Looking at pornography is dangerous. It is like throwing gasoline on a fire, since it feeds and intensifies the desires that are already in us. It is also like drinking salt water – instead of satisfying, it just makes you thirstier.

Pornography can be very addictive, and people who started looking at it when they are young can get hooked and find it very difficult to stop.

Pornography is also deceptive and distorting, it portrays a fantasy world, not reality. As a result it gives unrealistically portrays how peoples' bodies should look and how people should relate to one another.

Masturbation

Masturbation—acting out sex by oneself—often develops out of sexual fanaticizing and pornography. It turns sex into an individual act, separate from love and relationship, devoted instead to pleasure.

It also diminishes the significance of sex within marriage. Remember that sex is supposed to be something that only husband and wife share – their special secret. Masturbation makes the experience impersonal, ordinary and commonplace.

Masturbation can also be addictive. It affects a person's brain the same way drugs do, stimulating brain chemicals that cause pleasure. As with drugs, some people get hooked on that pleasure. After getting hooked it's hard for them to quit, even when they want to.

Finally, masturbation feeds a person's sexual desires like pornography. It makes those desires stronger, focusing the mind increasingly on sex.

Mutual Masturbation, Oral Sex, Anal Sex

Some people think of these as “loopholes” for keeping one's virginity “technically.” They might think that before marriage it's wrong to have

vaginal intercourse (what people usually mean by “sex”), but they think other sexual acts are OK, like:

- Mutual masturbation, when one person touches or rubs another person’s genitals;
- Oral sex; and
- Anal sex.

Sex is sex, and all of these sexual acts are sins. We ought to be real, and not justify ourselves with false technicalities.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is when men have sexual relationships with men, or women have sexual relationships with women. Homosexual men are sometimes called “gay”; homosexual women, “lesbians.” This can be a very confusing topic, so we will try to understand it step by step.

First, it’s important to recognize how confusing sexual feelings can be during puberty and adolescence. Many young people experience a sort of passing sexual interest in someone of their own gender at some point. What do I mean? A boy might have a feeling of wanting to be close to another boy, or curiosity about what he looks like under his clothes. An unexpected sexual thought might come into his head about another boy. Or a girl might think or feel the same things toward another girl. None of this means that they are homosexuals – that they are “gay.”

Especially during puberty, when you are curious about sex and your mind is trying to make sense of it, you might have such passing thoughts or feelings. They may shock, surprise or confuse you. But these flukes don’t define you, in fact they will generally go as quickly as they came, and you don’t need to worry about them.

Some people, however, persistently feel sexual attraction toward their own gender; often this is the only kind of sexual desire they have ever known. These homosexual feelings are not sins. They do not come from God, but neither did the individual choose to have them. Their roots are

psychologically complex, and we may never fully understand them. But this much is clear: we are not condemned for spontaneous feelings that we cannot control.

For us Orthodox Christians, homosexuality is defined by behavior, not by the orientation of one's desires. A person's character and identity are defined by how they choose to live, not by the random thoughts and feelings that spring up in their minds. Regardless of how we feel, we can choose whether or not to behave according to God's will.

Homosexual acts are sinful because they are contrary to God's will. They are a warped version of sex aimed merely at creating a feeling of intimacy. As we have seen, sex is meant to be more than just a fun experience of closeness. It is designed for bonding and procreation—to foster a lifelong, special bond between husband and wife that provides a foundation for bearing and raising children.

People of the same gender cannot naturally become parents together—a man and a woman are required for that. This is one key difference between marriage and same-sex relationships. Another is even more basic: unlike homosexual relationships, marriage (as defined by God³) unites different genders and thereby generates a harmony of opposites that leads to personal growth. God made men and women different, so that by coming together in marriage they might balance and enhance each another. In their relationship they unite the two halves of humanity. Two men or two women can have close friendships, but their relationship can never be this distinctive union of opposites.

Regardless of how someone feels, they are free to choose how they will act. It is possible not to act on those desires, and this effort of self-control is a sacrifice for the sake of faithfulness to God.

It's very difficult for someone to deny homosexual desires in order to be faithful to God. Those who do so often feel isolated and alone in their

3 According to the Orthodox Church, a relationship between people of the same gender cannot be called marriage.

struggle. Their situation can be confusing. I have a lot of compassion for them, and hope they will seek out me or another priest to stand with them in this struggle.

Abortion

Abortion is the sin of murder.

Many people say that a baby is just a part of the mother's body until it is born. Our Church believes that the baby is a living person from conception – from the moment it starts to grow inside the mother. So, when the baby is destroyed within the mother, then a person is killed. That's why abortion is a big sin.

Abortion causes deep and long-lasting psychological pain. Women who have abortions often don't realize until afterward how much of a connection they had to their unborn baby. They realize their loss only when it is too late, which results in depression and guilt. And not just mothers, but fathers also express such feelings of loss and guilt after aborting their unborn children.

Repentance & Forgiveness

After naming all these sins, we must not let sin have the last word. In fact, that is the heart of the Christian gospel—God adamantly refuses to let sin have the last word. He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross in order to save us from sin. He is constantly working in the church and in our lives to save us.

No matter how much we have sinned, God loves us unconditionally and wants to forgive us and give us a fresh start. No matter what mistakes we've made, if we admit them in the Sacrament of Confession then God will forgive us and give us a fresh start.

If someone has had premarital sex, it is especially important for them to come to Confession. Sex before marriage is called a "mortal sin" because it can be deadly to one's spiritual life. Those who commit this sin may

not receive Holy Communion until they take the Sacrament of Confession. This should be done as soon as possible, so that the healing can begin.

We all sin, we all make mistakes. But the biggest mistake of all would be to give up on God or on our salvation. When we do mess up (even if it seems like a terrible sin), the Sacrament of Confession can restore us and give us a fresh start. There is no sin that is too big for God's forgiveness.