

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 13, Sexual Ethics

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian ethics. This is session 13, Sexual Ethics.

Okay, so let's turn our attention now to sexual ethics, and here there are a number of questions that we will address, including these: what obligations do we have regarding our sexual conduct, what philosophical and theological values should guide us as we think about sex, and when, if ever, are homosexual relations morally permissible.

Now, let's begin by talking about what's generally regarded as the modern permissive view on sexuality and some of the ideas of Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher who lived in the 20th century. He wrote an essay in the 1930s where he proposed a new sexual ethic. It's interesting to note that his views were very radical in his day.

Just from a historical perspective, it's helpful to note how Bertrand Russell, among other philosophers of his time, impacted the evolution of views in the West regarding sexuality and sexual conduct. So, one of the things that Russell endorses is premarital sex. He says it's unlikely that a person without previous sexual experience will be able to distinguish between mere physical attraction and the sort of congeniality that's necessary in order to make a marriage a success.

So, he's in favor of premarital sex. He also was a proponent of easy divorce, which was extremely difficult and, you know, hard to, or much harder to achieve back in the 1930s before no-fault laws and so on. He thought that divorce should be possible only through the mutual consent of the couple.

He regarded traditional Christian sexual morality as problematic and really as a result of modesty and jealousy. He concludes this particular essay by noting that, as he puts it, it would be good if men and women could remember in sexual relations to practice the ordinary virtues of tolerance, kindness, truthfulness, and justice. So, I guess he's offering a kind of virtuous, ethical approach to sexual morality there.

But it's interesting to observe that there are a few important virtues there that are missing from his list, at least that Christians would recognize as very important for guiding us in the area of sexual conduct. I would say, in particular, purity and faithfulness. Anyone? It seems like those are important virtues that we should consult and prize as important when thinking about sexual morality.

Certainly, scripture places a huge emphasis on sexual purity and faithfulness; one of the Ten Commandments focuses on that. Another orientation, which would be more in keeping with a traditional Christian sexual morality, advanced by or defended by a guy named Thomas Mapes, is Kantian in its approach. This guy, Thomas Mapes, applies certain aspects of the Kantian ethic to sexual ethics and specifically applies the second version of Kant's categorical imperative, which says that we should not treat people as mere means.

We remember that from Kant's ethics. Always treat people as ends and never as means only. So Mapes asks, what does this imply regarding how we treat people sexually? What does it mean to use someone sexually? So, he notes that the key to understanding what it means to use someone sexually is this concept of voluntary informed consent.

When you use someone sexually, use them as a means to an end, that is to violate their voluntary informed consent. He also notes some of the ways that this may be undermined. There are two ways that one may be robbed of their voluntary informed consent, either through coercion or deception.

If a person is coerced, that's obliterating their voluntariness. If they are deceived, then that obliterates their informant-ness. So, coercion and deception.

Mapes notes that sex with a child or a severely mentally handicapped adult is necessarily a case of using another person because they cannot give their informed consent. His point here also seems to condemn NAMBLA, which is the North American Man-Boy Love Association, which is all about eliminating age of consent laws. Interestingly, tellingly, Russell's ethic does not seem to condemn that necessarily.

So, any form of intentional deception through lying or withholding information that would prompt a person's consent for sex is a case of using someone and is, therefore, immoral. Of course, there are many cases where people lie, say they tell, a man tells a woman that he's single, he's not married, or he withholds the information that says he's HIV positive. That would improve his chances of having a sexual encounter with the person.

But that is an intentional deception, and so it violates informed consent. So, what forms might such deception take? Besides the ones that I just noted, we can think of other examples as well where a person lies, deceives, or whatever. There are a lot of different ways that a person may deceive, and then there are different ways that a person may coerce.

The prototypical example, of course, is forcible rape, and that is physical coercion. But there are other forms that sexual coercion may take, and MAPES distinguishes

two kinds of sexual coercion. Occurrent coercion is using direct force, but there's also dispositional coercion, where a person doesn't use direct force but uses the threat of harm in order to coerce someone into sex.

In clarifying what this dispositional kind of coercion is, MAPES distinguishes between a threat and an offer. A threat is a situation where non-compliance will bring an undesirable consequence. An offer is where compliance brings a desirable consequence, an inducement, say.

He gives the example of a professor who, in one case, could make the threat to a female student that, you know, if you don't have sex with me, then your grade is going to suffer. That's a threat. That's an undesirable consequence used to coerce the student.

Or, and this is probably more common when it comes to these sorts of contexts, an offer might be made. You know, you could get an A, you know, if you do this. That's an inducement to sex.

That's still a kind of dispositional coercion. There might be an implied threat even in the offer. So, those are different ways in which coercion, dispositional coercion, may take place.

Okay, let's turn now to some of the ideas of Roger Scruton, who applies an Aristotelian virtue ethic to sexuality. And he defends a traditional Christian view that sex is appropriate only in monogamous marriage. So, Scruton endorses a sexual morality that would be basically a Christian sexual ethic.

He notes that erotic love is a kind of virtue that contributes to human well-being or happiness. You don't have to have erotic love in your life, but it's something that most of us desire. And it certainly can and does enhance a person's overall happiness.

But in order for a person to experience virtuous, erotic love, it needs to be practiced monogamously. And Scruton says that's the case for a couple of reasons. First of all, since erotic love is about union, it's prone to jealousy.

So, a virtuous life of love must eliminate that. One thing that can contribute to that is a vow, a solemn vow of commitment, which, of course, is what happens in a marriage ceremony. He also notes that sexual expression that is not constrained within a marital commitment contradicts its proper role as an expression of one's whole self.

So, he notes that where there's a habit of sexual passion without commitment, the entrance of commitment will drive out passion. I saw a bumper sticker once that

said, is there sex after marriage? Kind of paralleling the question, is there life after death? But that bumper sticker seems to be coming from the perspective of someone who believes that somehow marital commitment destroys erotic passion. And that the best kind of sexual life is one where you are not constrained through marital commitment.

That's exactly the opposite of the truth, according to Scruton, that, in fact, the best place for erotic love and passionate sex life is within a marital context. And it's certainly the most healthy just from avoiding jealousy, a problem with jealousy, Scruton would argue, through the vow of commitment. But there are many other reasons why sex just within marriage is the best.

He notes that the empirical facts confirm this. As monogamous couples are more sexually satisfied, surveys show that's definitely the case. Actually, one study I saw that was pretty widely publicized a few years ago confirmed that conservative Christian women are the most orgasmic.

And that's something that would not be expected by our popular culture, and certainly, Hollywood, which celebrates free love and free sex outside of any kind of marital commitment. Also, there are higher divorce rates for couples who cohabitate before marriage. So again, this completely contradicts Bertrand Russell's idea that, well, you're going to improve your chances at a successful marriage if you live together before marriage.

No, the opposite is true. In fact, your chances are better if you don't live together before marriage. Here are a few interesting quotes on cohabitation.

This is from a couple of authors, Waite and Gallagher. It's Maggie Gallagher, who's written and published a lot of articles on sexuality. In marriage, they say that, on average, cohabiting couples are less sexually faithful, lead less settled lives, are less likely to have children, are more likely to be violent, make less money, and are less happy and less committed than married couples.

And here's a quote from C.S. Lewis, who says that the monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside of marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union, the sexual union, from all other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. So, I think those are some interesting and important observations. So, let's talk about some of the biblical grounds for monogamy.

It is the biblical view that it should be a man and a woman who unite and are given to one another in marriage. The metaphor that is used in scripture, and it actually seems like more than a metaphor, is this phrase of one flesh. As the writer of Genesis

says the Lord made a woman, Eve, from the rib he had taken out of the man, Adam, and he brought her to the man.

That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and he's united to his wife, and they become one flesh. As Adam puts it, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. That is the origin of the two human genders, which Jesus hearkens back to when he asked about divorce in Matthew 19, saying that God has joined together, let no one separate.

The biblical command not to commit adultery is part of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. And marriage is a metaphor for Christ and the church. You think about this deep metaphysical union between Christ and the church, and the Apostle Paul uses marriage as the metaphor for that.

It just reinforces the significance of the marital union and monogamy. The importance of biblical, the importance of sexual purity from a biblical standpoint, is a recurrent theme in the scriptures. We're told that believers are, we are members of Christ and one with him, and so that places a real premium on sexual purity.

As Paul says, why would I want to unite myself to a prostitute when I am a part of Christ, and I'm a temple, my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? See notes in 1 Corinthians 6. Here's another point that I think should be emphasized more regarding human sexuality and procreation and how that mirrors the Trinity. So, it is a teaching in a classical Christian creed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the union of the Father and the Son, and the three share the same nature.

In fact, the Son proceeds eternally from the Father, and then the Son, or from the union of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally. These three persons of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit are no less divine for this but share the same nature as the Father and the Son. Well, note the parallel here, as with the union of a human Father and Mother, proceeds a child, which is no less human, shares human nature, and has the same human essence.

There's a parallel here between divine procession, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the union of the Father and the Son, and human procreation as a child proceeds from the union of the Father and the Mother. Is that just a coincidence? Or is it a deeply important metaphysical fact about human nature and how the human family mirrors the Holy Trinity? I think that this really underscores the sacredness of human sexuality and procreation.

So, let's move on to the topic of homosexuality. Scott Ray notes that the term homosexual, which is itself going out of fashion or popular usage, I think the preferred terminology now is same-sex attracted or same-sex activity, but the word homosexual itself is ambiguous. We could mean by that someone who's sexually inverted, that's Scott Ray's term, referring to those who exclusively are attracted to

their own gender, as opposed to someone who's situationally homosexual, someone who's had homosexual experiences, same-sex sexual experiences, but they're not oriented in that way in the sense of a predominant attraction. So, the term homosexual itself is a bit ambiguous, but a key distinction we need to keep in mind here is that between homosexual attraction and homosexual practice.

So, one could be involved in homosexual activity or conduct and not really be attracted in that way, or someone could be attracted in a same-sex way and never get involved in homosexual practice. As for the causes of homosexuality, this question is often asked: is this homosexual predisposition genetic or acquired? There's a lot of debate about this, and the evidence seems to be inconclusive at this point. There have been a lot of neuroanatomic studies done regarding the brain, but the most interesting and, I think, relevant studies are the genetic ones, particularly twin studies, which inquire into concordance rates between identical twins.

Concordance has to do with similarity or agreement in terms of the orientations of identical twins. If homosexuality has a completely genetic cause, then there should be a 100% concordance rate, whether heterosexual or homosexual, between identical twins. And that should be true both for twins who are raised together or adopted away.

Some of the early studies were conducted by a researcher named Franz Kalman, who found a 100% concordance rate, but his studies have been roundly criticized. One, because the subjects were all institutionalized or mentally ill, and most importantly, there were no adopted away twins involved in the study. Still, despite these problems, unfortunately, this study is often cited as definitive despite a number of subsequent studies that have found only anywhere from 10 to 50% concordance rates.

Here are some of those studies. The Bailey and Pillard studies found a 50% concordance rate for identicals raised together. That's noteworthy by itself, but then only a 22% concordance rate for non-identicals.

They conclude that genetics is one contributing cause. However, potential problems with their studies include the fact that concordant twins tend to respond more frequently to research advertisements, and sexual orientations of both twins were not reported directly, but by some third party. More recent studies conducted by King and McDonald have found a lower concordance rate than Bailey and Pillard found, and they inadvertently found what they say is a relatively high likelihood of sexual relations occurring between identical twins.

This behavior could account for a significant percentage of the concordance rates among identicals, confirming what some earlier researchers had theorized about the role of incest. So here are very tentative conclusions. This is, you know, an ongoing

debate, but genetics cannot be the sole factor when it comes to a homosexual disposition because the concordance rate is less than 100%.

Anyway, given the selective pressures against this trait, think about it just from a micro-evolutionary standpoint: there are selective pressures against this. Some non-heritable factors have to be there to renew this generation after generation. That's where the environmental factors come in.

Genetic factors, we may tentatively conclude, probably play some role, maybe 30 to 50%, along with environmental and behavioral factors, such as developmental challenges to gender identity with one's same-sex parent, which is often cited as significant. Okay, so what are the ethical implications of the causes of homosexuality? Here's how I would answer that. Even if there is some biological basis for a homosexual orientation, there are no ethical implications unless one is a hard determinist.

And by hard determinist, I mean this is the view that all human choices are caused and, therefore, we are not free. If we believe that human beings have free will, then even if there is some sort of, you know, biological or even biological and environmental determinant to a particular disposition, if we have free will in any significant sense, then we still have the freedom to choose how we will act. Just as someone who has, say, an alcoholic disposition, genetically, they're still free to choose.

I have a brother who's an alcoholic. He's been sober for about eight years now, and he freely chooses to abstain. He's been doing that consistently all these years, even though he has that predisposition.

There are causal influences on every aspect of our being, but our choices are still free. And so if a person does have a certain same-sex attraction or disposition, they're still free to choose whether or not to act on that disposition. Still, we need to exercise compassion and sensitivity towards those who struggle in this area because that's still a very significant thing, an attraction or disposition to be attracted in that way.

Finally, let's consider some biblical texts regarding homosexuality. Where does the Bible speak to homosexuality or same-sex activity, and exactly how? In Genesis 19, there's a famous passage where God destroys Sodom, apparently mainly because of sexual immorality, including homosexual practice, which the writer of Jude makes clear, even if it's only implicit in that Genesis 19 narrative. The writer of Jude makes it clear that that is why God destroyed that city.

In Leviticus 18 and 20, both of those passages refer to sexual relations between men as detestable and, in the latter case, punishable by death. In 1 Timothy 1:8-10 and 1

Corinthians 6:9-11, those passages refer to homosexual offenders as lawbreakers and not inheriting the kingdom of God, respectively. In Romans 1, we find the most extensive discussion of homosexuality in the Bible.

There, Paul condemns unnatural relations and indecent sexual acts by both men and women in verses 24-27. Now, those who take a more liberal approach to these passages have offered a number of alternative interpretations of this passage, and here are some of those alternative interpretations. Some have argued that this passage just forbids homosexual male prostitution.

Paul does not mean to condemn all homosexual activity. Another interpretation insists that Paul is condemning true heterosexuals who engage in homosexual acts. So, if someone is naturally oriented in a heterosexual way but they have homosexual experiences in spite of that, then that would be unnatural for them, while it would not be unnatural for someone who's oriented in a homosexual way.

So, Paul's not condemning all homosexual activity, according to that interpretation. Thirdly, some argue that Paul is condemning perverse expressions of homosexuality as opposed to committed homosexual relationships. So, what he's condemning there is homosexual promiscuity, which is unnatural, and what he would condone or approve of, according to this interpretation, is a monogamous homosexual relationship.

The standard historical traditional interpretation of this passage, though, is that Paul does intend to condemn all homosexual behavior, whether or not it involves male prostitution, whether or not it accords with one's natural disposition or desires, and whether or not it's in a context of a committed monogamous relationship. I think Scott Ray is right about this. This is the only interpretation that does not read into the passage things that are not there. And when you look at the scholarship on this issue, and you see how some scholars have defended these alternative interpretations, it's always very strained at best, and there's reading into this passage things that are just not there.

Here, finally, is some recommended reading. These are five of the best resources on this issue that I've seen, specifically homosexuality and marriage, and just sexual ethics, generally. But Anderson, George, and Gerges have written a book called *What is Marriage? Man and Woman, a defense*, it's an excellent treatment of the issue.

Kevin de Young's, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* Robert Gagnon, this is probably the best treatment of the issue in the English language, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice, Texts and Hermeneutics*. Robert Reilly's called *Making Gay Okay. How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior is Changing Everything* is a fascinating cultural study regarding the issue.

The best thing I've ever read on human sexuality, period, is Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. It's about 700 pages long. I've only read pieces of it actually, but I've read Christopher West's book, *Theology of the Body for Beginners*.

It's a nice introduction to this massive magnum opus on the topic. It is just tremendous. I think I can safely say it's the best thing ever written on human sexuality in all of human history.

That's a bold claim, but there are a lot of people who agree with me on that, and there's a lot that has been written on that particular volume. If you go online, you can find some very helpful notes on Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* that helpfully condense his points into just 20 or 30 pages, but it's profound stuff. He really emphasizes how human, not just human nature, but human sexuality really is ultimately grounded in the Trinity, or at least the Trinity is where we need to look in terms of guiding our thinking about sexual conduct.

So, I highly recommend that, as well as these other resources.

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