

Jesus' Teaching on Sexual Morality

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There is a great deal of uncertainty among Christians today about the morality of different sexual practices. Here I look at Jesus' teaching on the subject. Although he did not deal with every issue in detail, he did give some guidance on them, and my aim in this article is to look at what he did say, and to expound this as accurately as I can.¹ I omit his teaching on divorce, which I have considered elsewhere.²

Jesus' starting point (Matthew 5:17–20)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples:

¹⁷'Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one small letter, not one little stroke, will by any means pass from the Law until all has taken place. ¹⁹Whoever therefore relaxes one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others [to do] so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does [them] and teaches [them] shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I say to you that, unless your righteousness *surpasses* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Here Jesus affirms the OT (17), and says that the Law will stand until all the prophecies in the OT have been fulfilled, including the promise of a 'new heaven and a new earth' (18).³ He concludes that disciples should practice and teach all the commandments, even the least (19). Disciples are to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees (20), both in this respect, and as in the teaching that follows (21–48).

The starting point for Jesus' teaching is therefore the Law. Here I give a brief summary what the Law says on sexual issues.⁴

Man, woman, and marriage (Genesis 1–3)

Genesis begins with a general account of creation (1:1–2:3), which is then elaborated in certain particulars (2:4–25). In the general account, the creation of human beings is described as follows:

²⁶Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' ²⁷So God created the man in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.'

The transition from singular ('God created the man ... he created him') to plural ('male and female he created them') is explained in Genesis 2:

¹ This exposition is based on my book, *Jesus's Teaching on Divorce and Sexual Morality*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1996; distributor: bmdpgn@amservice.com).

² *Jesus's Teaching*, Chap. 2; 'Jesus' Teaching on Divorce,' www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/divorce_nelson.pdf

³ See my article, 'Christian Morality: Jesus' Teaching on the Law,' *Themelios* 32 (2006), 4–17 (on-line at www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/jesus_teaching.php).

⁴ For a fuller discussion, see *Jesus's Teaching*, pp. 4–12.

¹⁸Then YHWH God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper for him, corresponding to him.’ ... ²¹So YHWH God made a deep sleep fall on the man, and he slept. Then he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. ²²And YHWH God fashioned the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man. ²³And the man said, ‘This at last [is] bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called “woman”, because she was taken out of man.’ ²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Here the narrator describes the creation of a woman out of part of the man. This gives them an inherent unity that transcends their ability to unite physically. It is because of this inherent unity (‘Therefore ...’) that a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh (24).

At this stage, the relationship between the man and the woman is harmonious. Genesis 3, however, describes how the woman is tempted to acquire knowledge of good and evil, and leads the man into disobedience (1–6). God’s response is to make their lives more difficult, including the relationship between them (16).

Prohibitions

The law God gave to Israel through Moses explicitly prohibits the following sexual activities:

- *Adultery* (Exod. 20:14, Lev. 18:20, Deut. 5:18).
- *Bestiality* (Lev. 18:23, Deut. 27:21).
- *Homosexual acts* (Lev. 18:22).
- *Incest* (Lev. 18:6–18; Deut. 22:30; 27:20, 22–23).
- *Prostitution* (Heb. *zānāh*; Lev. 19:29, Deut. 23:18).
- *Rape* (Deut. 22:25–29).
- *Sex before marriage* (Exod. 22:16–17).
- *Shrine-prostitution* (Heb. *qādēš*, *q^edēšāh*; Deut. 23:17).
- *Transvestism* (Deut. 22:5).
- *Unclean acts* (Lev. 18:19).
- *Violation of betrothal* (Deut. 22:23–27).

These prohibitions have the effect of confining sexual activity to marriage, and protecting married life. Although they are negative, their purpose is positive. Moses told the people, ‘YHWH commanded us to observe all these statutes ... *for our good always*’ (Deut. 6:24).

The law against adultery constitutes one of the ten commandments (Exod. 20:1–17, Deut. 5:6–21). These were written on tablets of stone, and kept in the holy of holies, at the centre of the nation’s life (Exod. 40:17–21, Deut. 10:1–5).

The punishments in the Law for breaking these prohibitions are very severe. They include the death penalty for adultery (Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22), bestiality (Exod. 22:19, Lev. 20:15–16), the worst forms of incest (Lev. 20:11, 12, 14), homosexual acts (Lev. 20:13), and violation of betrothal (Deut. 22:23–27). That these offences carried the death penalty shows how seriously God regarded them. The book of Genesis records how he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because gross sexual immorality had become endemic in these cities (Gen. 18:16–19:29).

Jesus' affirmation

Jesus said, as we have seen, ‘Whoever therefore relaxes one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:19). He thereby affirmed all the above prohibitions.

He affirmed them again when he specified the things that defile a man (Mark 7:20–23). These include adultery (*moicheia*), fornication (*porneia*), and wantonness (*aselgeia*). The basic meaning of *porneia* is ‘prostitution’ (from *pornē*, ‘prostitute’, from *pernēmi*, ‘sell’). From this, it acquired the broader meaning ‘sexual immorality’, and came to be applied to various kinds of sexual misconduct.⁵ His listeners would have understood the word here to refer to sexual activities prohibited by the Law.

The apostles also spoke against sexual activities prohibited by the Law. These include homosexual acts (Rom. 1:26–27, 1 Cor. 6:9–11,⁶ 1 Tim. 1:8–11,⁷ Jude 7?⁸), incest (1 Cor. 5:1–5), and prostitution (1 Cor. 6:15–16).

On the positive side, Jesus affirmed marriage by his attendance at the wedding in Cana in Galilee (John 2:1–11), and Peter and Paul affirmed it in their letters (Eph. 5:22–33, 1 Pet. 3:1–7). Jesus and Paul themselves were celibate, the value of which Paul also affirmed (1 Cor. 7:32–35).

Cultural context

When the Law was given, it conflicted with contemporary pagan culture (see Lev. 18). In the time of Jesus and the apostles, it conflicted with much of Greco-Roman culture (Rom. 1:18–32).⁹ When Jesus affirmed the Law, he told his disciples, ‘You are the salt [preserving] the earth ... You are the light [guiding] the world ...’ (Matt. 5:13–16).

Implied prohibitions

In addition to the explicit prohibitions listed above, the Law implicitly outlaws a number of other sexual activities, as explained below.

⁵ Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz, *TDNT* 6, 579–95.

⁶ Gk. *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The first term literally means ‘soft men’, and probably refers to the passive partner in a homosexual act. The second term comes from *arsēn*, ‘male’, and *koitē*, ‘bed’ (the words that are used in the LXX to translate Lev. 18:22 and 20:13), and almost certainly refers to the active partner.

⁷ Gk. *arsenokoitai* as in 1 Cor. 6:9.

⁸ Lit. ‘going after different flesh’. This almost certainly refers to the incident described in Gen. 19:1–8. Lot is visited by ‘men’ (18:22; 19:5, 8, 10, 12, 16) acting as ‘messengers’ (19:1, 15). The Sodomites wanted to ‘know’ them (19:5) in the euphemistic sense of this word (19:8). The incident closely parallels that in Judg. 19:16–24.

⁹ Cf., e.g., Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

- *Abortion*. The Law laid down that, if a pregnant woman is accidentally struck when men are fighting and ‘her children come out’, any fatality should be recompensed ‘life for life’ (Exod. 21:22–25). This almost certainly applied to the foetus as well as the mother, showing the value placed on this.¹⁰ A man seducing or raping a woman had to take responsibility for her, not leave her to contemplate abortion (Exod. 22:16–17, Deut. 22:28–29).
- *Contraception*. God’s disapproval of this is implied by his condemnation of Onan to death for regularly practicing *coitus interruptus* with his brother’s widow (Gen 38:8–10). While his crime was partly that he failed to fulfil his duty by his brother of producing offspring for him (Deut. 25:5–6), this was not his whole crime, for, under the Law, failure to fulfil this duty, while being regarded as a serious offence, did not carry the death penalty (Deut. 25:7–10).
- *Nudity*. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were not ashamed of being naked (Gen. 2:25). After the Fall, they were, and used leaves to cover themselves (3:7). God subsequently provided them with garments of skin (3:21). From this point onwards, exposure of nakedness is regarded as shameful (9:20–27; Exod. 20:26, 28:42–43).
- *Paedophilia*. The Law refers to the innocence of infants (Deut. 1:39). There was no explicit law against sexual abuse of children, presumably because the wrongness of this could be taken for granted.
- *Polygamy*. Though practised in the OT, this goes against the basis for marriage set out in Genesis 2:18–24. [While Solomon had many wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:1–3), in the Song of Songs, he discovers the joy of having *one* lover (Song 6:8–9).]
- *Pornography*. Pornographic plaques and figurines were a feature of pagan worship in the ancient Near East.¹¹ The Law required the Israelites to destroy these (Exod. 34:13 etc.).
- *Promiscuity*. This is effectively outlawed by other prohibitions.
- *Self-gratification*. God’s disapproval of this is implied by his condemnation of Onan (Gen. 38:8–10). He does not, however, condemn those who do this involuntarily (Lev. 15:16–18, Deut. 23:9–11).

To the extent that these prohibitions are based on the Law, Jesus’ affirmation of the Law applies to them. He himself outlawed promiscuity (under *aselgeia*, Mark 7:22), affirmed the basis for marriage (Matt. 19:4–6), spoke against harming children (Luke 17:1–2), and referred to the shame of nakedness (Rev. 3:17–18). Early Christians took abortion to be wrong (*Didache* 2.2). The only uncertainty is how far disapproval of Onan extends. Christian couples who do not want more children would need to pray about this.

Jesus’ higher standard (Matthew 5:27–30)

Having affirmed the Law to his disciples, Jesus continues, ‘For I say to you that, unless your righteousness *surpasses* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the

¹⁰ Many commentators take *’āsôn* (‘harm’) to refer only to the woman, making verse 22b the recompense for loss of a baby. However, it is unlikely that loss of a baby would not have been regarded as harm.

¹¹ See, e.g., William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 3rd edn. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1953), 74–7.

kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:20). What he means by 'surpassing' he explains further in verses 21–48. He does this by means of a series of examples. In these, he raises the standard set by the Law.¹² One example concerns adultery:

²⁷'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman intending to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹So if your right eye causes you to stumble, take it out and throw [it] from you; for it is better for you that one of your members should perish than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it out and throw [it] from you; for it is better for you that one of your members should perish than that your whole body go away into hell.'

Jesus here cites the seventh commandment (27), and takes it a step further. Adultery does not just consist of the final act. A man who eyes a woman (*blepōn*, continuous tense) with lustful intent (*pros to epithumēsai*) commits adultery with her (28). The tense is significant. Jesus is not condemning a momentary temptation, but the *fostering* of desire. Over-friendly looks and gestures, he says, are to be completely resisted (29–30).

Jesus does not state how other sexual prohibitions in the Law are to be taken further. He presumably left this to his hearers to work out, by following the pattern of verses 27–28, i.e. 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not do X." But I say to you that everyone who fosters a desire to do X has already done it in his heart.'

Thankfully, Jesus accompanied his call for high standards with the promise of help to keep them, in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–17, 15:1–8). As Paul testified to the Romans, the Spirit makes a critical difference in our fight against the flesh (Rom. 7:24–8:4).

Love

Jesus taught his disciples to 'love' others (Matt. 22:34–40, John 13:34–35). Does this mean that sexual activities prohibited in the Law are permissible if they are carried out in love?

The answer is, no. This sets love against the Law, whereas Jesus taught that love sums up the Law (Matt. 22:40). No activity can be carried out in love if it breaks the Law (cf. 1 John 5:2: 'By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe his commandments'). The word used by Jesus (*agapaō*) implies acting, not so much out of affection (*phileō*), still less of sexual desire (*eraō*), but out of concern for the good of another (Matt. 5:43–48, Luke 10:25–37, John 15:13–14, 1 John 3:16–18). Christian love thus involves seeking the good of another as specified by the Law.

Jesus' ministry to sexual sinners

A woman of the city (Luke 7:36–50)

In the course of his ministry, Jesus encountered sexual sinners of various kinds. His approach to them was the same as to all sinners. He forgave those who came to him in repentance and faith, and accepted them into his company. Luke records the following example:

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he entered into the Pharisee's house and reclined. ³⁷And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that he was reclining in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster pot of [fine] ointment, ³⁸and,

¹² For a full discussion, see 'Christian Morality.'

standing behind [him] at his feet weeping, began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped [them] with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet and anointed [them] with the ointment.

³⁹But when the Pharisee who had invited him saw [this], he spoke to himself, saying, ‘If this man was a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman [this is] who is touching him, that she is a sinner.’

⁴⁰And Jesus answering said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’

And he said, ‘Teacher, say’.

⁴¹‘A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²As they had nothing with which to repay, he granted grace to both. Which of them, then, will love him more?’

⁴³Simon answering said, ‘I suppose [the one] to whom he granted grace the more.’

And he said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’

⁴⁴Then turning to the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered into your house; you did not give me water for [my] feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped [them] with her hairs. ⁴⁵You did not give me a [welcoming] kiss, but, from when I entered, she has not ceased kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with [fine] ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, seeing that she loved much. But one who is forgiven little, loves little.’

⁴⁸And he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

⁴⁹Then those reclining with [him] began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’

⁵⁰And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

What comforting words for a sinner to hear, ‘*Your sins are forgiven*’ (48)!

The scribes and Pharisees continued to express disapproval of the way in which Jesus accepted sinners (Luke 15:1–2) but he defended his actions by telling them the parables of the lost sheep (3–7), the lost coin (8–10), and the prodigal son (11–32). In the latter, the father rejoices over the return of his son (20–24), in spite of his son’s debauchery (13, 30).

The woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:2–11)

Some manuscripts of John’s gospel record the following incident:

²At dawn he came again to the temple ... ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, standing her in the middle, ⁴they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What then do you say?’ ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have [grounds] to accuse him.

But Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷But as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘He who is sinless among you, let him be first to throw a stone at her.’

⁸Again, he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹Then those who heard went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and he was left alone, with the woman still in the middle.

¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’

¹¹She said, ‘No one, sir.’

Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, from now on sin no more.’

In this incident, the scribes and Pharisees sought to trap Jesus on the question of whether the death penalty for adultery in the Law should be carried out or not (3–6a). If he said ‘Yes’, he would be going against the Roman authorities, who did not allow the Jews to carry out executions; if he said ‘No’, he would be going against the Law. In the event, he says neither, but turns the question on the scribes and Pharisees: ‘He who is sinless among you, let him be first to throw a stone at her’ (7). At this, they slip away, one by one (9).

Jesus here questions the fitness of human beings to carry out the death penalty for adultery.

The lesson for Christians is that those of us who do not sin in a particular way should not engage in self-righteous condemnation of those who do. Jesus warned his disciples against this (Matt. 7:1–5). Everyone sins in one way or another (Rom. 3:23, 1 John 1:8).

Jesus too does not condemn the woman (11a). This is because his mission was to save sinners, not condemn them (John 3:17). He wanted to give them every opportunity to repent (Luke 13:6–9). But he in no way condoned the woman’s sin. He told her not to sin any more (11b).

The woman at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18–23)

The risen and ascended Jesus asked the apostle John to write a letter to the church in Thyatira, the first part of which is as follows:

¹⁸And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes as a flame of fire, and feet like burnished bronze: ¹⁹“I know your works, and your love and faith and service and steadfastness, and your last works [being] more than the first. ²⁰But I have against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and misleading my slaves to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹And I gave her time to repent of her fornication, and she does not want to repent. ²²Behold, I am throwing her into a [sick] bed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works; ²³and I will kill her children with death. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches inner parts, and will give to each of you according to your works.”’

Jesus here makes it clear that there is a limit to how much time he will give to someone in which to repent (21; cf. Luke 13:6–9). Beyond that time, he will act in judgment (22–23).

Notice that Jesus upbraids the church for permitting the woman to do what she was doing (20). He expected the elders to take action to stop her. To be obedient to Jesus, therefore, a balance has to be struck between self-righteous condemnation of others and irresponsible toleration of sexual sins.

Striking a balance

The NT provides the following examples of how this balance should be struck and sexual sins dealt with.¹³

- Paul instructs the Galatians, ‘Brothers, if someone is overtaken in some misdeed, you who are spiritual should restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, watching yourself, lest you also be tempted’ (Gal. 6:1).
- Paul upbraids the Corinthians for tolerating a man who was committing incest with his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5). In the Law, this was a capital offence (Lev. 20:11). He tells them, ‘When you and my spirit are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, with the power of the Lord Jesus, [you are] to deliver such a one to Satan for destruction of the flesh, in order that the [said’s] spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (4–5). By ‘deliver to Satan’, he means excommunicate (2b, 13b). His aim is both to remove from the church a bad influence (6–8), and, at the same time, to help the man to appreciate the seriousness of his misconduct, to repent of it, and be saved (5b).
- In a subsequent letter, Paul tells the Corinthians to ‘forgive and comfort’ a member of the church whom they had disciplined, and for whom the discipline had had the desired effect (2 Cor. 2:5–11).
- Jude writes, ‘... have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching [them] out of the fire; and have mercy on others with fear, hating even the undergarment (*chitōn*) stained by the flesh’ (Jude 22–23).¹⁴

Conclusion

Jesus taught that the sexual prohibitions in the Law still apply, but to an even higher standard. This casts us on him for forgiveness, and the help of the Holy Spirit. I realize that some Christians will question this conclusion, but I have tried to be as objective as I can. Readers should carefully compare what I have written with the arguments of those who come to different conclusions.

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<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

¹³ For a fuller discussion, see *Jesus’s Teaching*, pp. 37–9.

¹⁴ For other readings, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 727–9.