

Time of Grace Ministry
Sexpectations: Sex Is Fiery
Proverbs 5-7
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Today I want to wrestle with a really important question and the question is this: Why are Christians so different? When it comes to sex, why is the teaching of Christianity so different than the teaching of our culture? Because you know by this point, it's really different, right? Perhaps there's no topic where culture and the Christian church differs as much as sex.

So my question today is why? Like, why would our heavenly Father, if he loves us, set the standard so high? Why would he call us to be so different than the culture around us so that faithful followers would have to wrestle and fight? For some of us, this would be the biggest war and battle that would not end soon but it would last years, if not decades, to honor God with our bodies and to flee from sexual immorality. Why would he do that to us? Why would he challenge us and call us to deny what so often feels natural and desirable and pleasurable? Why would God do that?

Well, the other day I opened a Bible and searched for the answer to that question and I found one. I did kind of a search for every time the Bible uses the word "sex" or "sexual" and I learned that there are 77 passages in the Bible where words like that appear; they were evenly divided between the Old and the New Testament. And if I could summarize what the Bible essentially teaches about sex and sexuality, it would be not with 1,000 words but with one picture and the picture would look a little bit like this: A fireplace. Just a quick show of hands here today - how many of you had fireplaces in your homes growing up or have a fireplace in your home now? Yeah, wow, a whole bunch of us. Yeah, I have a fireplace in my house right now and I love making fires. Like, I don't know if it's the long Wisconsin winters and I'm just like preparing myself but it's not the like flip the switch fire, but getting the wood out of the garage, the look of the flames, the smell of the fire, like there are few things better on a cold night than making a good fire, getting out a Bible or some board games, and being with the people I love the most. I love fires so much that I choose it, I want to have it inside my home, and yet, I'm a little bit afraid of the fire. I have pretty strict rules when it comes to the fireplace in my living room. Once it's started and the door swings open with the hot glass, my head is on a swivel. I'm very cautious and very strict with my kids about where they can be in the living room. I don't let anyone in our home just make a fire; there are some pretty strict boundaries and I don't have to tell you why, right? Because you don't get 10 tries with a fire before it can burn or scar you; sometimes it just takes once. I hope that doesn't make me a bad father or a strict father or a legalistic father; I'm just very, very cautious with fire. Not because it's bad in and of itself but because it can hurt you.

And essentially, that's how our heavenly Father feels about sex. Like, is sex in and of itself bad? No! I spent two entire messages opening the Bible to try to prove no, God invented sex. It's good for married people; like he gives it into our lives to provide warmth and connection and intimacy. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love showing up at every wedding and leaving a

little box on the gift table that says, "You're welcome" because this is their gift to every single married couple. And yet, if you'd read those 77 passages, do you know what you'd find? Every single one of them is a warning. Like there are positive ways to talk about sex in the Bible but all 77 times the word "sex" or "sexual" is used, it's a warning. Not because God's bad or sex is bad but because God's a good father who loves his kids.

So here's the idea I want to explore with you today; it's kind of my big idea for today: That sex is fiery. That Christians are called to be very different, to embrace a different sexual ethic than the world because sex is fiery. It's very good but if we use it outside of God's boundaries, it can go very badly.

Now obviously, I don't have time with you today to walk through all 77 passages so I'm going to focus on just three of them tonight and I hope what you embrace at the end of this message is that even though this is difficult and even though it's always going to be hard to be this different than our culture, I hope you see the wisdom of our heavenly Father's heart.

So we're going to kick it off with the first passage, which comes from the book of Proverbs. Give me a nod if you ever read the book of Proverbs before in the Old Testament - yeah, a bunch of you. It's essentially a book about how wise people live. Like if you want to be wise with your money or your words or your relationships or people want to start drama at work, you should read the book of Proverbs. But do you know the topic that the book of Proverbs talks about almost more than anything else? Sex. And yet, most of the passages in that section are not about the goodness of sex but the danger of it. Let me give you one example from Proverbs 6. It says, "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife. No one who touches her will go unpunished." You kind of see the father's heart. He says, "Son, I don't want you to get punished. I don't want you to get burned. I don't want you to get hurt." You wouldn't like dump burning coals into your lap so don't go chasing off into an adulterous relationship because it's not going to turn out as well as you think. You're going to get hurt. You're going to get burned.

The father's really making the first big point I want to share with you today that sex can hurt you. That if you take this fire out of the fireplace, someone's going to get hurt and it's not just the kids and it's not just the person getting cheated on. You might be the one who gets hurt, which is a pretty interesting thing to say. I mean, think about that: Why would this father have to say that to his son? Can a man pour burning coals into his lap? Like who would ever do - have you ever been at a barbeque and you say to your buddy, "Hey Bill, after you finish those burgers, make sure you don't put the charcoal down your pants." He'd be like, "Yeah, why would I do that?" And yet, this father says with sex sometimes people do that. And the reason why is known by some of you who have been longtime members of our church family. You know, it's been about six years, I think, since the founding pastor of our church preached here. But Pastor Ski used to say something that's kind of stuck around our church culture even though he's been gone for many years. He used to have this beautiful acronym and it'd go like this: S-T-P equals L-T-P, which stood for "Short-term pleasure equals long-term pain." See, Pastor Ski used to remind us what the father in Proverbs is saying; that the reason people will do with sex what they wouldn't do with burning coals is because there's pleasure involved. I mean, it's sex after all! And in the

heat of passion, you can forget about the long-term part of the pleasure; it's like it's blown up into a 96 font, caps lock font, and you're so excited about the pleasure you forget it's short-term and it might leave you with long-term pain. Like you might actually get hurt and burnt; it might be exciting and dangerous and thrilling and intimate but then the night's going to be over and the consequences won't.

And some of you know that's true, right? Because you look back on your sexual history and it hasn't always worked out as well as you thought in the passion of the moment. Maybe you were young, middle school, high school, and he said he loved you and you believed him and it didn't turn out like a fairy tale and you look back and you can't believe, you know, 10 years later that you would give something so precious to someone who loved you so little, who knew you so little. Maybe it just felt right like you were star crossed lovers and so you started flirting with someone else's boyfriend or you got interested in someone else's wife and it didn't turn out without drama; you got punished. There was a jealous ex and there were kids who were confused and your life did not get easier; it got much, much more complicated. Maybe it ripped your family apart and you suffered the consequences. Maybe you were consenting and she was consenting and you thought you were ready but what you didn't know is that your body would end up diseased and with an infection. Maybe you got pregnant and life took a hard turn and you love your kids - they're a great gift from God - but life has been difficult and you're not sure if this was like the person you wanted to be the father of your children. Or maybe you didn't have a child; maybe you terminated the pregnancy and now you've opened a Bible and realized what that was inside of you. That was a child that God created; a life that you ended. Maybe you got into pornography because everyone does it and everyone looks but what you didn't realize is that it would cause your brain to become addicted. It would hurt your body, it would mess with your expectations of what a sexual relationship would be and now it's complicated - not just for other people - but for you. Maybe you got naked and you thought like Adam and Eve you would not be ashamed but you look back and now you are. Maybe someone got hurt because you crossed a sexual boundary and that person was you.

Or maybe not? You know, the interesting thing about the Proverbs? That they're not promises. See, people get confused when they read the Proverbs because they expect them to be like 100 percent guarantees but that's not the point of wisdom literature. Like that passage that says if you train up a child in the way he should go, when he's old he will not turn from it. Some of you parents know well there are exceptions because that's not a guarantee. It's just a probability; not a for sure prediction. And that's the dangerous thing about some of you who are crossing the line sexually right now. You think it's going to be okay because you're doing okay; because you haven't gotten hurt or burned or scarred just yet. You think it's going to be okay but it's not. Like God's mercy and patience with you, that he hasn't allowed you to suffer that consequence just yet, does not mean it won't happen in the future. You're like a person who spent the last two years texting and driving without a seatbelt on and because there hasn't been an accident yet, you think your habits are okay. You're like a kid who's been chasing the basketball into the street without looking both ways and a car hasn't hit you yet so it must be alright. You're like a person who has let your children mess with fire and no one's gotten burned just yet so you figure that's the way it'll always be. And I would beg you God the Father has been patient with you because he doesn't want you to get hurt but he does not guarantee the future. Don't assume because

something hasn't happened yet, it won't. Because God might not give you a tenth chance or even a second; the first time, you might get burned.

Brothers and sisters, trust the wisdom of your heavenly Father. Sex outside the bonds of marriage can hurt you. Our heavenly Father doesn't want you to get hurt and he doesn't want you to hurt them, either. A few years ago, I got to teach a class full of teenagers about the Bible and sex and of course, that was the lesson when one of the students brought his friend to class. I'll call his friend Keandre and I didn't know a lot about Keandre's family or his faith but I could get the impression really early that he didn't really know much about the Bible. I don't know if he had ever heard it before. And so when I was teaching this lesson on Christianity and sexuality, I was thinking in the back of my head the whole time, "I wonder what in the world this kid is thinking?" Like compared to what he's experienced out in the world, this must be so like conservative and restrictive and crazy; I wonder what he's thinking? And then he told me what he was thinking. I paused in my teaching and asked if there were any questions and whose hand went up? Keandre's. "Ah, yeah?" I dared to ask. And this is what Keandre said: "Pastor Mike, if everyone did what you just taught, the world would be a better place. There wouldn't be dads who don't spend the night with their kids." This kid didn't know much about Christianity but he had experienced that the fire can burn people.

And that's what our second Bible passage teaches today. Look at 1 Thessalonians 4. The apostle Paul said, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality. That each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable; not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God. And in this manner, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or a sister." What does God want? What is his will that we should be sanctified? Do you know what that fancy Bible word means? It means we should be different; like we should be set apart and live a holy life. God says you should avoid sexual immorality. The Greek word for sexual immorality is the word - listen to this - "porneia." That's where we get our word "pornography;" for sexual pleasure outside the bonds of marriage. We should avoid it. And I love this line, "That each of you," every man, woman, and child here, "each of you should learn to control your own body in a holy and honorable way." I love that phrase because it's realistic. God knows that because of the fall into sin, the way we're born, what's natural and easy for us is not to use our bodies in holy and honorable ways. We have to learn to control ourselves. No matter what your sexuality or preference, there will be desires in you that go outside of God's boundaries so we have to patiently learn and ask God and the Holy Spirit for the fruit of self-control. We're going to have to learn that because it's going to be difficult. But why would we do it? Because God wants his people to be different than the world who does not know him. He wants not just their generosity and the way they volunteer in our community but their sexuality to be different and the last line tells us why: "So that in this matter," the matter of sex, "no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or a sister."

Do you know how many people are wronged when it comes to sex? Lots. Lots of people get hurt and lots of people get burned. Do you know right now in our culture how many people are victims of sexual violence in America? One in three women and one in six men. Can you imagine if every seat in church was full today, do you know how many people that would represent right here in our church? Imagine if every person in this side section had been a victim

of sexual violence. If every chair was filled, there would be 50 women and 30 men just here who had been hurt because of this; someone wronged or who took advantage of a brother or a sister and that's just sexual violence. Pornography? Do you know how many people get hurt when the search history is discovered? When the door wasn't locked? When you can't hide it? Do you know what that does to relationships? Do you know how many people we've had to work with as a church family to rebuild the trust and the closeness because she says, "Why am I not good enough for him? What's wrong with us? What's wrong with me? Am I not beautiful enough? Do I need to change? Do I need to lose weight?" And like the comfort that leads to good sex is just torpedoed because people get hurt. And kids get hurt; that it was fun in the moment but now here's a kid who doesn't get to grow up with mom and with dad in the same house because sexual immorality doesn't just hurt you, it wrongs and it takes advantage of other people. You might be consenting adults but what happens when that consenting adult grows up and marries another person and now that future spouse has to compete with that sexual experience? See, in the moment, it is pleasure but it leaves us with long-term pain.

And God doesn't want his kids to get hurt. Write this down; it's the second reason that God wants us to be cautious with sex because sex can hurt them; God's sons and his daughters. I'm a dad; I would never want someone to hurt my kids and God the Father feels the same way. You know, before I started this conversation with you, I was kind of nervous. Not because talking about sex makes me blush or I thought this would be bad for our church; I was nervous about a certain demographic of people who'd hear me preach - older women. And maybe it was just my stereotype but I could picture a lot of, you know, 20-something guys being interested in what the Bible has to say about sex but like the grandmas who are among us or watching on TV, I thought, "Oh man, I'm going to have to apologize and just let them know in a couple weeks there's going to be something that maybe resonates with their life." But then I found out I was wrong. I had written a blog post a couple months ago and I asked the supporters of Time of Grace, our media ministry partner, if they had any questions or things they want me to talk about and do you know the number one demographic of people who emailed me? Older women. And do you know what they told me? That they had gotten hurt because of sex. And I was so naïve because I forgot to just do the math; that a 70-something year old woman was in her roaring 20's right in the middle of our country's sexual revolution. When our culture decided to stoke the fire of sex but dismantle the fireplace when anything goes and you know what they told me as grandmothers what they would probably tell their children? That they got burned; that they had been hurt.

This morning on our other campus, I ran into an 82 year old woman and she said to me, "I wish someone would have told me this when I was twenty." That God was right; that he sees the big picture. In the moment, there are exceptions and you can violate his boundaries and it seems like no one gets hurt but from his 30,000 foot perspective, people do. And so our Father says, "I know it's hard but I don't want my kids to get hurt one more time so don't. Wait. Wait. Be patient."

But the last thing is the hardest - sex might hurt you and it might hurt them but the worst part is that it might hurt God. Now look at what the apostle Paul says in Romans 1. He wrote, "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the

degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen."

What was Paul's biggest fear? That people would exchange something created for the Creator, God. That instead of liking sex or experiencing sex or enjoying sex, what does Paul say? That we would worship and serve some created thing like sex instead of worshipping and serving God, which is the worst thing that can happen to the human heart. Write down our final warning for today: That God is most worried that sex can hurt him. It can hurt your connection, your eternal relationship, with God. I mean, listen to me right now. The worst thing that could happen to you sexually is not a disease and it's not an unplanned pregnancy and, God forbid, it's not even sexual abuse, regret, or shame. The worst thing that could ever happen to you is that you would walk into your bedroom and you close your Bible. That you would exchange what God wants for you sexually for what you want sexually. That you would decide that you were the exception to God's commandments and you turned them into suggestions. That your desires are more important than God's desires. That what you want to do with your body matters more than what God wants you to do with your body. And brothers and sisters, if you stop struggling against that, if you embrace that, you are in grave spiritual danger. It proves that you do not just like sex or enjoy sex; you worship it. You are a sex slave. And unless you repent, you cannot be saved. If someone wants to talk to you about your sexuality, your sexual identity, your dating habits, your relationship and you run away, you are running away from God. And he doesn't want to lose you. This is what I fear most of all: That the difference in this culture would cause people who grew up in the church to choose sex rather than God. Because 80 years of sexual happiness compared to eternity is short-term pleasure and it can leave you with everlasting pain.

And that's what the Bible says about sex. So why would you do it? This is the most serious sermon I've preached in months. If it's your first time here in church, I can't imagine what this sounds like. Why would you do this? Why would you choose this Christian sexual ethic? It's heavy and it's hard and it's challenging and it confronts us in so many ways - why would we do it? Well, I'll give you one answer: Jesus. That because of Jesus, we are willing to follow God. And because of Jesus, this truth, it warms our hearts once more. Write this down and let me tell you about it: We follow Jesus and his sexual ethic because sex is forgivable. Because all the struggles we've had to honor God with our bodies, it by the grace of God, is forgivable. Because Jesus, who is the Son of God, 2,000 years ago when he came to this earth and he was face to face with people who had hurt people themselves, God's children, God himself, do you know what Jesus did? He didn't hurt people; he was willing to be hurt for people.

And that's what I want to tell that anonymous 20-year old. You know, when I asked what questions do you have about sex, I got a lot of messages from older women but there was a younger woman and she wrote me this: "My boyfriend and I are continuously going to church, setting boundaries, seeking help, reading the word together and praying and, yet, we keep engaging in sex, which leaves us both frustrated and convicted. I feel dirty. Guilty. Unworthy of what God has for me. I just don't know how God sees us right now and I feel so ashamed; like God is upset. Does he forgive people like us?" You know what I want to say to her and to every one of us in this room who wishes we could rewind and do things differently? Yes! Yes! Thank God and halleluiah, yes! Because of Jesus. Because Christianity is not just about a different ethic of sexuality; it's about a different message of being saved. It's not about good people and

worthy people and clean people and perfect people making it to heaven; it's about people reaching out to Jesus and being forgiven. They say a picture's worth a thousand words and if I could send this 20 year old and maybe all of your hearts a picture, it would look like this picture. Artist Chris Powers tried to make this picture to depict what Jesus thinks about his people. And he wasn't naïve that all of us have struggles and sins; it's almost like this dark serpent that coils around our bodies but do you notice what Jesus did? That by his cross, he put our sin to death and that by his resurrection, do you see the tomb in the background? He reconnected us to a perfect God and just look at the expression on that face. Does he look disgusted with his church? Fed up? Embarrassed? Ashamed? No. Artist Chris Powers put a Bible verse next to this picture: Song of Songs 4:7, "There is no flaw in you," God says to his people. And he would say that to you today. You might have a decade's long struggle with pornography, there might be an affair in your past that you can't undo. You might have done things with your body that make you feel embarrassed or ashamed but if you reach out to Jesus, if you confess that sin, he will not make you earn his love. He'll treat you like this. He will forgive you. He has forgiven you. That because of his never-ending, crazy, reckless love of God, he would give up his body, be hurt by Roman soldiers on a cross, so that for you there would not be long-term pain but eternal pleasure in the presence of God.

And brothers and sisters, this is why we do it. That's why we embrace the different. It's why we try to honor God with our bodies because of Jesus. And we know it's going to be hard. We're going to have to learn and pray for each other and encourage and use our brothers and sisters as a support to flee from sexual immorality and to honor God with our bodies but where else would we rather be? So know this: Sex is fiery. It's a good gift but it can be dangerous and so your loving Father in heaven says be careful. He helps to heal us when we get burned and he doesn't want his kids to get hurt again.

Let's pray.

God, I have the feeling I'm not the only one here who wishes there was a do over button. And I have a feeling I'm not the only one who's so grateful in this moment for your grace. That your love for us is undeserved; that we can cry out to you and say forgive us and you do. God, thank you so much for the passage that says you are the Savior of the worst of sinners. Thank you, God, that there was a prodigal son who ran into the arms of prostitutes and when he came back, your heart was filled with compassion. Thank you that in the Scriptures there was a woman caught in the act of adultery and you looked her in the eye, Jesus, and said, "I don't condemn you." Thank you that there were Corinthians and Ephesians and Thessalonians who messed things up in the culture of Greek sexuality and you called them holy and blameless and pure because of what Jesus did and you still do.

Thank you, God, for this warning. I pray that we heed it. Help us to be wise and more than anything, help us to know who we are because of what Jesus did. We're your bride, the people that you loved, you're not ashamed of us and for that we praise you. We ask this all only because of Jesus, Amen.



TIME OF GRACE®

Sexpectations: Sex Is Fiery

Study Notes

Summary

Like fire, sex must be treated with a healthy fear. Mess around with one flame and you might get hurt. Mess around with one night and you might get hurt worse. This message explores the Bible's loving warnings about sex, showing God's loving and fatherly heart when he restricts sexual pleasure to the commitment of marriage.

- Sex is _____.
- **Proverbs 6:27-29:** ²⁷ Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? ²⁸ Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? ²⁹ So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.
- Sex can hurt _____.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:3-6:** ³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.
- Sex can hurt _____.
- **Romans 1:24,25:** ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.
- Sex can hurt _____.
- Sex is _____.

Points to Ponder

1. Study 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. List at least three reasons why Paul is so cautious about sexual immorality.
2. Evaluate: The Bible sets people up for guilt and shame by having such a high standard for sexual purity.
3. Read John 8:1-11. Describe how Jesus perfectly balances unconditional love with uncompromising truth.

Homework for Next Week

Read Philippians 4:4-13.

*“By trying to grab fulfillment everywhere, we find it nowhere.”
—Elisabeth Elliot*