

~Other Speakers S-Z: Gary Thomas:

I was in junior high, walking toward a group of buddies, when my best friend at the time came out of the circle and stopped me.

“No,” he said. “You don’t want this.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, hurt that this guy, of all people, would spurn me.

“This isn’t for you.”

I learned later that my friend was keeping me from a book that was making the rounds at our school. It had something to do with sex—complete with pictures—and the dog-eared corners attested to its being quickly stashed in sock drawers and under mattresses in numerous adolescent-occupied homes.

Most of us are introduced to sex in shameful ways. The viewing of “dirty” books or the experience of sexual abuse at the hands of an older person often usher us prematurely into the world of sexual knowledge. The natural result is that most of us have to overcome some deep-seated anxieties about sex. Many Christians don’t see sex as a gift for which to be thankful, but as a guilt-ridden burden to be borne. And naturally, anything so intimately connected with guilt is difficult to view as something that God created as holy.

In this article it is my desire to move past the harm and shame brought about by sex experienced outside the protecting walls of virtue, and examine how it is possible for this very fleshly experience to sharpen our spiritual sensitivities. However, if sex is going to turn us toward God and each other, it is vital that we examine it with Christian understanding.

A Biblical View of Sexuality

It is beyond a doubt that the Bible has a positive view of sex—witness the Song of Songs for instance. God’s command to Adam that he “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28) was an explicit commandment to engage in sexual relations. Sex wasn’t Satan’s idea—it was God’s.

God made flesh, and when God made flesh, he created some amazing sensations. And God called every bit of his creation “very good” (Genesis 1:31). It might sound shocking, but it is true: God doesn’t turn his eyes when a married couple goes to bed. It only stands to reason that we shouldn’t turn our eyes from God when we share intimate moments with our spouse.

To begin to view sex in this positive sense, the institution of marriage becomes all-important. Only as we think about sex within the confines of marriage do we begin to sanctify it as God intended.

To be sure, sex is abused within the marriage relationship as well, but when the principle that sex is to be used to serve our spouse and mirror our passion for God, the possibility of our sexuality becoming a spiritual aid may begin to make more sense. Practically, this means that we must examine our thinking and attitudes about marital sex in light of biblical foundations.

Gratitude Must Replace Guilt. Sex cannot pay spiritual dividends if its currency is shrouded in unfounded and illegitimate guilt. We must move past the hurt, shame, and guilt that is often associated with sex because of what has been experienced or witnessed outside of God’s parameters. The effects of these roadblocks can be lessened through a proper biblical understanding of sex, as well as through the practice of confession and

repentance.

Gratitude to God is essential because without it the powerful feelings associated with sex will lead us to focus on self. Ironically, the idolatry of sex and obsessive guilt over sex accomplish the same thing—they keep the focus on self, whether it be out of enjoyment or despair. Gratitude, on the other hand, turns our hearts toward God.

It took me a while to realize how I was inadvertently insulting God by my hesitation to accept the holiness of sex and pleasure. I don't have any problem imagining someone seeking God by enduring the pain of a fast. But what kind of God am I imagining if I can allow pain but not pleasure to reveal God's presence in my life?

Instead of being suspicious of pleasure and the physical and spiritual intimacy that comes from being with my wife, I need to adopt an attitude of profound gratefulness with awe.

View Your Spouse as More Than a Lover. Part of the process of becoming fully prepared to use sexuality as a spiritual discipline is to remember that in Christian marriage, husband and wife are more than lovers. Sex speaks of spiritual realities far more profound than mere pleasure.

When Paul tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), our contemplations on the significance of sex take on an entirely new meaning. In a Christian marriage, these are sanctified bodies—bodies in which God is present through his Holy Spirit, bodies coming together in celebration, but in a spirit of reverence and holiness.

Otto Piper urges us to view the sex act as a physical picture of a deeper reality: "We have come together in [God], called by him, creating a family, serving him, he living in both of us, expressing physically the spiritual truth he has created—we are no longer two, but one."¹

This spiritual element of sex is a crucial aid to help men experience deliverance from sexual addictions. When sex is reduced to pleasure alone, no wife can possibly meet a husband's expectations.

Pleasure, by nature, is ephemeral. It's fleeting. I read an article written by a Christian who had overcome a serious addiction to pornography, and he made it quite clear that he always needed a new magazine. Although he possessed enough naked pictures to wallpaper his house, he needed the thrill of getting new pictures of new women.

A wife can't reinvent herself on a daily basis, so a man can't kick a passion for pornography by trying to turn his wife into a centerfold. He must search for, and find, something much different in the marital bed. He can seek the deeper (but oftentimes quieter) fulfillment of spiritually meaningful sex, looking for God and for Christian fellowship behind the pleasure—not running from the pleasure, to be sure, but not making an idol out of that pleasure either.

Remember—every hunger that entices us in the flesh is an exploitation of a need that can be better met by God. The only context for godly sex is marital sex. Illicit sex is spiritual junk food—immediately sweet, but something that will poison our spiritual appetite until we crave that which will ultimately destroy us. Illicit sex will do nothing but diminish our sensitivity to holiness, righteousness, and God's presence in our lives.

The deeply physical and fleshly experience of sex can be enjoyed without guilt, but there is an even deeper spiritual fulfillment inherent when a man and woman engage in sexual relations. Don't reduce sex to either a physical or spiritual experience. It is both—profoundly so.

Reconciling the Power of Sex. Sex is not a physical need in the same way that food is, but it is certainly a

physiological drive. It is predictable, and it is emotional as well as physical. Most important, the desire that a man and woman have for each other is there by God's design. God put this "need" in us. How then do we approach this sense of need from a Christian perspective?

It might help if we see hidden in our sexuality an analogy of our longing for God—that we are incomplete without him and need to join ourselves to him anew. A healthy look at sex can provide fruitful meditation on our need and desire for God: the sense of incompleteness followed by the joy and fulfillment made all the sweeter after finally giving ourselves to another.

Passion is a fearful thing to some of us. The sense of longing reminds us that we are incomplete by ourselves, but the fact is that God made us incomplete. We need him; we need others. Instead of running in fear from this frightening element of sexual expression, we can channel it in the proper direction. C. S. Lewis wrote, "Pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility Make them channels of adoration."

Now, let's consider how a married couple might use aspects of their physical intimacy to grow spiritually—turning earthly marital pleasures (and challenges) into channels of holy adoration.

Gaining God's View of Marital Beauty

Marriage takes the raw force of sexuality and connects it with emotional intimacy, companionship, family responsibilities, and permanency of relationship. In so doing, it provides a context that encourages spiritual growth by moving us to value character, virtue, and godliness over against an idealized physical form.

I won't deny that one of the reasons I was first attracted to Lisa was because I thought she looked good. But what if looking good became Lisa's obsession? Does God think three hours a day in a gym, working feverishly against the realities of nature to preserve an adolescent stomach is a good and profitable use of time?

Jesus' disciple Peter doesn't leave us to guess the answer. He says, quite explicitly, that women shouldn't focus on an external beauty that requires "outward adornment," but instead aspire after a beauty "of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight" (1 Peter 3:3-4).

A godly marriage shapes our view of beauty to focus on internal qualities. In recognition that age and (in the case of women) childbearing eventually reshapes every individual body, marriage helps to move men from an obsession over bodies into a reconsideration of priorities and values.

While external beauty will always matter to men—that's how God wired us—we can become mature in what we long to see. Appetites can be cultivated. What men and women obsess about, fantasize over, and concentrate on will shape what they desire.

I'm convinced that, with God's Spirit within us, we can become enamored with the things that enamor God. By denying myself errant appetites and by meditating and feeding on the right things—including being "captivated" by my wife's love—I will train myself to desire only what is proper to be desired.

Those who live only for sexual pleasure and stimulation know only a very limited life—and probably experience a high degree of frustration as time inevitably takes its toll on their aging bodies. Those who find meaning and fulfillment not just in sexuality but in parenting their children, serving God, engaging in a consistent prayer life, and living virtuously have a much broader base from which to enjoy life. A thoughtful and godly marriage will move us in this direction.

The Importance of Passion

From the record of King David's life and his psalms, it is clear that he was an unusually passionate man. There is no doubt that David's passion occasionally got him into trouble—the story of Bathsheba is well-known—but nowhere in Scripture are we told to go to the other extreme and choose a passionless existence. In fact, we are told in the book of Revelation that God would rather have us hot or cold, anything but the putrid "lukewarm" (Rev. 3:16).

Just as love expands us, so passion can as well. Passion is not meted out, decreasing every time it is expressed. In fact, the opposite is often the case—the more passionate we become about one thing, the more passionate we tend to become about many other things. A man who is passionate about his wife can be passionate about justice, about God's kingdom, about his own children, about the environment. On the flip side, if he is facing serious sexual problems within his marriage, a feeling of frustration and a certain despondency is liable to settle like a cloud over his work, his faith, and his fellowship. He is likely to become selfishly preoccupied and self-absorbed.

"Stoicism" has never been a Christian philosophy. If truth be told, we serve a passionate God who feels deeply. Our passions are what make us come alive. The apathetic person is a pathetic person. While we often fear our passions because they can carry us into an affair, a fight, or some other destructive behavior, the solution is not living a less passionate life but finding the right things to be passionate about.

The history expressed in the Bible and in the two thousand years of Christian experience attests to the fact that Christian spirituality is largely about maintaining our thirst and passion for God and his purposes in this world. Passions call us to enter fully into life, and are extremely important. They should be cultivated in marriage and brought to bear on all of life.

It may take some couples many months to be comfortable viewing their sexual intimacy as a form of spiritual expression, faith, and maturity. The Christian worldview doesn't disparage the physical; it embraces it. But in doing so, it reminds us that there are higher values than physical pleasure—that this world is passing away, and true joy and fulfillment can only be found in a relationship with God and in holy fellowship with his children.

To fully embrace marital sexuality and all that God designed it for, couples must bring their Christianity into bed and break down the wall between their physical and spiritual intimacy. Sex is about physical touch, to be sure, but it is about far more than physical touch. It is about what is going on inside us.

Developing a fulfilling sex life means I concern myself more with bringing generosity and service to bed than with bringing a washboard abdomen. It means I see my wife as a holy temple of God, not just as a tantalizing human body. It even means that sex becomes a form of physical prayer—a picture of a heavenly intimacy that rivals the shekinah glory of old.

Our God, who is Spirit (John 4:24), can be found behind the very physical sensations of sexual intimacy. He wants us to run into sex, but to do so with his presence, priorities, and virtues marking our pursuit. If we experience sex in this way, we will be transformed in the marriage bed every bit as much as we are transformed on our knees in prayer.