

**STAYING IN THE FISHBOWL**  
**1 Corinthians 6:18-20**

**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
**Amarillo, Texas**  
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The chaplain at the University of Nebraska took a survey of incoming freshmen to the university and asked them this question, “How much influence did your church play on your views of sexuality?” Of the freshmen at the University of Nebraska who were surveyed, only two percent said the church had ANYTHING to do with their views of sexuality. Only two percent!

I’m not sure why the church doesn’t have greater influence in this area – but I am sure the New Testament speaks to it, that Jesus spoke to it, that Paul spoke to it, and that Moses spoke to it in the old text. And the church has an absolute responsibility to speak to it.

The church cannot remain silent on this important topic. We cannot sit with our hands folded and allow others to influence our students in regard to this matter. The best thing we can do in regard to our students is to start talking to them about the topic from day one and continue to present to them a biblical sexual ethic and expect them to live within that ethic for the entirety of their lives. I can promise you this: every other power that exists is trying to influence your child in regard to this all-important issue.

**In fact, one writer, Terry Mattingly, wrote: “Some clergy continue to duck sexual issues because they’re afraid to offend grown-up sinners. Truth is, churches that can’t talk about sin and repentance can’t talk about healing and forgiveness.” (Terry Mattingly On Religion, “True Love vs. the Culture,” [tmatt.gospelcom.net/column/1997/08/06](http://tmatt.gospelcom.net/column/1997/08/06))**

It is my responsibility to have the courage in appropriate ways and using appropriate language to address the hard issues.

I want to first address some things we ought to believe and then some things we ought to do.

First, some things we ought to believe.

**I. Sex is good.**

God created it. God called it good. It existed before there was any sin in the world. Sex was not created by the Internet. Sex was created by the holy God of heaven where purity reigns. God created us with a desire to have intimacy. And if that desire didn’t exist, neither would people. It is part of God’s plan for procreation (Randy Alcorn, “Guidelines for Sexual Purity,” [www.epm.org/articles/sexpur.html](http://www.epm.org/articles/sexpur.html)). In fact, God’s word speaks openly of the pleasure of intimacy within the marriage relationship of a husband and a wife (Proverbs 5:18-19; Song of Solomon 4:5;

7:1, 6-9). Proverbs 5 talks about a man being satisfied with his relationship with his wife. It says “Rejoice in the wife of your youth. Be exhilarated always with her love. And don’t be exhilarated with an adulteress.” In fact, it’s quite more specific than I have read.

Sex is sort of like fire. Fire is a good thing in that it can keep us warm. It can cook our food so that we won’t get sick from bacteria. But if not placed within property boundaries, fire can destroy life. A raging forest fire can devour everything in its path. Controlled, it’s wonderfully good. Out of the boundaries, it’s a destructive force of hell.

## **II. The boundaries of a sexual relationship are found within the covenant of marriage.**

Look at this fish up here in this fish bowl. Now, I’m a lot smarter than this fish – I think I am, anyway. I don’t know what a fish thinks, but let’s suppose the fish could think for a moment. What if this fish began to think, “You know, Howie just doesn’t want me to have any fun. I look through this glass and I see a big world out there I could be swimming in. It would be wonderful if I could get out of this little glass bowl and plunge into that big space all around the bowl. Can you imagine how wonderful it would be if I could just get outside of this bowl?”

Let’s suppose for a moment the goldfish thinks that this bowl is a limitation to his fun, that these boundaries that I’ve provided for him are killjoy boundaries. But if I take this fish out of this bowl, or if he jumps out to explore beyond the boundaries of safety designed for him, it will destroy him.

Our human sexuality is that way. We’re like the fish in the bowl. God has set us in a bowl – a boundary in regard to our sexuality. He says that bowl, the boundary within which we are to stay, is the covenant of marriage between a husband and a wife. And there is no other appropriate way to express ourselves sexually. God knows if we get outside the bowl it will cause us tremendous pain. He knows how costly it is to ignore His law, just like it’s costly for this fish to ignore the law of nature which says his gills can’t consume air.

One of the largest lies proliferated by a fallen culture today is that there is no cost or consequences to sexual sin. It’s not true. The costs that we experience are beyond measure.

## **III. Getting outside of the fishbowl is extremely costly and painful.**

There is no way for me to enumerate the cost and pain associated with inappropriate intimate activity.

The greatest cost, I would say, is emotional and psychological - emotional and psychological trauma for yourself and for your mate or future mate in marriage. You see, sexual education programs in our nation today are based upon a very false assumption. If they can convince a student to use protection, then that student is safe from the harms of human sexuality outside the boundaries of the fishbowl. They don’t understand human sexuality at all. The thinking goes that if they will use protection, they won’t get a sexually transmitted disease, there won’t be an unwanted pregnancy, and there won’t be any damage done.

I argue while the physical cost through STDs may or not be avoided, the emotional cost is unavoidable.

In our passage today, the Corinthians are declaring, “In Christ, I’m free to do anything” (6:12). God gives us unconditional grace, and our scruples and old prohibitions can fall by the wayside. It’s even possible that some within the Corinthians church were actually visiting prostitutes, contending that such behavior was harmless now that they were free in Christ. And Paul refutes the idea. Paul insists that the physical body is important. They were saying, “Hey, all that matters is my spirit. The body is not really important.”

But Paul insists both here and in 1 Corinthians 15 that the body is created by God as a good part of creation, and that God will redeem the body through the resurrection. The body is not just some kind of husk or kernel to be cast off so we can free ourselves for the next life. We are redeemable both in body, soul, and spirit. As broken as our bodies may be as we age, they are redeemable. The body is important, as we see, in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It wasn’t just His Spirit that ascended to God – it was His whole body. And God declares He is going to raise us, also.

And we have with Him – look at verse 17 – intimate union with Christ, one Spirit with Him. It’s the same language used to describe the union with a prostitute in verse 16. The man who has sexual relations outside of marriage commits infidelity to Christ, but he also takes something that belongs to Christ – that man’s body – and we link it in the sphere of something that is unholy.

Students, what Paul is saying is that when we’re sexually intimate with someone, we have a mysterious relationship, a powerful relationship with him or her in a way that creates a real and enduring union. The two shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Paul supports his claim. Therefore, he declares, “flee fornication.” Here we see the image of Joseph fleeing from Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:12).

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, he argues in verse 19. We don’t even belong to ourselves anymore because (verse 20) Jesus has paid the terrible price to ransom us from the bondage of the powers of sin and death. Now we belong to Him and not to ourselves.

So it is extremely costly when we have sexual relations with someone to whom we’re not married. You are joining yourself in a mysterious, intimate, and spiritual and mystical way with someone in a way that you should only be joined to your spouse. Your body belongs to God, and you’re giving that which is holy to that which is unholy.

And it has lasting repercussions.

No amount of birth control can prevent emotional betrayal and pain.

I want to read an excerpt from a letter from a young man about the woman he was dating. He was a virgin. He found out she was not. He’s a 23-year-old guy.

**“I’m a virgin...I met this woman six months ago and we recently started dating. I recently found out that she wanted to remain a virgin until marriage, but she slept with one guy about**

a half dozen times before she met me. She said she felt terrible about it and she promised God again that she will never have sex again until marriage. She believes God has forgiven her.” And then he adds, “I can’t explain the hurt I felt when I asked her and found out she wasn’t a virgin. I do give her credit for being 100 percent honest with me, as she’s always been. I almost broke up with her right there, but there is something inside of me that feels I should forgive her. But the pain is so great.” (“Steps Toward Premarital Sexual Abstinence,” [www.worldwidegrovecorp.com/abstinence](http://www.worldwidegrovecorp.com/abstinence))

#### **IV. Disciples live with discipline.**

Sexual purity is not an option. For an obedient Christian, it’s a requirement. Scripture declares that we should avoid sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Our wrong doing, our sin in this area causes a wall between us and our holy God. I can’t sugarcoat this. You cannot be rightly related to God and, at the same time, knowingly defiant of the boundaries of the fishbowl when it comes to sex. You can’t openly rebel against Him and expect to have unhindered growth in your relationship to Him at the same time. God doesn’t oppose sexual sin because He doesn’t want you to have fun. He opposes it because He knows that outside the fishbowl, the fish is going to die.

#### **V. There are, of course, physical consequences.**

Sexually transmitted diseases which are not always blocked by the use of contraception. There is only one way to be absolutely certain you will not get a sexually transmitted disease. And it’s not contraception or vaccination. It is total abstinence or a relationship between two faithful spouses.

Listen to the experience of one mother:

**I was holding a notice from my 13-year-old son’s school announcing a meeting to preview the new course in sexuality. Parents could examine the curriculum and take part in an actual lesson presented exactly as it would be given to the students.**

**As we waited for the presentation, I thumbed through page after page of instructions in the prevention of pregnancy or disease. I found abstinence mentioned only in passing. When the teacher arrived with the school nurse, she asked if there were any questions. I asked why abstinence did not play a noticeable part in the material.**

**What happened next was shocking.**

**There was a great deal of laughter, and someone suggested that if I thought abstinence had any merit, I should go back to burying my head in the sand. The teacher and the nurse said nothing as I drowned in a sea of embarrassment.**

**The teacher explained to me that the job of the school was to teach facts, and the home was responsible for moral training. I sat in silence as the course was explained. The other parents seemed to give their unqualified support to the materials.**

**“Doughnuts, at the back,” announced the teacher during the break. I’d like you to put on the nametags we have prepared – they’re right by the doughnuts – and mingle with the other parents.”**

**As I watched them affixing their nametags and shaking hands, I sat deep in thought. I was ashamed that I had not been able to convince them to include a serious discussion of abstinence in the materials.**

**My thoughts were interrupted by the teacher’s hand on my shoulder. “Won’t you join the others, Mrs. Layton?” The nurse sweetly smiled at me. “The doughnuts are good.”**

**“Thank you, no,” I replied.**

**“Well then, how about a nametag? I’m sure the others would like to meet you.”**

**“Somehow I doubt that,” I replied. “I’ll just wait here.”**

**When the class was called back to order, the teacher thanked everyone for putting on nametags.**

**Then she said, “Now we’re going to give you the same lesson we’ll be giving your children. Everyone please peel off your name tags. Now then, on the back of one of the tags I drew a tiny flower. Who has it, please?”**

**The gentleman across from he held it up. “Here it is!”**

**“All right,” she said. “The flower represents disease. Do you recall with whom you shook hands?” He pointed to a couple of people.**

**“Very good,” she replied. “The handshake in this case represents intimacy. So the two people you had contact with now have the disease.”**

**There was laughter and joking among the parents.**

**The teacher continued, “And whom did the two of you shake hands with?” The point was well-taken, and she explained how this lesson would show students how quickly disease is spread. Since we all shook hands, we all have the disease.**

**“Not all of us were infected,” I said. “One of us...abstained.” (Kimberly Van Wagner, [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com))**

## **VI. You are vulnerable to sexual immorality.**

**Bill Perkins said, “If you think you can’t fall into sexual sin, then you are godlier than David, stronger than Samson, and wiser than Solomon.” If David, a man after God’s own heart, can fall into sexual sin, if Samson, God’s servant of herculean strength, can literally lose his life through**

sexual sin, and if Solomon, the wise one of old, can be tripped by sexual sin, then you and I can as well.

## **VII. Since God doesn't want you to have premarital sex, neither does he want you to do that which prepares your body for premarital sex.**

The "How far can I go?" question really isn't the best question, because it means how close can I get to disobeying God without actually doing it?

I have a little bit of a fear of heights. I'm okay if I'm in an airplane. And I've even ridden the elevator into the Gateway Arch in St. Louis – towering 630 feet, with nothing between you and the ground below except a sheet of glass.

But when there are no parameters, when there is no fishbowl around, I tend to get uneasy. For example, if we were climbing a mountain – while other families are sitting on the edge of the mountain with their feet dangling to the valley floor hundreds of feet below, I drew a hard line and tell my children, "You have to stop right here." (Mimic looking over at the edge in the distance.) "If you stop right here, you're not going to fall off. You're not going to be injured or tumble to a rocky death below. But if you get to the edge and dangle your feet, people have, can, and will fall – with one misstep. And before you know it, you're gone."

The same thing with our human sexuality. If this is the line beyond which you don't want to fall, move way back here. That way you can be certain of the safety for you, the person you're dating, and for your family, your church family, and your future husband or wife.

## **VIII. There is nothing you've done that God isn't willing to forgive.**

There may be some consequences to your actions that I can't take away for you. But if you've already crossed a line, if you've already gone too far, let me urge you – with the greatest wisdom I have – to retreat back to the line of safety, to ask for God's forgiveness, and to re-establish yourself as a young man or young woman of sexual purity. God loves you. And that same God who forgives each of us for our greed and our gluttony will forgive you, too. We worship a God of the second chance, a God of redemption.

Quickly I want to give our students some very practical things to do. We've talked about what we believe, but now this is what we should do.

### **1. Seriously commit yourself to abstinence until you're married.**

This is for you to decide. Your parents, your church, no one else can decide that for you.

### **2. Only date other believers.**

Now, this doesn't ensure that you won't be tempted to be sexually involved. But hopefully, if you date another believer, he or she will respect your commitment to being an obedient follower of Christ.

### **3. Realize you don't owe anybody anything sexually.**

The only thing you owe is sexual purity to your spouse-to-be. It doesn't matter how nice an evening a guy has shown you. If he expects a sexual relationship as a result of your date, then he's perceiving you as a prostitute rather than perceiving you as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### **4. Never use a substance that will cause you to compromise your clear-thinking process.**

If you're drunk, if you're using drugs, you will lose your ability to make good judgments. And you will find yourselves in a place of deep regret.

### **5. Never do anything with anyone you're dating that you don't want your future spouse to have done.**

If you don't want someone to touch your future wife there, then you don't touch the girl you're dating there. Treat every girl you date as if she is someone's wife-to-be, someone's daughter, someone's sister – a human being made in the image of God.

### **6. Be realistic about your future with someone.**

One person in a thousand actually marries their high school sweetheart. You think it's love. You think it's forever. But you have no idea how long this relationship is going to last. Nothing is guaranteed until you've signed the legal document and the pastor has said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Emotions of love do not justify physical relationships. In fact, when you're in love you don't make good mental judgments. This is from no less a source than the *Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2007 on line. The article is entitled, "Is It Love or Mental Illness? They're Closer Than You Think." That's the title of the article. The bottom line, as you read the article you realize that when you're in love you have a chemical storm going on in your brain, and that chemical storm is likened to drug addiction or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at New Jersey's Rutgers University, says, "The brain system involved in romantic love is powerful. Everything that is going on in the brain, everything that happens with romantic love has a chemical basis."

When your boyfriend says, "If you love me, you would...," you respond, "If you love me, you wouldn't pressure or ask."

God loves you, and God has put boundaries around our human sexuality that are good and safe, wholesome, pure. God loves you and He doesn't want to put you as a fish out of water, to let you get out of the boundaries and find the pain and destruction that comes with following the world's way instead of God's way.

I hope those who have already crossed the line will seek God's forgiveness and recommit themselves to never making that mistake again.

The fishbowl may seem constraining, but it is the only safe place to thrive and will lead to an ocean of joy.