

# Hot Sex & Hypocrisy

*A sermon on the Song of Songs; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23; & James 1:17-27 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 September 2018*  
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## Message

Sexual Intimacy is an exquisitely beautiful gift from God, but attempts to control and repress it frequently distort it into a hypocritical and malevolent force.

## Sermon

Sex and hypocrisy seem to go to bed together far too often. This is by no means confined to religious people. Most of our society seems unable to handle sex with honour and freedom, but Christians have a particularly bad record. The recent Royal Commission has meant that our newspapers have had a couple of years worth of stories about sexual abuse and cover-ups of sexual abuse perpetrated by religious leaders who were at the same time loudly preaching hard-line traditional sexual morality. The Willow Creek Church in the USA, one of the biggest and most influential Baptist churches in the world, is currently struggling with the fall-out of finding that their founding pastor had been sexual harassing staff members. Hypocrisy and sex seem to go to bed together far too often.

The Roman Catholic church is again copping bad press this week after releasing their response to the Royal Commission's recommendations. All the press attention has been on the one recommendation that they said they wouldn't accept – lifting the seal of confession in cases of child abuse. In practice it is an irrelevance, because disclosures of abuse in confession are almost non-existent, but the church has again left themselves looking defensive and hypocritical. Hypocrisy and sex seem to go to bed together far too often.

If you were to listen to some Christians, you'd think that human sexuality was beyond redemption and that the less we have to do with sex the closer to God we'll all be. Well, how then do they explain the presence of the Song of Songs in the middle of the Bible. The bit we heard tonight was not nearly as racy as some of the rest. Actually, I know how they usually explain it – they say that it is not sexy at all, that it is an allegory of God's loving relationship with the church.

Now it is probably true that it was kept in the Bible because of that allegorical use, but the fact remains that it is first and foremost a collection of highly erotic love poetry. And it seems to me that if God didn't like that sort of thing, then it wouldn't be used to illustrate the way God relates to us.

But God, as the original author of human sexuality, must cringe when stories of sexually predatory church leaders hit the news again. How do we get it so wrong so often? Jesus's harsh words about hypocrisy in the gospel reading we heard tonight focus on things to do with food rather than things to do with sex, but you may have noticed that the list of evils that he sums up his comments with, the evils that come not from external influences but from the depths of the human heart, included fornication and adultery. Sex may not have been the primary topic of the debate on that day, but when thinking of religious hypocrisy, it came readily to his mind.

Much of the way Christians have often thought about sex has been shaped by the mindset of the Greek philosophies that were influential at the time of the early church (and still have a lot

of influence today). Greek philosophy, with its tendency to divide spirit and flesh, and think of them as being in conflict with one another was responsible for our tendency to think that sexuality and spirituality are at odds with each other.

The Hebrew prophets and poets didn't think that way, and that's why we get so startled when we hear them using sexy talk to describe the things of the Spirit. There is lots of erotic imagery in the Hebrew scriptures, not just the Song of Songs. It came rather naturally to them. If you wanted to describe the extraordinary depth of God's desire for intimacy with us, what other language could you use but the language of the most passionate human desire for intimacy – the language of sex?

The Christian understanding of God emerged from the Hebrew understanding of God. Right at the beginning of the Christian understanding of God is what we call the incarnation – God becoming flesh. And at the culmination of Christian thinking about God is the resurrection – the human body restored and glorified. Christian thinking then must always remain “incarnate” – that is to say it must always remain embodied, fleshly, earthy.

Any spirituality that sees human bodily needs and desires as irrelevant or as an obstacle to spiritual growth has dubious claims to being consistent with Jesus. Any spirituality that sees sex as a problem to be overcome is getting itself seriously out of step with the way of God made flesh.

A friend of mine is a gay Roman Catholic priest who has been living in Rome for about three decades, and I once asked him if he could explain for me the apparent hypocrisy of the Roman church's increasingly strident denunciations of homosexuality and their insistence that they were purging it from their midst, when, as my friend and I know, the prevalence of gay men among the Roman priesthood, the church bureaucracies, and the theological colleges is such that to purge them all would bring the church crashing down. A very high percentage of the really good Roman priests and theological academics I know are gay men, and the fact that I know that tells me that if the inquisition were serious, *they* wouldn't have any trouble knowing it either.

My friend's answer was very illuminating. As an anglo living in Rome, he said that you have to realise that these fierce edicts come from within a Mediterranean culture which has a very non-anglo attitude to rules. He says there isn't any expectation from the people making these statements that anyone is going to take any notice of them.

Now I'm an anglo, so I don't really get that at all. It just sounds like hypocrisy to me, but he's lived in Rome long enough that I'm willing to take his word for it that it is not seen that way in that culture.

But when I asked further, he acknowledged that the real problem comes when these pronouncements take effect in the anglo world, in Australia and America and Britain. They don't translate cross-culturally, and so we end up with much more dangerously repressive consequences. Repress something as powerful as sex, and the results can be explosive. The level of hypocrisy that has hidden outrageous and sometimes systemic sexual abuse is now costing the church billions of dollars and yet it is still floundering in its attempts to face the causes.

Tonight we heard Jesus's fierce condemnation of "abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human traditions," and we've often heard that as a criticism of religious traditions and rituals, but if you read it fairly, that is not where the focus falls. What Jesus has in his sights are those who make a display of meticulously complying with the ceremonial practices, but who are up to their eyeballs in evil, in abuse and exploitation and injustice. James was aiming at the same target in the extract we heard from his letter – those who talk the religious talk but violate the ethics of love in their treatment of the vulnerable.

A sexual ethic of "Just say No!" has been disastrous in its relational and pastoral consequences and it also does no justice to a God who created sex and smiled and said it was good. But negative attitudes to sex have so infected Christian thinking that we start hearing "Just say No!" even when it is not there. Proverbs 5:15-20 is a bit of ancient Hebrew poetry advising men against adultery. If you were to read it in some of the sanitised modern translations, you could easily hear it as 'just say No'. But the original is closer to this:

*Drink waters from you own reservoir,  
And running water from you own spring  
Should your fountains overflow on the street,  
And your water brooks on the public squares?  
Let your fountain be blessed,  
And have joy from the woman of your youth,  
The hind of many loves, the gazelle with gracious favours!  
Let her breasts inebriate you at all times,  
Her love constantly ravish you!  
For why should you be ravished by a stranger,  
And embrace the bosom of another woman?*

That is a long way from "Just say No!" It is more along the lines of "Sex is like champagne – don't splash it around like cordial!" Basically it is advising against adultery on the grounds that the sex will be a lot hotter if you stick with one partner and don't have to keep starting all over again trying to figure it out with a new partner. It is an argument that values and celebrates great sex, even promotes it, instead of fearing it and trying to suppress it.

Sex is far too powerful and wonderful a thing to be held down by repressive attitudes. Almost invariably, attempts to control it by squashing it succeed only in forcing it into the dark where it mutates and distorts and becomes a destructive and malevolent force that diminishes and dehumanises us. Vociferous campaigns against sexual sins are all too often masks of extreme hypocrisy that hide a dangerous seething brew of obsessive sexual dysfunction. It is sex's great power for good that, when mistreated and distorted, gives it its power for evil. But the answer to that is to restore and celebrate its goodness, not further repress it.

Unfortunately though, the culture around us has too often responded to one evil with another. Reacting against the repression of sex, we have splashed it around like cordial. We have commercialised it and trivialised it and turned it into a cheap disposable consumer commodity. We have turned it into a social media competition in search of the most likes. And that doesn't liberate sex at all, let alone liberate us. Rather it turns sex into a joyless nightmare that traps us and dehumanises us and fills us with anxiety and fear and self-loathing.

And for those of you who have been the victims of malevolent and abusive sex, listen again to the words we heard Jesus say tonight. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile." That is to say that nothing that anyone has done to you has defiled you in the eyes of God. God still looks upon you with love and joy, and with tears of solidarity for your pain. You are not defiled. You are still the apple of God's eye. Sex was never meant to be like that, and God is not blaming you.

The Song of Songs is a collection of deliciously sexy poems that are included in our Bibles first and foremost as a celebration of one of God's wonderful gifts to us, the gift of sexual intimacy. And perhaps they are also there to remind us that sex is a precious gift to be honoured and celebrated, and not disparaged by those who love God, or trivialised and degraded by anybody.

And the way this erotic poetry has been used allegorically down through the years makes use of its unabashed passion to tell us something important about God and about God's feelings for us. The Bible is not at all embarrassed to use highly erotic literature to lead us into a greater understanding of God.

We could even describe it as a 'sacramental' view of sex. The God who takes flesh among us and who uses physical things to connect with us, is happy for loving, faithful, joyous and passionate sexual intimacy to be for us a taste of the nature of God, a glimpse of heaven. Liberated from hypocrisy and rescued from being splashed around like cheap cordial instead of treated with honour, the message of the Song of Songs is that sexual intimacy is not only a wonderful thing, but something through which we can be drawn a little more deeply into the exquisite mysteries of the God who is breathtakingly passionate love. Something sacred indeed!