

1. Chastity—What’s That?

What does the word ‘chastity’ mean to you? Is it a term you even use or think about much?

Most young believers have only a vague recollection of the word *chastity*, perhaps from a childhood catechism lesson. That is, if they recall the term at all. But it is an important word, with rich history and meaning, and worth getting to know. It means, roughly, ‘sexual purity.’

Now we are using a term more people are familiar with. But even among many believers, this is an idea that is out of place in time, like wearing a suit and tie to a baseball game. Most modern people see those who believe in sexual purity—in chastity—as hopelessly out of touch, or even as oppressors imposing legalism and stealing their happiness.

This could not be more wrong. Historically, Christianity has embraced the biblical teaching

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that chastity is required of every person. It is central to how God wants to us to live, to order our relationships, and even to govern our thoughts and the desires of our heart. In fact, early Christians were known throughout the Roman world for their strict chastity. To the pagans, who lived in a culture at least as sexually immoral as our own, it was one of the most obvious things that set believers apart. Do you want to be a truly 'counter-cultural' Christian? Be chaste.

Chastity is one of the most fundamental ways that we honor God, show respect to others, and maintain the self-control we need to live truly productive and honorable lives. To be chaste in the Lord is to accept a beautiful order that is liberating and authentic. Chastity points us towards what is eternal, delightful, and deeply meaningful and away from what is temporary, shallow, destructive, and which will never truly satisfy our deepest needs and longing.

A 'chaste' person is someone who exercises sexual self-control in line with the moral teachings of the Bible. Chaste people avoid sexual sin to, as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, pursue their 'chief end' which is to 'glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.' Treasuring chastity is part of loving what God

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loves and hating what God hates, which those who want to honor the Lord and experience true, godly happiness must do. There is nothing joyless or oppressive about it. In fact, it is one aspect of being liberated of being a slave to sin, and the death and misery sin brings (Rom. 6:6-7).

CHASTITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT WHAT WE DO WITH OUR OWN BODIES

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* says that being 'chaste' means 'innocent of unlawful sexual intercourse.' This way of looking at chastity—that it only involves bodily actions—is common. It is not exactly wrong, but it is Scripturally incomplete.

To get a fuller picture, let's go back to that marvelous well of wisdom in the *Shorter Catechism*. Here, true chastity is summarized as the right way to understand the seventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' Here it is: 'The seventh commandment requireth the preservation of our own and our neighbor's *chastity*, in heart, speech, and behavior.'

Notice, first, that pursuing chastity means being concerned about the impact we have on others, and not just ourselves. We are to avoid

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doing or saying anything that harms anyone else's chastity.

People who have sex outside of marriage are sinning against God (1 Thes. 4:3-5) and even against their own body (1 Cor. 6:18). But they are also pulling down their partners. In *The Christian Directory*, the great Puritan minister Richard Baxter pointed out that engaging in sex outside marriage is a 'greater sin because it is not committed alone.' Those who are sexually active, said Baxter, are 'guilty of the sin of [their] companion, as well as [their] own.'

Going beyond this, we should not sexually tempt others, or knowingly encourage others to even view sexual immorality as acceptable. Rather, we should encourage others towards holiness.

On the one hand, we are all ultimately responsible before God for our own sin, and the world is full of temptation even if we do not contribute to that ourselves. On the other hand, the Bible often condemns those who lead others to sin (see, for example, Mal. 2:8; Prov. 4:16; Luke 17:1-2).

Think of it this way. To shoplift is to commit theft. But enticing companions to join in the shoplifting too is worse. Shoplifters bring real

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guilt upon themselves, along with the possible practical consequences of law-breaking. But those who entice others to join them actively inflict this on their peers as well. Who wants that on their conscience?

Second, chastity is not just about external actions, but what we do with our hearts, including our minds and our affections. It is good not to engage physically in sexual immorality. But do we entertain lustful thoughts, allow our eyes to linger on sexually enticing images, or worse? I know that going beyond actions to the heart and the tongue sounds awful demanding. But it is exactly what Jesus clearly said, when He warned us against such things as sexual lust in our hearts or sinning with our eyes when He explained the seventh commandment (Matt. 5:27-29).

This concern with thoughts, intentions, the eye and so on also applies to what we just said, that chastity means caring about other people too, and not just ourselves. We should not knowingly encourage, in any ways, sexual lust in others.

This can be taken to extremes. Some believers have severe 'modest dress' requirements, for example, or make demands on women that

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literally blame them for the sexual sins of men. That is *not* what I have in mind. However, those who wish to be chaste must exercise reasonable modesty and take care not to stir up illicit desires in others. They especially should not sexually flaunt themselves or put erotic images in front of others.

Interactions with peers of the opposite sex require balance and good judgment. It is not just about what clothes we wear, but about *how* we wear them. More broadly, it is about how we act toward those of the opposite sex, and the intentions behind those actions.

Third, chastity extends to our speech as well. Do we engage in what the Bible describes as obscene, or lewd, or filthy talking? (See, for example, Col. 3:8; Eph. 4:29, 5:4; Ps. 141:3). Are we flirting, that is, talking to peers of the opposite sex in ways that communicate sexual interest or play with attracting them sexually? This is all unchaste conduct, and it corrupts those around us.

Besides, as we already saw, we are to guard our hearts. The Bible teaches us that we do this because our life springs out of our hearts (Prov. 4:23). This includes controlling our speech: 'out of the abundance of the heart

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[the] mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45). Guarding our hearts includes guarding our speech, and vice versa. The mouth and the heart go together.

I have been in the men's locker room in my college's gym, exposed to the sexual talk and bragging of young Christian men who were unaware that an authority figure was listening from behind the next row of lockers. (My wife tells me that girls often do the same thing.) This was very disappointing. Those youthful brothers were dishonoring themselves, corrupting each other, and cheapening the girls they were talking about. They certainly were not honoring God or upholding His moral law. This is the opposite of godly companionship. Why weren't they encouraging each other to consider what is good and lovely (Phil. 4:8), rather than tearing themselves and others down?

**CHASTITY INCLUDES ALL SEXUAL
ACTIVITY**

Thinking that chastity is only about sexual intercourse, but 'everything else goes,' is a seductive lie that has been around a long time. This idea is destructive and fails both moral and common-sense tests.

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First, consider the Scripture texts we just covered about what Jesus said about our eyes, our minds, our hearts and not just our bodies. Does it make sense that Jesus doesn't want us sexually lusting after people in our hearts but doesn't mind if unmarried individuals sexually fondle each other? That is not only lusting but acting on that lust.

Second, other social scientists and I have looked carefully at the data from surveys that measure involvement not only with intercourse but these other forms of sexual stimulation. Those who engage in mutual sexual stimulation other than intercourse end up doing the latter, sooner or later. As Proverbs 6:27-28 declares, 'Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?'

Those who wish to avoid sexual immorality do not toy with it. They don't 'dip their toe' in it.

CHASTITY RESPECTS GOD'S GOOD GIFT OF SEX

Sex is a good gift from God. Unfortunately, this is something that many believers have forgotten. Christians have at times been so concerned about avoiding sexual sin that they

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have treated sex as if it is always bad. Many who are not believers believe that Christianity teaches this. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis forcefully rejected this idea: 'I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure, were bad in themselves. But they were wrong.' In fact, to say that sex is essentially bad is to call evil what God calls 'good' (Isa. 5:20).

But imagine someone you love gave you a beautiful picture they painted, expressing the greatest intentions of their heart towards you. Instead of putting it in a lovely frame and hanging it in a place of honor, you use thumbtacks to put it on the walls of your garage. How would that person feel? Something that was truly lovely would be diminished, even made ugly, by misusing it like that. A gift meant to bring you and that person closer together would now drive you apart.

We cheapen sex when we use it in ways God forbids. The beauty of sex is seen clearly only when we use it as its Designer intended. The Scriptures teach us that this means enjoying sex only with the man or woman He unites us to in marriage. That is, if marriage is part of

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God's plan for our life, as it is for most of us (Matt. 19:10-12).

CHASTITY AND MARRIAGE ARE LINKED

As we have already mentioned, being chaste means not engaging in sex outside marriage. Sometimes, the word chastity means simply abstaining from sex altogether, maybe even permanently, like some Christians who believe they are called to remain single. But Christians typically understand that, even though married people should normally have sexual relations (1 Cor. 7:1-3) they can be chaste if they are faithful to their spouses, as when John Calvin used phrases such as 'holy and chaste marriage.'

However, pursuing chastity is not just a struggle for singles that marriage ends. Married people must be faithful to their spouses not only by avoiding physical adultery, but in their hearts, thoughts, and speech, including taking care not to encourage lust or sexual immorality in others. They too must rely on the grace of God as they strive to be sexually pure (Matt. 5:27-28; John 8:3-9).

Biblical teachings about sexual immorality cannot be understood well unless we have a basic appreciation of God's design for marriage, how central marriage is to God's

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plans and care for humanity, and how sex fits into marriage. Sound Christian teaching about sex is connected to a biblical understanding of marriage. A complete picture of marriage enables us to see not only what sex is, but what its purposes and meanings are. God's design for marriage reveals the practical, relational, and spiritual reasons that we are called to reserve sex for marriage.

In short, only by understanding marriage and the relationship of sex to it can we understand why and in what ways sex outside marriage is wrong. And so, we turn to this now.

MAIN POINT

Chastity of mind, heart, speech, and body are all important to understanding God's good purpose of sex.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Why do you think God calls us to avoid sexually impure thoughts and desires along with actions?
- Examine conversations you've had and overheard with your peers. How is being 'chaste' viewed by others?

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- How can both girls and boys be careful not to lead others into sexually impure thoughts or actions?