

Hebrews 13:4

“Let The Marriage Bed Be undefiled”

September 25, 2022

Pr Josh Anderson

Ordinary Time

Our sermon text this morning, as we continue in our study of the Epistle to the Hebrews, comes from Hebrews 13:4. Here, the Apostle continues to describe the kind of actions and thoughts and loves that the church must embrace as she strives for the holiness of life to which she is called.

As we begin this morning, I just want to acknowledge the tensions inherent in preaching on a Scriptural passage that calls us to honor marriage and to keep the marriage bed undefiled.

I am conscious of the reality that this passage may hit you differently given your experience of marriage and sexuality in your life. I just want to acknowledge that reality. All of us come to a text like this with a story - a sexual story that is as unique as we are.

Some of us in this room have been given the grace to experience the deep and profound blessing of a decades long marriage where our marriage beds have genuinely been kept undefiled.

And I use that language intentionally. If that is your story, it is a deep evidence of God’s grace and kindness to you, for every one of us is a sexual sinner in some way.

But for many of us, that is not our story. Some of us have experienced marriages where the marriage bed *has* been defiled - whether through our sin or the sin of our spouse, and those of you in that situation know well the unique pain and suffering and betrayal that defilement of the marriage bed brings.

Some of us have stories where divorce has ended a marriage that we were once a part of - whether through our failures, or the failures of our former spouse, or through some mixture of the two.

Some of us this morning have never known the blessing of marriage, and although we deeply desire to be married, God has not yet given us that gift. That too can be a story of deep pain and loss.

And yet, no matter what our story or experience, our Scripture text this morning comes to us and has a word for us to hear.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word. I'll read Hebrews 13:1-3 as well to give us the context for verse 4.

*1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. 4 Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Beloved, God cares about your sexual holiness.

When it comes to your sexual actions, your sexual thoughts, your sexual desires, he says simply this: Be holy, as I am holy.

And God is concerned not only with your sexual holiness as an individual, he is concerned about our sexual holiness as a community.

We are in this together — this corporate call to holiness and purity in our sexual lives.

Of course, this call to sexual holiness is not only present in our passage this morning, or in the New Testament epistles generally. It is present in the Old Testament, it is present in the teaching of our Lord Jesus — in fact, the call for God's people to embrace and live out sexual holiness is one of the most fundamental claims of the Scriptures.

In contrast, our contemporary Western culture is full of sexual confusion, disorder, despair, and abuse.

We are in the middle of one the greatest social experiments in human history - essentially, we are discovering in real time what happens to the men, women and children who live in a society in which nearly every sexual rule is removed, where nearly every sexual impulse is not only permitted, but actually sanctioned and celebrated.

The early returns on this experiment are not encouraging, and with all the authority of the Word of God, I going to give you a spoiler alert this morning: this kind of sexual revolution is ruinous for all parties.

But...but...it's worth remembering that larger Greco-Roman culture in which the first Christians lived was also a culture of sexual disorder, confusion, abuse and despair. But over several centuries, that culture's sexual life was wholly transformed.

And do you know that transformation happened, beloved? It happened because the new people of God, those baptized in Jesus' name, radically practiced lives of sexual holiness. And over time, the culture itself was made new.

And if our culture is to be turned back from its own slow motion suicide, it will happen in only one way - by the church of Jesus Christ once again embracing, in a profound and radical way, the sexual holiness we are called to.

The apostle this morning has a prescription to offer the church for sexual holiness. He describes that call in these words: *"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous."*

It's interesting that within this context of a call to holiness, the Apostle addresses marriage in particular. That's not an accident. The sexual holiness of the people of God begins with sexually holy marriages. And this is not arbitrary - it is the way that God designed human society to work.

In very beginning, God established marriage at the bedrock of human relationships, creating Eve from the rib of Adam and then giving her to him as his wife - and as the writer of Genesis comments: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."*

Not all are called to be married. The Scriptures make this quite clear.

But, as Hebrews tells us, whether we are married or unmarried - the estate and calling of marriage must be honored by all - for sexually holy marriages lay the foundation for sexual holiness for the church, for the community, for the culture as a whole.

Men and women get married for many reasons. In our culture, love is the most typical reason. And there's nothing wrong with getting married for love, of course.

But Christian men and women need to understand that marriage, if entered into, is not simply about your own personal fulfillment, or happiness, or satisfaction. No, for the Christian, marriage is a kind of vocation - an embrace of a particularly holy form of life for the sake of others.

To put it bluntly, because marriage is a calling to be honored by all, your marriage is not just about you - the holiness of your marriage is a gift you give not only your children, but also your neighbor.

In the early 1940s, when the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazi government, he wrote a letter to two friends who were getting married that helpfully describes the honorable calling of marriage. It's printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along. He wrote:

*Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance, through which He wills to perpetuate the human race till the end of time.*

*In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to His glory, and calls into His kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind.*

*Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man. As high as God is above man, so high are the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of marriage above the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of love. It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.*

Beloved, I am convinced that Bonhoeffer is exactly right here.

If we are going to embrace sexual holiness as a church, we need to embrace a far more comprehensive understanding of the honorable calling of marriage than we typically have.

Marriage is truly an office, a calling.

To be a husband or a wife is a position of great responsibility in the church and the world, both for the community in which you live today, and for the generations to come.

Beloved, hear me carefully. Not only your children, but also your grandchildren and your great grandchildren will be deeply affected by the extent to which holiness is characteristic of your marriage, by way in which you do or do not practice fidelity to your marriage vows.

You want to talk about doing something important, something significant with your life?

If you're married, that's the most significant calling you have.

A church that is full of people who have been faithfully married for forty or fifty or sixty years - whose marriages are characterized by holiness and faithfulness and love — that will change the world.

And as a church, we must think about the kind of marriages that we honor. In our culture, it is youthful passion, young love that is honored, held up, elevated in value and importance. And there is nothing wrong with young love. But the power and influence and importance of young love pales in comparison to the power and influence and importance of mature love.

Those marriages that last. Those husbands and wives that grow old together, that grow more deeply in love and holiness and wisdom as the years and the decades go by — those should be our heroes — that should be what we honor.

*Let marriage be held in honor among all*, the apostle says. And along those lines I just want to say a brief pastoral word to those women in our church who are married but choose not to work outside the home but rather spend their lives serving their husbands and, if God grants the blessing, their children.

Sisters, hear me. I know that your calling in this situation is not one that is highly valued in our contemporary culture.

I know that there are many voices in our society that tell you implicitly or explicitly that you are running the risk of wasting your gifts, your education, even devaluing your personhood because you are not pursuing a career in the marketplace.

Beloved, I want you to know that this is not true. It is a lie. You are not wasting anything.

Your calling as a wife or a mother is profoundly important, and by giving your life in service to your husband and your children you are producing beautiful fruit not only in the present, but you are giving your life to something that will bear fruit for generations to come.

And as your pastor, I honor you for your high and essential calling.

But the apostle in this passage does not only teach us to honor marriage.

He also calls those of us who are married to holiness. He says: *“Let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”*

What does the apostle mean here? What does it mean for the marriage bed to be undefiled?

Clearly, the apostle is talking about sexual holiness here, and he's using the marriage bed, the place where marital sexual intimacy is experienced as a kind of picture of that sexual holiness.

By instructing us to keep the marital bed undefiled, he is essentially saying this — protect the marriage bed — the marriage bed is sacred space, holy space.

And because the marriage bed is a holy place don't let anything come into that sacred space that should not be there, and don't let the intimacy of marital love go outside the boundaries of that sacred space.

So, the first part of this command is negatively oriented, so to speak. We're to keep impure things out of our marriages.

Of course, as a bare minimum, this instruction is a commandment against adultery. Married persons vow sexual fidelity and faithfulness to their spouse, and this means that all forms of sexual or physical intimacy with others outside of the marriage must be abandoned.

But physical adultery with another person is not the only thing prohibited by this command. In our cultural moment today, we must also say a word about the danger that pornography poses to the marital bed.

You don't need me to tell you that we live in a culture saturated with pornography.

After abortion, the production and consumption of pornography is one of the great moral crises of our age, and it impossible to overstate the disastrous ramifications of the way in which pornography use has been normalized and is now nearly ubiquitous in our culture.

And to be clear, we cannot blame this great moral crisis just on “the internet” or “smartphones.” No, beloved, the problem, as always, is the human heart and its capacity for selfishness, power and cruelty.

The internet and smartphones have only made it easier for us to abuse and destroy one another — it’s worth pointing out that every time a pornographic image or video is viewed, it is an act of abuse and cruelty to a actual human person who is in that image or video — someone’s daughter, someone’s son — a divinely created man or woman who is created in God’s own image, and whose nakedness and vulnerability is now being invaded and used for their own selfish ends by a person whose name they will never know.

And sadly, to our shame, marriage beds in the church are being defiled by the use of pornography, usually by one spouse against the wishes of the other. Again and again in my ministry, I have seen the terrible impact of unchecked, un-repented of pornography use on marriages in the church.

Beloved, this should not be so. In fact, according to the Scriptures, it must not be so.

And I just want to say, as your pastor, if this is your experience, if your marriage bed is being defiled by pornography, please, please ask for help. Don’t try to manage this on your own.

I don’t care if you are the spouse using pornography, or if you are the spouse who is being harmed by their husband or wife’s use of pornography. Either way, please come to me and ask for help. Let’s talk about this together. Let’s handle this head on. Let’s figure together what it looks like to move forward in repentance and healing and holiness.

Make no mistake, God is able to forgive and heal and repair marriages defiled by pornography. I have seen that as well - thanks be to God. But only very rarely can this be done without help from the outside.

But again, remember - the reason to ask for help is not *only* because of the personal pain that pornography can introduce into a marriage.

The reason to ask for help is also because your marriage is not just about you.

So much depends on the holiness of our marriages and the purity of our marriage beds. So much.

I know that I've been pretty blunt and straightforward about the dangers of sexual defilement in our marriages.

And so, as we close this morning, I just want to speak for a moment about blessing of marriages where the marriage bed is kept pure and holy.

When a marriage bed is kept undefiled, it not only keeps impure things out. It also creates the space for a kind of holy intimacy, a kind of holy playfulness, a holy love.

In May of next year, Ami and I will, by God's grace, celebrate the 20 year anniversary of our wedding day.

We were both 22 when we were married. To be clear, we had no idea what we were getting into.

Not only did we not really know each other, we didn't even know ourselves.

And 19 and a half years later, I get the feeling that we're only just now beginning to figure it out. I get the sense that what we know now is only a beginning, only a taste of what we might have in another 10 years or 20 years or 30 years, or, if God is merciful, even more than that.

There is a kind a hiddenness to a marriage that lasts, a marriage where there is repentance and healing and purity and holiness.

What I mean is that there are depths to that kind of marriage, intimacies that are unknowable to anyone who isn't a part of that marriage — intimacies that weren't possible even for them to experience in the early years of their life together.

I mean, in a marriage like that, in a marriage that has lasted, a marriage whose bed has been kept holy over the decades, there are whole novels that could be written about a single glance, a shared moment of laughter, a brief touch of the hands.

The Russian theologian Alexander Schmenann reflected on the power of a holy marriage, and he wrote this, words that have always stuck with me since I first read them years ago:

*In movies and magazines the 'icon' of marriage is always a youthful couple. But once, in the light and warmth of an autumn afternoon, this writer saw on the bench of a public square, in a poor Parisian suburb, an old and poor couple. They were sitting hand in hand, in silence, enjoying the pale light, the last warmth of the season. In silence: all words had been said, all passion exhausted, all storms at peace. The whole life was behind—yet all of it was now present, in this silence, in this light, in this warmth, in this silent unity of hands. Present—and ready for eternity, ripe for joy. This to me remains the vision of marriage, of its heavenly beauty.*

Beloved, that is what I talking about. That is the power and beauty of Christian marriage.

Let us honor it together. For so much depends on the honor and the holiness of our marriages.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.