

Matthew 5:8, 27-30; Galatians 5:1, 6b, 13-14

Love in Chastity

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For those of you who have read your bulletin or remember what Pastor Greg spoke about last week, you'll know that today's sermon is about chastity. So if you're taking notes, I want you to write down what comes to mind when you hear the word chastity. Or make a mental note in your mind. At the end of the sermon, I'll ask you to go back to that and see if your understanding is the same or different.

Now when Pastor Greg and I first began our series on the Sermon on the Mount in August, we emphasized the importance of understanding the context of this message. There are two things about this setting which I want to remind you of this morning as we head into the topic of chastity. First, it is important to remember the audience to whom Jesus is speaking. His message is to His followers, to His church with the purpose of forming His people. Yes, this message is to individual Christians but it is set in the context of the gathering of the people – in the church.

Secondly, Matthew records Jesus' Sermon on the Mount after reminding us that Jesus came to teach, preach and heal. Jesus teaches and preaches so that we are healed and made whole. It means the Sermon on the Mount is not legalism; not primarily about a set of rules to adhere to, not a list of guidelines to obey. The Sermon on the Mount is a message of the gift of God's grace that comes to us as we receive healing and wholeness; as we receive our true identity as human beings which God always intended for us to enjoy and experience.

Given those two reminders, we can come to the virtue of chastity and recognize that Jesus' teaching of chastity applies to the whole church, to the whole people of God: to the man and woman; to the single and widowed and married and divorced; to the young and old and those

who find themselves somewhere in between. It is a message the church receives from God; a message the whole church must discern together what it means, not a message for individuals to figure out in the privacy of their bedrooms.

The virtue of chastity, as we will see, ought not to be framed as a list of to do's or, more accurately, to don'ts, so that it becomes legalism. The virtue of chastity ought to be framed and understood in the context of God's good gifts of grace to us; for our healing and wholeness as human beings.

Together with Pastor Greg, I recognize that the topic of sexual ethics is very difficult and in so many of our experiences of sexuality there is great woundedness. I hope that this morning we can all hear a message of healing.

As Pastor Greg mentioned last week, the sexual practices that happened in the time of Jesus and the first disciples is not so different from our own. What is different between now and then is male/female relationships and marriage. Pastor Greg spoke about how Jesus' sexual ethic was revolutionary; restoring dignity, worth, value, and respect, especially to the woman. When we consider the virtue of chastity, we will also notice its revolutionary and radical proposition.

Before Jesus and his teachings, chastity had been a virtue that only women were expected to keep. Men were not expected to practice chastity. In Jesus, we see how not just women but now all believers are called to a life of chastity. Jesus does not introduce a new virtue but makes

universal what had been only a feminine virtue and practice. What is new and radical is that all are called to live a life of chastity.

What is this radical call to chastity that Jesus teaches his followers to practice? It is perhaps the most misunderstood virtue and consequently one of the least popular and undesired virtues of the Christian life. In fact, in the fourth century, the great North African theologian and philosopher, Augustine once prayed “O Lord give me chastity but not yet.” It has often been understood as abstinence and what is not sexually permissible.

This comes from a limited view of the definition of chaste which means clean. Often people have interpreted that sexual desire itself is unclean or dirty or wrong or bad. This message has trickled down over the centuries and generations and has now been confronted with the sexual revolution. A recent Barna survey conducted among young adult Christians cited the church’s judgmental and simplistic teaching of sexuality as one of the top five reasons young Christians leave the church. I caution you to think of chastity in terms of what is not permissible, or in terms of a suppression of sexual desire. In this view, chastity is a resounding and obnoxious “no”.

If chastity is not about what is prohibited, what is chastity? Well, last week, Pastor Greg offered the definition from the catechism of the Catholic Church: “chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of a man in his bodily and spiritual being.” It goes on to say that chastity involves the “integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift”. Other scholars define chastity in this way: it is the “virtue that brings the

sexual appetite into harmony with reason. It requires, not the renunciation of sexuality, but the right or reasonable use of it.” Another scholar writes “chastity is the virtue of reverence for sexual being, male and female, both in oneself and in all other persons.” This should already give us the clue that chastity is not the same as abstinence, nor is chastity a virtue that is only for the unmarried.

We know that the consequence of sin is that all kinds of relationships are broken and we live in a constant state of tension. There is the tension we experience between generations: the wisdom and understanding of the old and the idealistic ways of the young. There is the tension between our body and spirit. We are physical bodily beings yet also spiritual. Neither should be regarded above the other. Do we prioritize taking care of our physical body or emotions or mind or spirit or somehow try to balance it all? There is the tension between me and you – I am not alone in this world. There is both me, individually, and us, the community.

Our brokenness and experience of tension is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in our relationships with each other, whether as parent and child or friend and friend or husband and wife. Our understanding of love, our ability to give and receive love are all a little bit inharmonious. Love is often understood in subjective terms: rooted in my emotional state – my feelings - and experienced in sexual pleasure and enjoyment.

With love understood this way, the call to chastity is easily resented and altogether dismissed. Living in this fallen and broken-but-being-redeemed world, it is easier to be guided by our emotions and desires than it is to practice self-control and self-discipline.

For example, it is easier to indulge our appetites than practice moderation. It is easier to eat a whole big bowl of popcorn while watching a movie than to eat only a cup or two. It is easier to lose our temper than to practice humility. It is easier to be impatient and mad at the customer holding us up in line than consider that we don't actually know their circumstances. It is easier to be discouraged and complain than persevere through struggles with gratitude. It is easier to look for what's not working well than to give thanks for what's going well.

When love is defined in terms of my personal emotional state and sexual needs and desires, it is easy to see why the virtue of chastity is undesirable. When love is defined in terms of how I feel and what I really want, the virtue of chastity isn't very helpful. In fact, chastity is often considered to be something evil or harmful for humans because it prohibits someone from being loved. Chastity prevents me from feeling good and being sexually satisfied. Some people argue that chastity damages the psychological well-being of young adults who are discovering their identity and purpose in life. The argument goes something like this: sexual desire and attraction are natural and good. Therefore, it is unnatural and very bad to restrict sexuality in any way. Or perhaps this is the argument you've heard: If two people love each other, why should we tell them how such love ought to be expressed, or not expressed? With these perspectives, chastity is seen as an obstacle, a barrier, a wall that opposes love.

To put this in a slightly different way: another way we experience the brokenness of our world; the consequence of sin in our relationships with others and within us has to do with how we look at or regard someone. It is not uncommon to look at someone and feel attracted to them. It is not wrong or sinful to be attracted to someone. Indeed, God has given us this desire. However,

sometimes that attraction turns into a regard for the other person through the exclusive lens of their sexual value to me. It is to keep on looking at another person with the motive and thought of how that person can make me feel happy and satisfy my sexual desires.

Because we live in a fallen world, a world where sin discolours all of our relationships, we can expect to initially be attracted to someone and perhaps even regard the other through the lens of sexuality. Our initial response to meeting someone is not usually an authentic, self-giving and committed love for the other. In fact, it is the Holy Spirit within us which leads us to respond to another person from a place of self-giving love, not from a place of opportunity or abuse.

Because we live in a fallen world, our perception of someone else as a human being can become profoundly wounded because we start to view that person as an opportunity for our own personal enjoyment. The temptation to see the other as an object to satisfy personal emotional needs or sexual desires is very present.

We need not look far in this world to see this at work. It seems that nearly every day, a new media headline highlights the ways in which people are objectified as sexual beings. Consider the recent movement on social media with the #metoo – where both men and women (but predominantly women) gave voice to their experience of sexual harassment.

This is the tension in our own lives; the struggle we experience as Christ followers living in a fallen world, living in a world that teaches certain things about our sexuality and growth and human flourishing. Our very real and honest struggle we experience in our heart and mind and

will has to do with our emotions – the tendency to use another person for our own emotional needs. This struggle has to do with our sexual desires and the tendency to use another person for sexual pleasure.

Set in this context, love cannot actually grow. We will never be fully free to deeply love another person or to receive love from another person when we only look at someone for their emotional and sexual value to me. Love cannot flourish because love is not pure. It is mixed with a posture towards looking at another in terms of their sexual value; and thus is connected to regarding oneself only in terms of sexual enjoyment and pleasure. Love cannot grow because that person's mind and heart and body are so preoccupied with emotional and sexual pleasure.

We can see that a different way is needed; a way that does not objectify or devalue or dehumanize. It is the way of chastity. Chastity is that virtue which helps us to integrate our sexuality with true, authentic love as God intended us to experience. Chastity is that most treasured virtue which protects love in its purity, it makes love possible by not allowing love to become selfish or utilitarian.

Jesus teaches us this different way of love. Jesus teaches us a way of love that goes beyond how we feel or think, it reaches far deeper than our desires and fantasies. Jesus shows us a love that is self-giving, self-sacrificial, that seeks to serve another. Love that is a mutual commitment to do what is best for the other person. Chastity is a call, an invitation, to a way of self-giving love; to give of ourselves to another wholeheartedly and fully.

Chastity is about love: it teaches us how to love and how to be loved. Chastity enables us to love selflessly regardless of our powerful emotions or sexual pleasure. Chastity protects love from being damaged.

Chastity is about healing: it teaches us how to experience wholeness and flourish as true humanity. When we welcome chastity into our lives, we begin to look at others not in terms of how the other can satisfy my emotional needs and sexual desires or their value to me sexually; but we begin to regard the other with their full value as a person, they are fully human to us. We see another with full dignity and worth. We immediately affirm the value of each person in every situation.

Chastity is about freedom: it teaches us how to become free and to free others. It frees a person from being controlled by their emotional needs and sexual desires. It releases a person from the demand to use or abuse another person for personal enjoyment and introduces loving kindness. The catechism of the Catholic Church says this: “chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom.”

Is not this the cry of every person: to be loved, to be healed, to be free? Simply ask the child who has been forgotten or bullied. Listen to the story of the young woman scarred by an experience of abuse. Consider closely the life of the man struggling with pornography. Read the story in John 8 of the woman caught in adultery. Chastity shows us the way forward: the way of love, the way of healing, the way of freedom.

Chastity is only possible through purity of heart. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* Purity refers to our mind, emotions, and will. It is about a heart which does not have mixed motives and divided loyalties. It is a singleness of devotion and commitment. Purity of heart is required for love. Purity of heart is required for chastity.

With this perspective of chastity, it is hopefully evident that chastity is so much more than saying “no” to certain things. In fact, a person who abstains from sex is not necessarily one who has developed the virtue of chastity. The virgin may not have a pure mind and heart, a posture of self-giving love and respect that is needed of chastity. Instead, chastity is saying yes – a yes in our hearts and minds and will to the whole of another person; not just their sexual value. Of course it means that the yes requires that sometimes no is needed to protect love from becoming utilitarian or abuse.

I also hope it is clear by now that everyone is called to live a life of chastity: the single and the married, the divorced and the widowed. For all are called to live a life of self-giving love to another; to regard a person for their whole and total value.

How is chastity developed in the lives of the single or the widowed or married or divorced?

Chastity gets developed in our friendships. Perhaps no better way to see this is than in the life of Jesus Christ; who has given himself fully and completely to us. Chastity is developed when a single person experiences mutual love and intimacy in friendship. Chastity is developed when a married couple is faithful to one another. It is about practicing fidelity.

Developing this type of friendship of self-giving love, which honours, respects, and values the other takes significant time, patience, effort and most importantly the Holy Spirit. In friendships and relationships where subjective love is present, the question is which kind of love is more powerful, louder and stronger: the emotional and sexual love or the self-giving love? The reality is that we are quickly and easily attracted to a person's sexual values rather than to their true human value. Chastity holds this tension in place and allows us to see the other person in their full humanity. Chastity allows us to respond to that person with a self-giving love focused on their good, not on enjoyment for ourselves.

So now I wonder what comes to mind when I say the word chastity. I wonder if that is the same or different from what you thought of earlier.

Let us give thanks that Jesus teaches the way of chastity. Chastity says love one another. Chastity says give of yourself fully and wholeheartedly to the other. Chastity says treat one another with complete dignity, worth, respect and humanity. Let us pray.

Our loving God,

We thank you for making us physical and sexual beings; with emotions and thoughts and will and desires; with limitations and strengths; and with a deep affection for you.

This morning we remember the many children, men, and women who have been wounded because of experiences of unchastity. We pray that your healing would enter into those most sacred and private spaces. Forgive us for those occasions in our own lives where we have not had a purity of heart. For all of us, wherever we find ourselves on the path towards chastity, I earnestly pray that you would help us to open our minds and hearts to the Holy Spirit. Lord, I pray that you would give us your Holy Spirit so that we may truly learn to love another with a love that is self-giving, respectful, and honoring. As you continue to form and shape us as your people, give us courage and endurance to serve and love one another wholeheartedly.

We thank you that Jesus came to bring your Kingdom to earth; a Kingdom defined by love, healing and freedom. Thank you for the many ways that Jesus taught and showed us how to experience our true humanity and we thank you for the gift of chastity; which calls us deeper into what it means to bear your true image. Thank you for the most precious gift to us – salvation.

We pray these in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ,

Amen.