

# God's Outrageous Promises

## Part 2: God's rules about sex will liberate you\*

CHURCH OF THE SPIRIT

JULY 20, 2003

*\*Titles and themes match chapters in Lee Stroebel's **God's Outrageous Claims**, published by Zondervan, 1997  
Block quotes from the Bible are taken from **The Message***

**Intro to the Message:** Good morning. Today we're going to look at one of the most talked about, described, and sought after, well, in fact one of the hottest items on TV. Yet this item is almost never spoken of in Churches, except in a brown paper bag sort of way. And that's a shame. God created humans to enter into relationships with one another, and sometimes those are physical relationships. Now don't you think God has had something to say about how best to live out these kinds of relationships? But where do you ever hear about God's views on sexual relationships? Not in churches. Churches bring up the topic in order to condemn and judge, not teach. So it's no wonder our culture teaches more about what makes for good physical relationships than our churches. One study has shown that before my daughter turns 18, if she watches an average amount of TV, she will have witnessed more than 70,000 images of sex and suggested intercourse between people who are not married. That's because, as the study discloses, over 90% of all sexual encounters on TV are between people who are not married. That has lead one commentator to suggest with so much attention given to premarital sex, you have to wonder if there's any such thing as post marital sex. In the midst of all this, the Church has too often chosen not to speak up, except to speak out in judgement. That means we've lost touch with the positive guidance God offers for this basic part of his creation. God has good things to say about sexual relations. As you will see this morning, God's guidance can help you live in a much healthier and happier place. Yes, God is the author of many "*Thou shalt not's*" in the Bible, but he also wrote many "*Thou shalt's*." And together the guidance he offers provides healthier boundaries for all our relationships. Stay within his boundaries and you'll find more satisfaction and joy. Color outside the lines of God's plan and you'll find things get harder and harder for you. That's why we need to talk about God's plan for relationships. If I never spoke about God's guidance on this topic, I would be negligent of offering you a way to live life to the fullest. So, by the time you leave here, I want you to know God's design for sexual relations, and how you can find the strength and courage to follow his ways in a world that does not always understand or accept them.

As I thought about how to handle the issue of sexual relations in a message I must admit there were several thoughts that quickly came to mind. The first was this: I wonder if Paula could preach today ... No, but let me warn you that there is no way we can cover all the issues and questions that people have about the Bible's teachings on sexual relations this morning. If you want to ask more questions or study it in more depth, join me on Wednesday evening this week for our discussion of *The Hard Sayings of the Bible*. I also want to warn you I'm not an expert. I considered doing a lot more research on the subject for this message, but my wife had other ideas. No, let me be clear. I will offer you the practical guidance the Bible offers for sexual relationships. That means two things will happen: (1) We're going to put physical relations into a much broader picture of your whole spiritual life, and (2) I believe you will soon find the Bible is a lot more up-to-date than you thought.

The subject of sexual relations is not new. Paul was asked for guidance back 2000 years ago. [This morning's lessons will be on the screen behind me, and are reprinted in your bulletin insert for easy reference]. In the First Letter to the Corinthians we see the discussion start to take shape:

Now, getting down to the questions you asked in your letter to me. First, Is it a good thing to have sexual relations? Certainly – but only within a certain context. It's good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband. Sexual drives are strong, but marriage is strong enough to contain them and provide for a balanced and fulfilling sexual life in a world of sexual disorder. The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to "stand up for your rights." Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out. Abstaining from sex is permissible for a period of time if you both agree to it, and if it's for the purposes of prayer and fasting – but only for such times. Then come back together again. Satan has an ingenious way of tempting us when we least expect it.

[1 Corinthians 7:1-6]

Paul is asked, "*Is it a good thing to have sexual relations?*" OK ... that would seem like a no-brainer there, right? But the question is not whether sexual relations are enjoyable, but are they a good thing for us, spiritually? Paul answers, "*Certainly ...*" but then adds that there is a context for sexual relations. They need to take place within certain boundaries. Paul quickly concedes that sexual passions are strong. Then he adds he believes marriage to be stronger yet. He even tells us that God's ways will provide us with a fulfilling sexual life -- a large departure from what Paul describes as a world of sexual disorder. So let's be clear: looking for satisfaction, and more importantly, giving it, are not bad things. They're part of God's design. We'll look at this more closely, but first I want you to notice two teachings here.

For instance, note that Paul takes sexual desires seriously. He doesn't say that once you become a Christ Follower all of your earthly desires become replaced with fond wishes to pray and sing hymns. We remain people with a desire to be loved

and to love, to touch and be touched. Let's take these passions seriously too. There will be people who you know who do not live up to the standards God has set. There may have been times when you may not have lived up to the standards God has set. And even if you have never looked at someone else and lusted after them, or committed adultery, or had an impure sexual thought ... that does not give you a place of privilege to look down on others who still struggle with these issues. The Bible is quick to remind us, all of us have fallen short of the standards God has set, whether in the area of sexual purity or in how we forgive or judge others, or in how we give to the poor, or serve one another.

Second, Paul offers a basic understanding of how God works: he places limits on behavior, not to take away our freedom, but to increase it. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but it's true. Have you ever driven on a road just after the crew has put new asphalt down? Last year I was driving back from Centerville on the Fairfax County Parkway at night. The crews were putting down new surfaces, and that meant there were no lines on the road. That left us with three lanes and a couple of breakdown areas across, with no idea of where to drive. It was like a scene from *2 Fast, 2 Furious* -- people drove wherever they liked. Only I didn't like it one bit. The lines help us know how to stay safe. It's not that they limit our freedom, they give us more. In the same way, when God places boundaries for our behaviors, he is showing you where you can behave and feel free at the same time. I know that years ago, the 60's and 70's were considered periods of free love. Only what did we get from casual relationships? You could have sex with anyone you wanted, but it became harder to find real love. Birth control procedures have provided some security, it is true. And the Episcopal Church to which we belong here at *The Spirit*, has often spoken in favor of people using birth control methods. But still, you have to acknowledge that the name is an odd one. Birth control methods really have nothing to do with either birth or control. And it's amazing to me that in many schools my teenage son could be given birth control supplies but there are laws that forbid the school of giving him an aspirin. Sexually transmitted diseases have climbed to a current rate where every day another 35,616 Americans will contract an STD, some of them, like AIDS, fatal. Cervical cancer, while not officially an STD, has been shown by researchers to be between 5 and 11 times more likely in women whose male partners have multiple partners of their own. "*In effect*," one Johns Hopkins researcher states, "*husbands take cancer home to their wives.*" Did you know by 1999 there were over 30 million orphans due to the AIDS epidemic worldwide. The price tag for free sex is rather costly. Wouldn't you be willing to accept that some boundaries would be a good thing? Just one example: If you know your partner is being loyal to you, you are free from worrying about contracting AIDS. There's a boundary that gives you freedom. There are plenty more ...

Paul explains that within the boundaries of marriage, a husband and wife may have the freedom to satisfy each other. You may have noticed that last line about abstaining only for specific periods of time. This means the old excuse of "*I have a headache*" no longer applies. Now if your spouse asks you to have sex, your reply should be, "*No Honey, tonight is my night to fast and pray.*" But notice the simplicity of God's arrangements here. The husband does not have control over his body but the wife does, and likewise, the wife does not have control over her body but the husband does. For those people who think the Bible supports a chauvinistic approach to marriage with the male as the one who gets to make all the decisions, here the system looks pretty much like a 50-50 partnership. You'll see this again in other places in the Bible too. Then the Bible also offers guidance for those who are single:

I do, though, tell the unmarried and widows that singleness might well be the best thing for them ... but if they can't manage their desires and emotions, they should by all means go ahead and get married. The difficulties of marriage are preferable by far to a sexually tortured life ...

[1 Corinthians 7:8-9]

I'm not going to comment on what Paul might mean by the term "*The difficulties of marriage.*" That would be an unfamiliar concept to me ... but notice again, the care and concern offered because of the possibility for us to feel sexually tortured. The Bible says being single is a great thing for some, for others, it is better to be married than it is to feel tortured. And yet, even then, there will be help for you to find fulfillment from God. I'll explain that in a minute ... First let's look at the whole design of human nature. The Bible tells us:

You know the old saying, "First you eat to live, and then you live to eat"? Well, it may be true that the body is only a temporary thing, but that's no excuse for stuffing your body with food, or indulging it with sex. Since the Master honors you with a body, honor him with your body! God honored the Master's body by raising it from the grave. He'll treat yours with the same resurrection power. Until that time, remember that your bodies are created with the same dignity as the Master's body. You wouldn't take the Master's body off to a warehouse, would you? I should hope not. There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, "The two become one." Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever – the kind of sex that can never become one.

[1 Corinthians 6:13-17]

Here the Bible challenges us to honor God with our bodies. Act in ways that give honor to God rather than makes him cringe. But then, the Bible adds this: "*There's more to sex than skin on skin. Sex is as much a spiritual mystery as a physical fact.*" Have you ever thought about that? Our desire to love and be loved, to touch and be touched comes from God. We were made to live in community with others. In creation, God said, "*It is not good for man to be alone,*" reminding us that whether we are

single or married, loneliness and alienation from others was not what God planned for us. It is hard to live each day thinking you are utterly alone, separated from others. You can begin to wonder if anyone cares about you. That's a spiritual challenge for all of us. The answer comes as we seek deeper relationships with others and with God. We were made to live with others, and with God. That deep spiritual hunger will lead us to look for love. Only sometimes we can look for love in the wrong places. That's why the Bible focuses on how sexual relations have to do with a spiritual union as well as a physical one. It's not just skin on skin. Sexual relations are not at heart an athletic event, complete with statistics and training, a focus on maneuvers and techniques. At the heart, all of our relations are about giving and receiving love; they're about finding a spiritual union with another person. That's why the Bible focuses on the phrase "and the two will become one." In fact, this simple expression of physical relations describes not only how we come together, but the reason. God created sexual relations to overcome the sense of separation we experience in life. And that means, sexual relations also provide a way of understanding our relationship with God. The Bible says we were designed to be as close to God as a man and woman can be in marriage. So we read:

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh." This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. [Ephesians 5:29-32]

The more familiar translation says it this way: "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*" *This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.*"

[Ephesians 5:31-32 NRSV] The goal of a Christ Follower is not merely to follow, but to become united to Christ. The Bible describes this as "*being in Christ*" and states that once we are "*in Christ, the old has passed away and we become a new creation.*" [2 Corinthians 5:17] God wants to overcome the spiritual and physical distance between you and him. God longs to be in a deep spiritual relationship with you. And at your heart, deep within, I believe each of you wants to have a deep relationship with God. Only sometimes that yearning for a deep experience leads us to look for mere sexual union. That's why God gives us the boundary of experiencing sexual union within a loving, lifelong commitment. As we saw before, the Bible says: "*Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than before -- the kind of sex that can never [help you feel like you've] become one.*"

OK, but let's be serious once again ... what kind of help does God give us in dealing with these strong inner passions and desires? Does God only give rules to follow, that seem too hard at times? Or does God also give us some help to go along with the guidance? Well, the Lord knows how hard it can be to deal with our passions. Remember that Jesus was both god and man at the same time, so God knows exactly what it's like to feel desire. That's why God offers each of us the help of his Holy Spirit, to give us the strength to find the fulfillment that comes only from living within the guidelines. So:

Don't you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don't care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex ... don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom. A number of you know from experience what I'm talking about, for not so long ago you were on that list. Since then, you've been cleaned up and given a fresh start by Jesus, our Master, our Messiah, and by our God present in us, the Spirit. [1 Corinthians 6:9-11]

The Bible says you can be given a fresh start. It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done. God will give you a fresh start. It's not like any of the things you have done will surprise him. It's not like anything you have done in the past has been new and undone by others before you. If you want to trade up to the fulfillment God offers it may mean some of you will have to look more at your living arrangements, and your dating patterns. Some of you need to change patterns of your internet usage, or what you do when you're away on a business trip. Don't believe everything you hear. Have you seen these commercials on TV? They have the new advertising campaign for Las Vegas which says, "*What you do here stays here.*" But it's not true. What you do when you're on the road stays here, in your heart. And you bring it into your relationships with others. Think about where you need to make some changes in order to move up to the joy God offers. In a few minutes we will join together in asking for God's forgiveness for all that is past. Please take that moment seriously today, and ask God not only for the forgiveness that sets you free from the shame you carry, but also ask for the power of his Spirit so you can move ahead in a new direction. God will offer you his help, the power of the Spirit. And it's this power which can help you experience a real change in your life. Without it, we're left living life and trying to grab for all we can get, living for the gusto, but without the real joy that God offers. You'll see it most in your relationships too -- because without adding God into the equation, all your relationships will end up being about ... you. I don't mean to say people who are not Christ Followers can not be loving or nice. But there's a difference in your focus when Jesus enters into your life. Life, relationships, sexual desires, stop being about what you want and feel and need and like. They become about what you can give or share. It's obvious, the Bible says, what a life that is centered on getting what you want looks like. Tell me this doesn't sound familiar ...

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival [or a sexual object]; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could

go on. This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.  
[Galatians 5:19-21]

Yeah, that sounds like Las Vegas to me. Or most TV shows. And it sounds like a lot of other times when I wanted life to be all about getting my needs and desires met. Let me tell you again, life does not need to be lived like that. You can trade up to what God offers you today. This lesson concludes:

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments ... Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. [Galatians 5:22, 25]

You can trade up to the loyal commitments and mutual fulfillment God offers you once you start to live out God's design for relationships in the details of your daily lives. He has designed us with deep desires to love and be loved, to touch and be touched ... and those are good things. God has also given you a context for such desires to be shared and met. The further away from his ways you go to meet your needs the more you'll experience difficulty and a loss of fulfillment. Best of all, God offers his Spirit as a way to lead you from what comes naturally to what comes out best in the end. It's not God who is limiting you or taking away your freedom to life and the pursuit of happiness. God is the one trying to show you the lines on the road so you can be safe and secure in your most intimate relationships -- with others, and with God himself. The Bible explains that real freedom comes not from doing whatever you want, but in doing what works best. You heard that in this morning's first lesson: *"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery ... You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love to become servants to one another ..."* [Galatians 5:1, 13] Do not trade down, and go back from the power of the spirit to live in sexual addictions or a pattern of sexual relationships that never work out in the end. Why trade down when God offers you a real freedom and sense of fulfillment in relationship with him? There is a great freedom in God's ways:

I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively ... With promises like this to pull us on, dear friends, let's make a clean break with everything that defiles or distracts us, both within and without. [2 Corinthians 6:11-13, 7:1]

Make the break, and live in the freedom God offers. Don't accept a small existence when you can have so much more. So look for the tell tale signs of God's presence in your life and follow them. They'll lead you away from a life of sexual tension. And while God will never completely take that tension away, he will give you something sweeter than forbidden fruit.

The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less. [2 Corinthians 5:5]

So don't settle for anything less than true relationships that honor God and bring you what you want most in your life. Never forget, God knows your past. He knows your challenges and temptations, he sees your dilemma. Today he has everything you need to find the spiritual freedom that comes from bringing God into all your relationships ... and your heart ...

## Dilemma

*words & music by Henry Fiske, Jr.*

Talking to a friend of mine, he said that he was hurt  
One hundred thousand pounds were on his fragile human heart  
I asked him why he thought he had to carry all that weight  
When all he had to do was walk the path to freedom's gate  
My friend said he was certain that there wasn't any way  
To get around the burdens that he carried day to day  
I told him there was freedom and a way for him to fly  
Just get upon the wings of grace and kiss the grief good-bye  
He can lift you high above it all -- High above your towering human walls

This is my dilemma, this is my concern  
How many burdens must we bear before we finally learn  
This is my dilemma, that the world would see  
There is no need to bear the load, the Savior set us free

So many people carry those hundred thousand pounds  
Upon their tender shoulders till they're lying on the ground  
So many never get up, crushed by all the weight  
Believing that there's no escape, and that it's just too late  
He can lift you high above it all -- High above your towering human walls

This is my dilemma, this is my concern  
How many burdens must we bear before we finally learn  
This is my dilemma, that the world would see  
There is no need to bear the load, the Savior set us free

Don't try and carry all the weight,  
For in the end all you'll really find is that there's no escape  
Lean on the One who paid the price  
Who freed us from our burdens with the perfect sacrifice  
This is my dilemma, this is my concern ...