

Grappling with Guilt

What Makes You Feel Guilty?

What makes you feel guilty?

Has a relationship gone sour and you find yourself agonizing about what might have been if you'd acted or spoken differently? Maybe your slave-driver boss hassles you for being behind. Are your kids wondering why they ended up with you as a parent?

These days, food guilt is common. With super-slim models gracing supermarket tabloids and magazine covers (admit it, now; you've peeked), even a fit, petite-sized former cheerleader can get depressed standing in the checkout line. "No-Guilt Nachos," offers a *Ladies' Home Journal* recipe.

America Online has a special guilt section dealing with "Relationship Guilt," "Parental Guilt," "Food Guilt," "Workforce Guilt," "Pricey Guilt," "I'm-a-Rotten-Person Guilt," "Stay-in-Touch Guilt," and "Trying-to-Please-Everyone Guilt." Whew!

Ever been late paying a family bill due to negligence or overspending? Been unfaithful to your spouse? Lied to the IRS or a friend? Been angry without reason?

When we fall short of our own – or others' – standards, guilt feelings can result. Unresolved guilt can bring anxiety, depression, ulcers, low self-esteem and more.

I am a recovering perfectionist. As a teenager, I could be pretty hard on myself. I once fouled out of a high school basketball game in the final seconds with our team ahead. The opposing player made his free throws, putting his team ahead. I felt bleak. Our team's desperation inbound pass went to

midcourt, where a teammate caught the ball and threw up a prayer. The ball swished through the net as time expired. We had won. I was the second happiest player there. I probably would have excoriated myself had he missed.

A single man I know became involved with another man's wife. Her rocky marriage had sent her lonely heart wandering and his youthful enthusiasm and libido met many of her wants. They dreamed, schemed, sneaked, and rendezvoused. When discovered, he lied and sought to perpetuate the affair. Eventually, friends convinced him to break things off. He felt guilty for having the fling, guilty for lying about it, and guilty for dumping her.

Feeling guilty can cripple you emotionally. Serious ethical or moral lapses can bring blame and shame. A seemingly minor flaw can sometimes bug the daylights out of you. This article looks at healthy, biblical ways to deal with guilt, and how to know that you are really forgiven.

Some Causes of Guilt Feelings

Why does guilt affect us so, and how can we alleviate it? Some psychologists emphasize that problems in our past can plague us in the present. Inability to reconcile or move past unhealthy relationships with parents, siblings, teachers or classmates may color our emotions. Other authorities feel that people may be following overly rigid standards.

Suggested solutions have included discovering and resolving past hang-ups, relaxing moral codes or easing personal expectations. Certainly many people still suffer from past problems or set unrealistic standards. Forty-eight hours of tasks won't fit into one day, so don't necessarily castigate yourself when only half your ambitious to-do list gets accomplished. If you find yourself sneaking a diet-busting snack, maybe rewarding yourself occasionally is better than whipping yourself. But it seems wise to also consider that, at

least in some instances, we may feel guilty because we are guilty.

If this is true, then therapy for a guilty person could begin with getting them to admit their shortcoming. That's not always easy.

Admitting you're wrong can be hard. Perhaps you've heard of the writer who asked his domineering editor if he'd ever been wrong. "Yes," replied the editor. "I was wrong once. It was when I thought I was wrong but I wasn't."

University of Illinois psychologist O. H. Mowrer pointed out a common dilemma in trying to face your own shortcomings:

Here, too, we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until first they acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgement unless he has "already changed." In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego "insult," and one must have a new source of strength to endure it.[*{1}*](#)

I understand this inner weakness problem. As a teenager, I found success through athletics, academics, and student government. I was attending one of my nation's leading secondary schools. President John F. Kennedy and actor Michael Douglas were alumni. But my achievements didn't bring the personal satisfaction I wanted. Guilt, anxiety, and a poor self-image often plagued me on the inside.

My first year in university, I met some students who said that the spiritual side of life offered a solution to the guilt problem. A relationship with God, they said, could give me the "new source of strength" necessary to face my own flaws and seek help. Because of them, I discovered practical reasons why faith could help me overcome my guilt.

A Solution to Guilt

The hit movie *Bruce Almighty* depicts God's attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the phone number is valid in many area codes. After the film's release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after twenty calls per hour clogged her cell phone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they'd really discovered a direct line to God. One even left a message confessing her adultery.[\[2\]](#)

Owning up to guilt can help clear your conscience.

Those college students I mentioned earlier had a joy and enthusiasm that attracted me. They claimed to have a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. I couldn't believe it all. I kept returning to their meetings because I was curious and because it was a good place to get a date. Especially because it was a good place to get a date!

They explained that God loved me, but that my own self-centeredness or sin had separated me from Him. They said His Son, Jesus, died to pay the penalty for my sins, and rose from the dead so I could receive forgiveness as a free gift. Eventually, it made sense.[\[3\]](#) Through a simple heart attitude, I invited Jesus to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. There was no thunder and lightning, no angels appeared, and I did not become perfect overnight. But I found a new inner peace, freedom from guilt, assurance that I would be with God forever, and the best friend I could ever have.

Of course, my experience is not unique. Harvard psychologist William James, in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* cites Henry Alline who placed his faith in Christ: "the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone . . . my whole

soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death . . . was now filled with immortal love . . . freed from the chains of death and darkness....”{4}

One early believer wrote: “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.”{5} I found that my own guilt was gone, but I also had to draw on His power daily.

A friend of Jesus wrote, “If we confess our sins to him, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”{6} Some call this statement the believer’s “bar of soap.” We confess, being honest with God. He forgives and cleanses us.

But what if you don’t feel forgiven? Is there such a thing as false guilt?

True or False?

A reader who signed his e-mail “Guilt plagued” told me of his struggles:

A few years ago, out of desperation, I made a series of terrible mistakes. I am committed to the Lord and confessed my sins. I’m terribly ashamed and embarrassed about what I have done, and I feel ten times worse because I can’t make restitution. . . . I’m having a difficult time processing the idea that He has forgiven me. . . . Please help me . . . what should I do? The guilt is eating me alive.

Sometimes we feel guilty because we are guilty. Other times we feel guilty without cause. Is your guilt true or false, and what can you do about the feelings?{7}

When my wife, Meg, was in graduate school at Stanford, she regularly parked on the street near her campus office. One

afternoon she discovered a parking ticket on her windshield. During that day – while she was parked there – campus management had painted the curb red, signifying “No Parking.” (The curb had never had paint during her tenure.) Was she guilty?

Her dilemma was both laughable and burdensome. Meg would have to either pay a fine or go to court. She appeared in court and told the judge what had happened. He dropped the charges. (I should *hope* he would!)

The law and the judge’s application of it determined guilt or innocence. Similarly, if we violate God’s proscriptions, we stand guilty. If we do not violate biblical principles, then we may or may not be guilty.

If you know your guilt is real, your solution begins with placing your trust in Christ to forgive you. Once you have, and you become aware of sins in your daily life, simply admit them to God.

Keep short accounts with God. As the proverbial country preacher said, “I ‘fesses ‘em as I does ‘em.” Feelings may lag behind, but if you’ve admitted your sin to God, He has forgiven you.

What if you’re unsure if your guilt is true or false, or if you confess your sins but still don’t feel forgiven?

Consider *the Holy Spirit’s guidance*. Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to guide us into truth,[{8}](#) especially concerning sin.[{9}](#) If the Bible doesn’t prohibit certain behaviors, you – if you’re a follower of Jesus – can ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom about them. Jesus’ brother James wrote, “If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you.”[{10}](#) Discerning God’s guidance is not a perfect science, but His inner conviction can help you sort things out.

Making Things Right

What do you do if you're not sure if your guilt feelings are legitimate, or if you don't feel forgiven?

Realize that *God's promises trump your own self-criticism*. Members of God's family can trust His opinion even when they don't feel like it's true. We can "set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."[{11}](#) Does your heart condemn you unjustly? You can say, "Listen, heart. I'm a child of God. I've confessed my sin and He says I'm forgiven. I refuse to believe your condemnation."

I recommend that you converse with yourself in private rather than in public! For a variety of psychological and spiritual reasons, your guilt feelings may not disappear immediately. Changing established emotional patterns can take time. Choosing to believe God is good starting point.

Realize also that *God's promises trump the real enemy*. This may be hard to swallow, but it's important. Jesus taught the existence of "Satan," a "liar and the father of lies,"[{12}](#) the "accuser" of believers.[{13}](#)

I once considered myself too intellectual to believe in Satan. Our university mascot was the "Blue Devil." To me, the devil was some guy in a blue costume with a pitchfork who ran around at basketball games. Then I heard that Satan the deceiver has some people so deceived that they don't believe he exists. Jesus' life and teachings eventually convinced me that Satan was real. If you experience false guilt feelings, realize that they may have a lower source. You needn't deny the feelings, but you can deny false guilt based on Jesus' friendship with you.[{14}](#)

You may need to *make restitution*. My second year in college, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the

psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. "No one wants it," I convinced myself. "It deserves to be taken." I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I read a booklet about God's forgiveness. That bucket kept coming to mind. I not only needed to admit my theft to God. I needed to make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

After hearing of this stolen bucket episode in a lecture, one friend wrote his former employer to confess all the items he had stolen and to offer restitution. "We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives," observed another associate.

Feeling guilty? You may just need to relax unrealistic standards in a stress-filled world. But you also may need to face genuine personal shortcomings. If you do, you can know that the complete forgiveness that Jesus offers is free and that His truth trumps all challengers.

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Notes

1. O. H. Mowrer, "Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils," quoted in Henry R. Brandt, *The Struggle for Peace* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1965).
2. Mitch Stacy, "'Bruce Almighty' Phone Number Annoys Many," *Associated Press/AOL News*, May 28, 2003.
3. For detailed information on Jesus and evidence to support His claims, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

4. *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* (Boston, 1806), 31-40; selection abridged in Henry James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library/Random House, 1936 [original copyright 1902]), 214-215.
5. Colossians 2:13-14 NLT.
6. 1 John 1:9 NLT.
7. For more on false guilt, see, Kerby Anderson, "False Guilt," www.probe.org/false-guilt/ and Sue Bohlin, "It's Not Your Fault!" www.probe.org/its-not-your-fault/.
8. John 16:13.
9. John 16:8.
10. James 1:5 NLT.
11. 1 John 3:18-20 NIV.
12. John 8:44 NASB.
13. Revelation 12:9-10 NASB.
14. 1 John 4:4 NLT.

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Divorce and You

How can you cope with divorce if it comes your way? How can you help a friend who is going through it? What about divorce and the ministry? Practical—and personal—thoughts on this important issue.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

It's Over

Divorce. What thoughts and feelings does that word kindle in you?

Are you happily married and feel that divorce is not an option? Maybe the concept scares you. The fear of loss seems overwhelming.

Are you in a struggling marriage and the end is near? Perhaps you are confused, angry, depressed, or grieving. Or maybe you are happy and envision this as the necessary end of an unpleasant relationship.

Perhaps your parents are divorced. Maybe you recall their angry disputes during your childhood, fear over your family's future, anguish over deciding with whom you would live.

Got any friends whose marriage is on the rocks? You might care for both of them, but how should you relate to them now? Take sides? Remain neutral? Intervene? Keep out of it?

In 1975 I married a wonderful woman. She was kind, sensitive, beautiful, loving, intelligent, fun, talented . . . my best friend. We traveled the globe together speaking in universities, on television and radio, writing books and articles about love, sex and marriage. She taught me much about love, kindness, sensitivity, communication. Much of the modest success I've seen in speaking and writing I owe in part to her excellent coaching.

Twenty years later, in 1995, she told me she wanted out. I felt devastated. The love of my life didn't love me any more. The pain of rejection ran deep. I had not committed adultery or desertion. I felt helpless. Legally, I was helpless. California's "no-fault" divorce laws mean that in our state it takes two to get married but only one to get divorced. One partner can simply claim "irreconcilable differences" – no proof is needed – and a judge will dissolve the union after a six-month waiting period. The unwilling partner is legally powerless to stop it.

Imagine the worst spat you've ever had with your spouse, partner, or friend. Multiply the pain of that by a jillion and

you have a glimpse of the hurt. It felt as if I were being reamed out by an emotional Roto Rooter. I cried buckets. It was really, really awful. Are you getting the idea that I did not like this experience?

What does the Bible say about divorce? How can you cope with divorce if it comes your way? How can you help a friend who is going through it? And what about divorce in the ministry? This article offers you some practical thoughts on this controversial topic.

Biblical Issues

Is divorce a solution or a cop-out?

I appreciate it when speakers or writers make clear their way of looking at the world. My worldview is a biblical one. You may agree or disagree, and I certainly respect that, but may I encourage you to consider what the biblical documents say on this issue?

Moses, the famous Jewish liberator, explained that God made the first man and woman for a close bond. "For this reason," Moses wrote, "a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."[{1}](#)

Hundreds of years later, some religious leaders asked Jesus of Nazareth about divorce. He quoted Moses' statement, then added, "Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together."[{2}](#) Jesus held marriage in high esteem: "God has joined them together," He declared, ". . . let no one separate them."

But if divorce is wrong, these male religious leaders responded, why did Moses discuss how to handle certain complicated divorce situations? Jesus explained: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you," Jesus continued, "that anyone who divorces his wife, except

for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”[\[3\]](#)

Strong words. What do they mean? Even dedicated followers of God differ about whether He allows divorce and under what circumstances. A thorough study exceeds the scope of this short series. I recommend Jay Adams’ book, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*,[\[4\]](#) for more detail.

Years before my own marriage began to crumble, I carefully studied a biblical perspective on divorce and remarriage. Here is what made the most sense to me. Partners should enter marriage for life, “until death do us part.” If splits arise, reconciliation should always be the first aim. If reconciliation fails, I see two biblical bases for divorce and remarriage: adultery of one spouse[\[5\]](#), and desertion[\[6\]](#). Adultery or desertion do not mandate divorce, but they make it allowable.

As difficult as this subject may seem, remember that God loves you and wants the very best for you.[\[7\]](#) If you are hurting right now, He understands. He wants to wrap His arms around you, be your friend, and help you handle your deepest disappointment.

Coping With Divorce

What are some ways to cope with a shipwrecked marriage?

Divorce can teach you a lot. I’m a sinful person who made plenty of mistakes in marriage. I could have been more thoughtful, sensitive, and kind. Though I tried hard to be a good husband, I realized I could not be responsible for another’s decision.

About a year after the divorce, at some friends’ encouragement, I began to speak publicly about what I had learned. I was determined not to speak ill of my ex wife, but I wanted to encourage others. My story got several reactions,

which I began reflecting to audiences to help them process it. Maybe you can relate.

"Some of you feel uncomfortable with this topic," I would tell listeners. "You wish I would change the subject. I've felt that way. Others of you think, I wish the person I love would be as open with his heart as you're being.' Some of you are skeptical," I'd continue. "You'd like to hear *her* side of the story! I can appreciate that. Maybe you're angry. Perhaps I remind you of your ex-spouse. You think, He talks so sweet. But I bet he's a tyrant in private!' I realized that I cannot assume responsibility for all the people who have hurt you. But I can offer hope. Maybe people will reason, He's hurt; I've hurt. He says Jesus helped him with his hurt. Maybe Jesus can help me with my hurt.'"

Jesus can help you with your hurt. He said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls." [{8}](#)

Often divorcees experience the classic stages of loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. [{9}](#) You may not believe you're experiencing this. You may be mad at your mate or God. You may promise God you'll follow Him if He restores your marriage. You may become depressed when the end seems certain. Eventually you may accept reality.

What helped my journey through grief? I had to believe that God really did cause "all things to work together for good to those who love" Him. [{10}](#) I sought to walk closely with Him. I asked forgiveness of my ex-wife for my many shortcomings. I forgave her and forgave myself.

I saw a skilled counselor. A wonderful divorce recovery group helped me understand what I was experiencing and feeling. I did not date for about two years after the divorce was final,

to allow time to sort things out. And some fine friends helped me to land on my feet.

Responding to a Friend's Divorce

How might you be a friend to someone in the midst of divorce?

The couple next door is splitting up. One partner is bailing on the marriage. You and your family have known them for years. You've babysat each other's kids, carpooled to work, vacationed together, laughed and cried together. You are members of the same church.

How should you relate to them now? Take sides? Remain neutral? Intervene? Keep out of it?

If you are a follower of Jesus, you likely will want to seek divine wisdom. Every situation is different, and marital strife can be explosive. Jesus' mother Mary once had some wise advice that relates well to these situations. She said, "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."[\[11\]](#)

I was quite fortunate to have a circle of good friends who reached out in loving care. Perhaps their examples can give you some ideas of what you might do.

My friends did not abandon me in my darkest hour. They stuck with me, let me know that they cared, asked how they could help, arranged opportunities for us to spend time together. One couple had me over to dinner every Friday night during the fall. Then we would watch their son play high school football. It helped take my mind off of my problems, relax, and enjoy being around other people.

Some recommended books,[\[12\]](#) met me for lunch, and invited me to a concert. One couple listened as I poured my heart out and helped me plan my future. Some organized a prayer meeting among close friends, helped me move, sat with me in court. They would call to ask how I was doing, especially when I felt

particularly lonely or burdened.

Two friends tried to contact my estranged wife to encourage her to drop the divorce action.

After the divorce, many gracious folks welcomed me into their circles and encouraged me to serve others. Some pastors and theologians who knew me well told me they thought it was appropriate biblically for me to remarry. I was reluctant. I wondered if I could ever open my heart to another woman.

Then, at a conference, I met Meg Korpi, a beautiful, sensitive, kind, wise, caring, brilliant, fun woman. She was as dedicated to God as she was wise and gorgeous. (I get points for saying all this in writing, you understand!) I knew what I liked and I liked what I saw! We began to date almost three years after the divorce ended and were married about a year-and-a-half later. We are very happy together. We thank God often.

Divorcees and the Ministry

What about divorce and the ministry? If a ministry leader divorces, should he or she remain in ministry?

If a leader initiates an unbiblical divorce – or commits adultery or otherwise acts inappropriately – one should confront him or her as described in Matthew 18. In my view (not all will agree), with a change of mind and heart – and after appropriate time – it may be possible to restore a fallen leader to effective service. Paul wrote, “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”[\[13\]](#)

What about the victim of an unbiblical divorce? There are both wise and unwise ways to deal with such tragedies. Ministry boards and executives should take special care to act biblically. They may be tempted to value public image and donations above biblical principles.

Perhaps my case will be instructive. My first wife and I were international speakers with a prominent evangelical movement with thousands of wonderful staff. We traveled the world together, wrote books, appeared on television. In my twenty-fifth year with this organization, my wife filed for divorce without – in my opinion – biblical grounds. This caused quite a stir.

Though initially expressing concern and care, corporate leaders claimed they had a policy requiring me to leave if my spouse divorced me. I was told I was a PR risk and would need to go. At one point they wanted me to agree never to speak or write about marriage, divorce, or remarriage (mine in particular or these themes in general). Things got “curiouser and curiouser.”

Again, this movement has done much good around the globe. It helped me come to faith when I was a student. Please understand that I am seeking here the proper blend of grace and truth, not an easy task in these matters.

My employer owned a seminary, a separate corporation that had no automatic divorce restriction. The seminary president hired me. He took some heat for acting biblically, but those like him who refused to convict me of a sin – divorce – that I did not commit were God’s instruments of grace in my life. After a time of healing, I returned to the lecture circuit. Today, I am privileged to enjoy an even larger global influence via speaking and writing.

Divorce does not have to end ministry. Has any sin been dealt with in a biblical fashion? If so, then the divorced servant of Christ can, with God’s direction and power – and with appropriate accountability – continue to touch lives for Him. Jesus welcomed the denying Peter into fellowship and service.

The wounded servant may become even more effective, able to connect with people on a deep level and to point them to the

One who can heal their broken hearts.

Notes

1. Genesis 2:24 NASB.
2. Matthew 19:6 NLT.
3. Matthew 19:8-9 NIV.
4. Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).
5. Matthew 19:9.
6. 1 Corinthians 7:12-15, taken with Matthew 18:15-17. An outline of this argument regarding desertion is as follows: 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 can be understood to mean that when a spouse who does not believe in Christ deserts a spouse who does have faith in Christ, the deserted believer is not bound from remarriage. Regarding a marriage between two believers, a deserted spouse should first seek reconciliation. If the deserter will not reconcile, the deserted spouse should follow the biblical "progressive correction" prescription in Matthew 18:15-17. That is, s/he should confront the deserter with his/her sin individually, then (if the deserter continues to resist) with one or two others, then involving the church. If the deserting spouse still resists, then the Lord's admonition to the church (which includes the deserted spouse) is "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, relate to that person just as you would to someone outside the church, as to an unbeliever. How does the church relate to unbelievers? One of the many biblical teachings regarding relationships between believers and unbelievers is that an unbelieving spouse who deserts a believer does not bind that believer from remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). See Adams, op. cit., for a more complete discussion of desertion as allowable grounds for remarriage.
7. Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 23.
8. Matthew 11:28-29 NLT.
9. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., *On Death and Dying*, reprint edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, reprint, 1997).

10. Romans 8:28, NASB.

11. John 2:5 NASB.

12. Especially helpful are Joseph Warren Kniskern, *When the Vow*

Breaks (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993); and many of the Fresh Start resources

at www.freshstartseminars.org.

13. Galatians 6:1 NIV.

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Cool Stuff About Love and Sex

Hey, kids. Want to read some cool stuff about love and sex that you might never hear from your folks? Hey, parents. Want to learn how to communicate with your kids about these important topics? Read on!

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



Cool Stuff

Psst! Hey, kids! Want to hear some really cool stuff about love and sex that you might never hear from your parents? Listen up! (But . . . how about closing your ears for the next few seconds?)

Hey, parents! Want to learn how to talk to your kids about sex in a way they will understand and relate to? Keep listening. [\[1\]](#)

OK, kids. You can listen again.

“A fulfilling love life. How can I have one? How can I get the most out of sex?” University students worldwide ask these

questions. As I've spoken on their campuses, I've tried to offer some practical principles because I believe both pleasure and emotional fulfillment are important facets of sex. These principles relate to teens, too. Teens of all ages.

Sex is often on our minds. According to two psychologists at the universities of Vermont and South Carolina, 95% of people think about sex at least once each day.^{2} You might wonder, "You mean that 5% of the people *don't*?"

Why does sex exist? One of the main purposes of sex is pleasure. Consider what one wise man named Solomon wrote. Writing sometimes in "PG" (but not "R-rated") terms, he said:

Drink water from your own cistern
And fresh water from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.^{3}

Solomon's ancient love sonnet, the "Song of Solomon," is one of the best sex manuals ever written. It traces the beauty of a sexual relationship in marriage and is an openly frank description of marital sexual intimacy. You might want to read it yourself. (Would it surprise you to know that it's in the Bible? You can dog-ear the good parts.)

Another purpose of sex is to develop oneness or unity. Fifteen hundred years before Christ, Moses, the great Israeli liberator, wrote, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."^{4} When two people unite sexually,

they “become one flesh.”

A third purpose for sex is procreation. That, of course, is how we all got here. You learn that in first year biology, right?

OK, so sex is for pleasure, unity, and procreation. But how can people get the most out of love and sex?

How to Have a Most Fulfilling Love Life

One way not to have a fulfilling love life in marriage is to concentrate solely on sexual technique. There is certainly nothing wrong with learning sexual technique—especially the basics—but technique by itself is not the answer.

The qualities that contribute to a successful sex life are the same ones that contribute to a successful interpersonal relationship. Qualities like love, commitment, and communication.

Consider love. As popular speaker and author Josh McDowell points out, those romantic words, “I love you,” can be interpreted several different ways. One meaning is “I love you *if*—If you go out with me . . . if you are lighthearted . . . if you sleep with me.” Another meaning is “I love you *because*—because you are attractive . . . strong . . . intelligent.” Both types of love must be earned.

The best kind of love is unconditional. It says, “I love you, *period*. I love you even if someone better looking comes along, even if you change, even if you have zoo breath in the morning. I place your needs above my own.”

One young engaged couple had popularity, intelligence, good looks, and athletic success that seemed to portend a bright future. Then the young woman suffered a skiing accident that left her paralyzed for life. Her fiancé deserted her.

This true story—portrayed in the popular film, “The Other Side of the Mountain”—was certainly complex. But was his love for her “love, period”? Or was it love “if” or love “because”? Unconditional love (or “less-conditional”, because none of us is perfect) is an essential building block for a lasting relationship.

Unconditional love with caring and acceptance can help a sexual relationship in a marriage. Sex, viewed in this manner, becomes not a self-centered performance but a significant expression of mutual love.

Commitment is also important for a strong relationship and fulfilling sex. Without mutual commitment, neither spouse will be able to have the maximum confidence that the relationship is secure.

Good communication is essential. If a problem arises, couples need to talk it out and forgive rather than stew in their juices. As one sociology professor expressed it, “Sexual foreplay involves the ‘round-the-clock relationship.’”[\[5\]](#)

Why Wait?

After I’d spoken in a human sexuality class at Arizona State University, one student said, “You’re talking about sex within marriage. What about premarital sex?” He was right. I was saying that sexual intercourse is designed to work best in a happy marriage and recommending waiting until marriage before experiencing sex.

This view is, of course, very controversial. You may agree with me. Or you may think I am from another planet, and I respect your right to feel that way. Here’s why I waited.

First is a moral reason. According to the perspective I represent, the biblical God clearly says to wait.[\[6\]](#) Some people think that God wants to make them miserable. Actually,

He loves us and wants our best. There are practical reasons for waiting.

Premarital sex can detract from a strong relationship and a fulfilling love life. Too often, it's merely a self-gratifying experience. After an intimate sexual encounter, one partner might be saying, "I love you" while the other is thinking, "I love it."

Very often premarital sex lacks total, permanent commitment. This can create insecurity. For instance, while the couple is unmarried, the nagging thought can persist, "If he or she has slept with me, whom else have they slept with?" After they marry, one might think, "If they were willing to break a standard with me before we married, will they with someone else after we marry?" Doubt can chip away at their relationship.

Premarital sex can also inhibit communication. Each might wonder, "How do I compare with my lover's other partners? Does he or she tell them how I perform in bed?" Each may become less open; communication can deteriorate and so can the relationship. Premarital sex can lessen people's chances to experience maximum oneness and pleasure. I'm not claiming that premarital sex eliminates your chances for great sex in marriage. But I am saying that it can introduce factors that can be difficult to overcome.

A recently married young woman told me her perspective after a lecture at Sydney University in Australia. She said, "I really like what you said about waiting. My fiancé and I had to make the decision and we decided to wait." (Each had been sexually active in other previous relationships.) She continued: "With all the other tensions, decisions and stress of engagement, sex would have been just another worry. Waiting 'till our marriage before we had sex was the best decision we ever made."

Wise words. I waited because God said to, because there were many practical advantages, and because none of the arguments I heard for not waiting were strong enough.{7}

The Vital Dimension

So far we've looked at "Why sex?", "How to have a most fulfilling love life," and "Why wait?". Consider now the vital dimension in any relationship.

Powerful emotional factors can make it difficult for teens to wait until marriage for sexual intercourse or to stop having sex. A longing to be close to someone or a yearning to express love can generate intense desires for physical intimacy. Many singles today want to wait but lack the inner strength or self esteem. They may fear losing love if they postpone sex.

Often sex brings emptiness rather than the wholeness people seek through it. As one TV producer told me, "Frankly, I think the sexual revolution has backfired in our faces. It's degrading to be treated like a piece of meat." The previous night her lover had justified his decision to sleep around by telling her, "There's plenty of me for everyone." What I suspect he meant was, "There's plenty of everyone for me." She felt betrayed and alone.

I explained to her and to her TV audience that sexuality also involves the spiritual. One wise spiritual teacher understood our loneliness and longings for love. He recognized human emotional needs for esteem, acceptance, and wholeness and offered a plan to meet them. His plan has helped people to become brand "new persons" inside.{8} He promised unconditional love to all who ask.{9} Once we know we're loved and accepted, we can have greater security to be vulnerable in relationships and new inner strength to make wise choices for safe living.{10}

This teacher said, "You will know the truth, and the truth

will make you free.”{11} Millions attest to the safety and security He can provide in relationships. His name, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth. Though I had been a skeptic, I placed my faith in Him personally my freshman year in college. Through a simple heart attitude, I said, “Jesus, I believe you died and rose again for me. I ask you to enter my life, forgive me, and give me the new life you promised.” He forgave all my flaws—and there were (and are) many of those. He said His own death and resurrection—once I accepted His pardon—erased my guilt.{12} That was great news!

Marriage with Jesus involved can be like triangle with God at the apex and the two spouses at the bottom corners. As each partner grows closer to God, they also grow closer to each other. Life doesn’t become perfect, but God’s friendship can bring a vital dimension to any relationship.

Parents and Kids

A nationwide survey of teens asked the question, “When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?” Forty-nine percent of teens responding said it was their parents. The next closest response was “Friends” (16 percent). Eleven percent said the media influenced their decisions about sex the most. Only 5 percent said it was their romantic partner.{13} Kids, lots of your peers think that it is important to consider how their parents feel about sex.

And teens feel that talking with their parents about sex can make important sexual decisions easier. In a subsequent national survey, teens overwhelmingly expressed that they could more easily postpone sexual activity and avoid getting pregnant if they could only talk about these matters more openly with their folks.{14}

But there’s a problem. Too many parents are unaware how important what they think about sex is to their teens. Parents often think that their teenagers’ friends are the strongest

influence on their teen's decisions about sex. Yet teens don't consider their friends as being nearly as influential as parents think they are.[{15}](#)

And mom, you are really, really important!

A major report based on two University of Minnesota studies involving national data found that teens having close relationships with their mothers are more likely than teens lacking close relationships with their mothers to delay first intercourse. The report authors note, "previous studies have shown that mothers tend to have a greater influence than fathers on teens' sexual decision-making."[{16}](#)

What can a parent do to help their teens develop positive, healthy sexual attitudes and behavior? Here are some ideas:

- Develop close, loving relationships with your kids from the time they are young.
- Model the types of behavior and attitudes you wish them to emulate.
- Listen to them and treat them with respect.
- Talk about sex, your own values, and why you hold them.
- Help your teen think through their life goals, including education, and how teenage sexual activity might affect their dreams.
- Discuss what types of media are appropriate for your son or daughter to consume.

Making sexual decisions can be hard for teens today. Parents and teens can help each other by becoming close friends and by communicating. It's not always easy, but the rewards can be significant.

Notes

1. Parts of this article are adapted from Rusty Wright, ["Dynamic Sex: Unlocking the Secret to Love,"](#) Every Student's Choice, 1996 and Rusty Wright, ["Safe Sex?"](#), Cross & Crescent

LXXXI:4, Winter 1994-95, pp. 19-21.

2. Kathleen Kelleher, "Entertaining Fantasies? Don't Worry, Everyone's Doing It," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1995, E1. She cites Harold Leitenberg of the University of Vermont and Kris Henning, "now at the University of South Carolina Medical School".

3. Proverbs 5:15-19 NASB.

4. Genesis 2:24 NASB.

5. Emily Dale, Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, 1975.

6. 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

7. For a summary of arguments for premarital sex, with responses, see Wright, "Dynamic Sex: Unlocking the Secret to Love," op. cit.

8. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

9. John 3:16; 13:34-35; 17:20, 23, 26; 1 John 4:7-21, 5:14-15.

10. Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:16-24; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.

11. John 8:32 NASB.

12. Luke 24:44-47; Colossians 2:12-14.

13. "Faithful Nation: What American Adults and Teens Think About Faith, Morals, Religion, and Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, September 2001, p. 5;

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/pdf/keeping.pdf>.

14. "With One Voice 2002: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, December 2002, pp. 2, 26, 27;

http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/pdf/W0V2002_fulltext.pdf.

15. Ibid., pp. 2, 22-23.

16. "Teens' Closeness With Their Mothers Linked to Delay in Initiation of Sexual Activity, Study Says," Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report, September 5, 2002,

http://www.kaisernetwork.org/daily_reports/print_report.cfm?DR_ID=13275&dr_cat=2. The words quoted are those of the Kaiser

Report summary of what the University of Minnesota research authors communicated.

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