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Are abstinence and purity the same thing?

“Abstinence” has become the battle cry of the faith-based approach to sex—and secular programs have started to include abstinence as an “option” as part of a larger safer-sex agenda. But what is abstinence, exactly? And how does abstinence fit into God’s plan for sex?

Abstinence simply means avoiding certain things. You can choose to abstain from specific foods or activities or events. When it comes to sexual education, proponents of the abstinence message want young people to say no to sex.

Surprisingly, Christians aren’t the only ones pushing you to abstain. Members of the Harvard student group True Love Revolution urge their classmates to say no to sex based on philosophical, biological, and relational arguments.⁴ The federal government pumps millions of dollars into abstinence-only programs every year.⁵ Even Planned Parenthood promotes abstinence as a behavior that effectively prevents pregnancy and STDs.⁶

The world recognizes that there are strong reasons to abstain from sex, but God doesn’t just call us to abstinence. He calls us to purity. So, then, what is purity?

That’s a question I’ve been asking students for years. Sadly, I’ve never found anyone who can define purity. Can you believe that? Not one person. Not even pastors. Purity is one of the most beautiful concepts in the Bible, and no one seems to know what it means.

I want you to understand purity, because it’s not what you think. Understanding purity will revolutionize how you think about sex.

Purity means—are you ready for this?—“to live according to original design.”

In any area of your life, if you are living the way God designed you to live, you are pure. If you are not living the way God designed you to live, you are impure.

Abstinence is a habit, or even a rule. Basically: Don’t have sex!

Purity, though, is a virtue. It is not simply the choice to avoid sex. It is a

Purity is a commitment to live according to God’s design.



commitment to live according to God’s design. Purity means saying no to sex, but only so that you are able to experience sex within the loving marital relationship that God created.

Q2 Why are God and the Bible so negative about sex?

As our culture increasingly promotes sex without boundaries, God’s view of sex seems more and more radical. Since the culture’s message is progressively pro-sex, many people interpret God’s message about sexuality to be anti-sex. *Nothing could be further from the truth.*

When it comes to God’s view of sex, many people, including Christians, have mistaken God’s serious approach to the subject to be negativity toward the subject. God does take sex very seriously. But the picture He gives us of sexuality is more intense, vibrant, and well . . . sexy . . . than the view taught by the culture. In fact, sticking to God’s plan for sexuality leads to sex that is far more fulfilling than the sexual experiences supported by the world.

How do we know that God is pro-sex? Because of the dynamic picture of sex He paints in His Word.

In Proverbs, the writer speaks about a physical encounter that is satisfying and intoxicating (Proverbs 5:19). There's no anti-sex message here! But there's more.

The Song of Solomon is full of steamy descriptions of love scenes between a man and a woman. The book tells the story of two lovers totally immersed in satisfying each other. The love-making poetry is vivid and exciting, and God included it in His holy Word.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul recommends sex between married couples often. The clear message is that God created sex for our enjoyment and His glory.

In fact, *there's not a single verse in the Bible that calls sex "sinful" or "dirty."* The verses that are often quoted to paint sex in a negative light aren't about sex at all. They are about the misuse of sex outside of God's design.

God desires us to experience sex at its best.



God designed sex as a gift to be shared between a husband and wife. As the original designer, God created this sexual experience to be the most exciting and satisfying. God's message about sex isn't, "Don't do it because it is sinful or wrong." His message is, "Wait—because sex according to this design is so wonderful that it's worth protecting."

For Christians struggling to understand God's plan for sex, the real question isn't, "Why is God so negative about sex?" but rather, "Is God really good?"

God's plan for sex is clearly outlined in the Scriptures. He wants us to enjoy sex, but He asks us to wait until we are married. The world teaches that God's request to wait is proof that He

wants to deny what's good for us. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Jeremiah 29:11 makes this promise, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Psalm 31:19 says, “How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you.”

God's desire is to give us good things. The boundaries He places on sex are for our protection, not our deprivation. The world may see limits on sexuality as negative, but the opposite is true. God isn't against sex. He's so for it that He wants every man and woman to experience sex according to His original design.

If we choose to believe God when He promises He has good things in store for us, we can freely embrace His plan for sex knowing He desires us to experience sex at its best.

Q3 Why did God even create sex?

The Bible gives us three specific reasons for sex. The first one might seem familiar, but keep reading. God's plan for sex isn't as boring as you might think.

#1: PROCREATION

You probably already know about the first reason for why God created sex. It's called procreation—that is, making babies.

In Genesis 1:28 God revealed this purpose for sex to Adam and Eve when He said, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

God has given us a very God-like ability to create life through

the act of sex. The beginning of this verse tells us that God intended the results of sex to be a blessing. When children are born out of a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, the blessing is tremendous!

Of course it is possible to make babies outside of marriage. But creating life is one of the most amazing things you will ever do. It deserves to be celebrated without the shame and distractions of bad timing, within the bounds of a God-honoring marriage.

#2: UNITY

As humans, we are hardwired with a deep desire for intimacy. We long to connect with other humans and with God. God created this desire within us. Part of His design for sex includes meeting that need for personal connection.

Sex is scientifically proven to create a bond between two people, but the deepest levels of connection and intimacy can only be achieved by pursuing God's plan for sex.

God wants sex to be fun!



Genesis 2:24 says, "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one" (NLT).

This passage talks about the bond between a husband and wife becoming so strong that they become "united into one." In other words, they are so joined together that you cannot pull them apart.

The writer of Genesis knew intuitively what science has recently confirmed. Researchers have discovered a hormone called oxytocin, or the "cuddle hormone."⁷ Oxytocin is a chemical your brain releases during sex and the activity leading up to it. When this chemical is released, it produces feelings of caring, trust, and deep affection. The same chemical is released when a mom breast-feeds her new baby. The purpose is to create a deep human bond or attachment.

Every time you have sex with another person, your body has a chemical reaction that tells it to “cleave.” God created the means to meet your desire for intimacy at a biological level—but there’s a catch. Research has proven that God’s design for intimacy is at its best between a husband and wife with no other sexual partners.

A University of Chicago survey found that monogamous married couples register the highest levels of sexual satisfaction. According to the survey, 87 percent of all monogamous married couples report that they are “extremely” or “very” physically satisfied by their sexual relationship and 85 percent that they are “extremely” or “very” emotionally satisfied.⁸ In other words, the oxytocin is flowing freely in the brains of many married couples! Remarkably, those who are least satisfied (both physically and emotionally) are those singles and marrieds who have multiple partners.

A review of longitudinal research by the National Center for Health Statistics and the University of Maryland found that women who save sex for marriage face a considerably lower risk of divorce than those who are sexually active prior to marriage.⁹ When we follow God’s design for sex, we are able to form a bond with our spouse that is difficult to break (remember how Genesis said that was when “two are united into one?”).

When we wait until marriage to have sex, we establish a level of intimacy that is unequaled.

#3: RECREATION

We’ve already established that God is pro-sex and that He desires good things for you. Here’s proof: One of the reasons God created sex was for our enjoyment. That’s right! *God wants sex to be fun!*

We see this clearly in Proverbs 5:18–19: “Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts satisfy you

always. May you always be captivated by her love” (NLT). Steamy, right? This passage talks about a husband being satisfied by his wife’s body. The original text reads more like, “May you be intoxicated by her sex.” God intended sex to be exciting and enjoyable.

It is true that sex outside of marriage can be fun, but it cannot reach the level of enjoyment and pleasure that we find when we stick to God’s plan for sex.

God created sex for our benefit and His glory.

Once again, research proves that



God’s design leads to the best sex. Most major studies show a strong correlation between monogamous marriage and sexual satisfaction. Those same studies indicate that women who engage in early sexual activity and those who have had multiple partners are less satisfied with their sex lives than women who entered marriage with little or no sexual experience. *USA Today* called this research “the revenge of the church ladies.”¹⁰

The world teaches that sex without limits is the most fun, but research has proven what God’s Word already teaches. God wants us to enjoy sex. When we stick to His plan for our sexuality we find a level of enjoyment and pleasure that cannot be matched.

So why did God create sex? Clearly, He did it for our benefit and His glory. When sex is enjoyed according to God’s plan, the result is amazing! When we move outside of the boundaries God has established for our sex lives, pleasure is weakened, intimacy is cheapened, and the blessings God intended as the results of our sexual encounters can spoil.

QA 4 How do you define “love”?

Most young people, both girls and boys, claim that being in love is the reason for beginning sexual activity. Clearly, love is a powerful motivator of behavior, and yet most of us struggle to define what love is.

Love is perhaps the most talked about, written about, and sung about subject in all of history. From movies, to music, to poetry, everyone seems to offer a different definition for love.

- “Love means never having to say you’re sorry”—from the movie *Love Story*.
- “Love is a verb”—lyrics by dc Talk.
- “Love is passion, obsession, someone you can’t live without”—from the movie *Meet Joe Black*.
- “Love is friendship on fire”—from the movie *The Perfect Man*.

Most definitions of love make for catchy song lyrics or romantic movie scripts, but do they hold up in the real world? When applied to our relationships and sexual experiences, do we even know what love really is?

Love is one of the most intricate and powerful concepts in the world, and yet I have found that very few people seem to understand it. Defining love is a critical step toward understanding God’s purpose and design for sex. After all, if you cannot define love, how do you know if you *are* in love? If you cannot define love, how can you know if you are *being* loved? If you cannot define love, how do you know if you *have* a loving, intimate relationship? If you cannot define love, how can you *express* love through sex? You can’t.

In order to fully understand what love is, let’s take a look at what it isn’t.

LOVE ISN’T A FEELING.

When you were little, your mother could command you to eat your vegetables (that’s an action), but she couldn’t command you to like them (that’s a feeling). When I ask people to define love for me, most of them tell me it’s a feeling. But love cannot be a feeling because you cannot command an emotion. You can only command an action or a decision.

Who can command us to love? God can and does!

John 13:34 says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

Ephesians 5:25 states, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Clearly, love is more than a feeling. It is a series of choices. When we choose to love, our emotions can be transformed, but love is expressed by acts of the will.

LOVE ISN’T SEX.

Our culture teaches that “love” and “sex” are interchangeable words, and that sex is a measuring tool to gauge whether or not you are in love. It further teaches that sex is a necessary component for a loving relationship. But God’s Word gives us a definition of love that has nothing to do with sex. Unmistakably, sex and love are *not* the same.

What is it about sex and love that makes them so easy to mix up? Remember in the answer to question 3,

Sex and love are *not* the same.

I stated that during sexual activity the brain releases oxytocin, a “cuddle hormone” that produces feelings of caring, trust, and deep affection. That “feeling,” combined with pop-culture’s attempt to sell sex and love as one package, can lead many to think that sex

equals love. Since we already know that love isn't a feeling and we can determine that the world's definition of love is inconsistent at best, undeniably sex is *not* love.

Since God designed sex to bond us to each other, when we choose to engage in sex outside of marriage it turns relationships upside down and confuses emotions to the point where a person can misinterpret sex for love. When we follow God's plan, the love between a man and woman is already established *before* sex enters the equation.

Choosing to gratify your immediate needs now by ignoring God's plan for sex is not an expression of love. True love will wait until marriage in order to protect you and your partner from the potential dangers of extramarital sex, and it will provide for a future where sex is at its best.

GOD'S DEFINITION OF LOVE

God's Word offers a clear definition of love. Stick with me here as we trace the word "love" through several passages to find a definition with the power to radically impact how we live.

In Matthew 22:39 Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

How are we to love others? The way we love ourselves. This passage isn't talking about a narcissistic self-love. We love ourselves by consistently making sure our needs are met. Thus, true love will desire to meet the needs of the one being loved.

Ephesians 5:28–29 (ESV) offers another clue toward God's definition of love. It says, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church."

How do we specifically love ourselves? By nourishing and cherishing. If I love myself in a biblical way, then I will nourish myself to maturity physically, spiritually, mentally, and relationally.

If I truly love myself, I will cherish or protect myself from anything that will hinder that nurturing process.

God’s Word provides the simplest definition of love—to protect and provide. True love always, without exception, seeks the best interest of the loved one. Its motivation is always to “protect and provide.”

How does sex fit into God’s definition of love? When sex is confined to marriage, it is a beautiful way to provide for the physical and emotional needs of your partner. But outside of marriage, sex opens you and your partner up to harm. When you choose to engage in sex outside of marriage, you fail to

True love’s motivation is always to “protect and provide.”



protect your partner (and yourself) from the potential for devastating consequences like unplanned pregnancy, STDs, guilt, heartbreak, and hindered goals.

When we operate outside of God’s design, the lines between love and sex get blurred. Don’t confuse warm feelings for love. And don’t buy the lie that sex is the best way to express your love for someone you care for. God designed sex for marriage for our own protection. When the happiness, security, spiritual growth, and health of another person is as important to you as your own—so much so that you desire to protect him or her from the potential harm that sex outside of marriage can bring—then you know that you’ve found love.

Q5 What does the Bible mean when it says, “God is love”?

Our ability to fully understand and embrace God’s plan for sex hinges entirely on our understanding of who He is.

First John 4:16 describes God this way: “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. *God is love*. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (emphasis added).

First John 4:8 tells us: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because *God is love*” (emphasis added).

The statement “God is love” doesn’t mean that God is a vague, warm, fuzzy feeling. Remember, we’ve already established that love isn’t a feeling. So, what does God’s love really look like?

In John 15:12–13 Jesus said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

God is the ultimate example of what love is and how love behaves. Jesus demonstrated this by living a life of love and compassion here on earth. His death on the cross gives us a picture of God’s love in action. His dramatic love for us is the standard by which He asks us to love others.

God doesn’t just say that He loves us. He doesn’t send us a cosmic Valentine from heaven and fail to put His love into action. He demonstrates His love for us over and over and over.

You might say, “Wait a minute! If God loves me so much why does He want to deprive me of good things, like sex?”

Let’s go back to the definition of love we discussed in the answer to the last question. Love means to protect and provide. God’s commands aren’t meant to deprive or restrict us, rather they

are meant to provide for our good and protect our future.

There are several commandments throughout the Bible where God asks us to say no to specific choices and behaviors. Though these commandments may appear negative at first glance, they are really a profound expression of God’s love. In fact, every time God says, “Thou shalt not,” He is proving His love by protecting and providing for us.

Deuteronomy 10:13 says, “Observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for *your own good*” (emphasis added).

God’s commands are meant to provide for our good and protect our future.

Why does God give us commandments? For our own good! Even when God’s ways feel frustrating or restrictive, we can know that He loves us and His directives were designed to protect and provide for us.

God’s commandments regarding sex are the perfect example of this principle.

In 1 Corinthians 6:18 we read, “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.”

God clearly asks us to avoid sexual immorality. Why? He gives us the answer in the same passage in which He asks us to wait.

“Whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.” Having sex outside of God’s design will literally affect your body physically. When you operate outside of God’s plan for sex, your body can suffer serious consequences. Here’s some evidence:

- Approximately one in four sexually active young adults ages 15 to 24 contracts an STD each year.¹¹
- In 2004, the CDC estimated that more than 18,000 young people, ages thirteen to twenty-four, were living with

HIV/AIDS (in the thirty-five areas with confidential name-based HIV reporting); almost 5,000 were diagnosed in 2004 alone, representing 3 percent of all people diagnosed that year.¹²

- In 2009, a total of 409,840 infants were born to fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds.¹³ Well over half of those pregnancies were unintended.¹⁴

Almost all of these health risks are eliminated when two people wait for marriage to experience sex. Even the challenges associated with unplanned pregnancy are lessened when a baby is conceived in the context of a loving, committed marital relationship.

Clearly, God doesn't ask us to wait for sex in order to spoil our fun or restrict us unnecessarily. His commandments regarding sex are evidence of His love for us as He seeks to protect and provide for our good.

Because "God is love" He seeks our well-being at every turn. When we understand the Bible in this light, we are free to embrace His commandments knowing they are written by a loving God, who knows what's best for us.

Q **6** What is a person's most powerful sex organ?

A Your most powerful sex organ isn't covered by your swimsuit. The key to maximum sex isn't found between your legs. It's between your ears. When it comes to sex, your brain is where the real magic happens.

Here's a crash course in the science of your brain. Though weighing only three pounds, your brain contains 10 billion neurons,

100 billion support cells, and 100 trillion connectors that connect those cells and neurons.¹⁵ Every second one million new connectors are created.¹⁶ Your brain is the most intricate mass in the universe.

Within that intricate mass of cells and connectors, the most exciting elements of sex are experienced. You've heard the word "orgasm," right? It describes an intense feeling of pleasure during sex. Researchers have discovered that during an orgasm the brain lights up after receiving a massive dose of feel-good chemicals. During sex, the brain sends messages through the body commanding physical function. Without nerves sending impulses back to the spinal cord, an orgasm wouldn't be possible. When it comes to responding to sexual experiences, clearly the brain is calling the shots.

Almost two-thirds of sexually active students wish they had waited.



But not all brains are equipped for maximum sex. Remember those hundred trillion connectors? When you are born, those connectors are bare. Starting in your teenage years, insulation called "myelin" forms around those connectors. Myelin continues to be formed well into your twenties. This "myelin shaft" acts just like insulation on an electrical cord. It allows the electrical impulses being sent by your brain to travel down the nerve faster and more efficiently.¹⁷ Some of the nerves that become coated during adolescence connect areas of the brain that regulate emotion, judgment, and impulse control. In other words, your brain doesn't become hardwired to make fast, wise choices about sex until you are in your twenties.

Neuroscientists have discovered that adolescent brains are still maturing in other areas as well. One of the last parts of our brains to mature is the system in charge of making sound judgments and

calming unruly emotions. It's called "the prefrontal cortex."¹⁸

When we are born, we operate out of the limbic system, which is found in the back, inner part of our brain. The limbic system is basically where we find raw emotion. When we function from our limbic system, we are unable to make choices based on right or wrong; we can decide only based on how we feel.

Later in life, our control center for decision making moves from the limbic system to the prefrontal cortex—which is found in the front of the brain. From the prefrontal cortex we are able to make moral choices. The limbic system deals with urges and appetites. Only the prefrontal cortex is able to make consistent choices based on future consequences. Think of it this way: if the limbic system is a hungry lion, the prefrontal cortex is a well-trained lion tamer. The lion just wants to eat and doesn't think about what may happen if he homes in on the wrong target for lunch. The lion tamer uses rewards and consequences to tame the lion's animalistic appetites.

Scientifically speaking, young people are lions. During the teen years, the prefrontal cortex is practically asleep at the wheel and the limbic system is in hyperdrive. In fact, the switch from functioning from the limbic system to functioning from the prefrontal cortex isn't normally completed until the midtwenties. Biologically speaking, the average teenager's prefrontal cortex isn't quite ready to take on the role of brain CEO or "boss,"¹⁹ but young people in this stage of development are making decisions about sex that will have consequences for the rest of their lives.

A recent survey by the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* found that more than 60 percent of seventeen- to eighteen-year-olds have had sex.²⁰ Yet their brains are not fully equipped to make choices based on future consequences. Maybe that's why almost two-thirds of sexually active students wish they had waited.²¹