

“Sex and the Bible”
Deuteronomy 22:13-22, 23:17-18
September 13, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to our series in the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses is instructing God’s people as to how they are to live in the land.

We’re going through Deuteronomy in its entirety, without skipping portions. And in the Book of Deuteronomy God addresses all kinds of aspects of life. And some of them are uncomfortable.

So, before we even read our text, let me give you two warnings.

First, some of you are going to hear the text, and probably be alarmed, and have a whole lot of pressing questions. That’s ok. Don’t panic. We’re going to get into all of that.

But in order to do that, we’re going to have to briefly discuss some biological topics that can be uncomfortable in this kind of setting. But they’ll help us better understand this text.

So, an uncomfortable morning. But I think that it will lead us, in the end, not away from the God who gave us this text, but towards him.

With that said, let’s turn now to our passage: Deuteronomy 22:13-22 and 23:17-18.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{22:13} “If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then hates her ¹⁴ and accuses her of misconduct and brings a bad name upon her, saying, ‘I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity,’ ¹⁵ then the father of the young woman and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of her virginity to the elders of the city in the gate. ¹⁶ And the father of the young woman shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man to marry, and he hates her; ¹⁷ and behold, he has accused her of misconduct, saying, “I did not find in your daughter evidence of virginity.” And yet this is the evidence of my daughter's virginity.’ And they shall spread the cloak before the elders of the city. ¹⁸ Then the elders of that city shall take the man and whip him, ¹⁹ and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name upon a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife. He may not divorce her all his days. ²⁰ But if the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, ²¹ then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

²² “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.”

And then from chapter 23:

¹⁷ “None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute. ¹⁸ You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of Yahweh your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to Yahweh your God.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, this morning we come to a challenging passage of your Word.
And so we ask you to give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand your word to us,
For our good, and for your glory.
We ask it in Jesus’s name, Amen.

Introduction

So ... most modern people, when they hear a text like this ... they understandably have a lot of questions:

- Is this law calling for the misogynistic abuse of women?
- Is it calling for a sexual double-standard?
- Is it establishing a system where a woman accused by a man is guilty until proven innocent?
- Is it reinforcing a male-dominated system stacked against women?
- Why is it calling for the death penalty in cases of adultery?
- Why is it so restrictive?
- Is God against sex?
- What kind of God would give us a passage like this?

All good questions. I’m going to try to address them all.

And in the end, I think we’ll see a positive vision for human sexuality. What I think we’ll see is that human sexuality is designed by God to be a powerful realm of complete self-giving and faithfulness, exclusive to marriage, that points to our relationship with God.

Let me say that again: Human sexuality is designed by God to be a powerful realm of complete self-giving and faithfulness, exclusive to marriage, that points to our relationship with God.

That's where we're going. But to get there, we need to start with some of those difficult questions I mentioned a moment ago.

The Text & Our Initial Questions

So first, what's going on in our text – and specifically, what's going on in verses 13-21?

The situation is one where, at some point after a marriage has been consummated, the husband makes the claim that his wife had been unfaithful to him before their wedding night.

Now, I think there's a popular and superficial understanding of what's going on in this text. And that popular critical version goes something like this:

“Here we see that the Bible says that if a man accuses his wife of not being a virgin on their wedding night, she would have to prove her innocence. The only way to do that would be to produce the bedsheet from the wedding night, which might have a spot of blood from when she lost her virginity. But if she didn't have the sheet, or if she didn't bleed when she lost her virginity (which is not uncommon), then the husband could have her executed on the spot. So the Bible affirms executing women for premarital sex – though not men – in a rigged justice system meant to serve the interests of men, and to sexually oppress women.”

That's how this passage is often understood. Maybe that's how you heard when I read it a moment ago.

But I want to argue that that reading is profoundly mistaken and inaccurate.

And to show that, let's get into some more detailed questions.

First, is this a misogynistic law that sets a double-standard against women, and that stacks the judicial system against them?

And actually, when we look at the details, we see that this is strikingly not the case.

First of all, we need to see the intent of this law. Verses 13-21 are set up in a format where there is a primary case, and then a secondary case. And the primary case is the author's main focus [Block, 521]. In this passage, the primary case is the one where a woman is being slandered by her husband, in which case the husband would be harshly penalized: publicly exposed as a liar, whipped, fined twice the dowry he received from his wife's family, and then losing the ability to divorce his wife in the future. It's those protections for a falsely accused wife that are the main point of this passage – the primary case in the author's mind. The main goal was to protect women against slander and false accusation from their husband. [Block, 530]

But, understandably, most modern people remain more concerned about the secondary case, in verses 20 and 21.

We perhaps point out how this system was run by men and we can think of the ways that that could skew things against a woman.

But actually, the law here is again designed to protect women in a culture dominated by men.

For one thing, the woman is not left on her own, but her parents – including her father – were required to be involved in her defense – providing a legal advocate for her through her father, who, as an older man, would have had at least an equal standing with her accuser, if not stronger. [Wright, *God's People*, 216]

Second, while the elders of the husband's city might carry out the trial described here, we're told in verse 21 that it's the men of her city who would carry out any sentence. [Block, 524] This provides a second level of legal protection for her, presumably requiring the men of her city (who would know her and her family) to sign off on verdict of the husband's city before any sentence was carried out.

Third, verse 22 make it clear that penalties for men and women are to be equal in cases of adultery, and both are to be held responsible. [Wright *Deuteronomy*, 224]

In all these ways, this passage actually is filled with steps to protect vulnerable women from false accusation, in a male-dominated society.

That might address some concerns. But others still remain for many of us.

Because we still want to ask: Is this law establishing a system where a woman accused by her husband is guilty until proven innocent?

And here digging deeper into this text provides some very helpful clarity – even if it requires us to briefly consider some biological components.

Because it seems that what's being requested here as evidence is actually much easier to obtain than the wedding-night bed sheet that some assume is in view.

Gordon Wenham, a celebrated evangelical scholar who did his PhD dissertation on Deuteronomy has a long article that addresses this passage, that's cited in multiple commentaries I consulted this week [Millar, 137; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 245-246; Wright, *God's People*, 214-215].

Wenham's argument, which I found persuasive, leads to the conclusion that the term translated "virgin" here actually primarily means a young woman who is of marriageable age – a young woman who is menstruating. And what's translated in the ESV as "evidence of virginity" is actually primarily evidence of menstruation. And the item translated here as "proof of virginity" is primarily, again, "proof of menstruation."

And with that adjustment to the translation, a much clearer picture emerges of what's going on here.

The situation, Wenham argues, is one where a husband marries his new wife, and he says that after they have been married a month or so, she hasn't had her period.

Now, it's possible she simply got pregnant in the first month of their marriage. But this man accuses her instead of having been unfaithful to him during their betrothal period – claiming that she was pregnant by another man, before they ever got married. In response, this passage is saying that her parents could bring her menstrual cloths from her last period, which she had in their home, in the weeks before the marriage, as a proof that she was not pregnant before the wedding day. [Wenham, 331-336; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 245-246; Wright, *God's People*, 214-215]

And so, rather than a bedsheet that may or may not get blood on it, and rather than a focus on virginity as a whole, the main focus of this law is adultery during betrothal, that led to pregnancy. And the proof they're looking for is evidence of her period in the weeks before the wedding.

Now, such evidence could be faked. But as Wenham points out, the general patter of the Law of Moses is to give a woman the benefit of the doubt whenever she's accused of sexual sin. And this fits with that. [Wenham, 335]

In addition, Robert Alter points out that from early on, rabbis noted that according to Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15, capital punishment was never to be carried out unless the crime was attested to by two or more witnesses. And they argued that that requirement had to be assumed in this law as well. And so, the capital punishment described here would require both a lack of proof of innocence, and also two or more witnesses who observed her in the act of committing adultery during her betrothal. Under such conditions, execution would be quite rare. [Alter, 989]

This brings us to another important clarification: That this text is addressing unfaithfulness during a committed betrothal – not premarital sex or loss of virginity in general.

In the Bible premarital sex is a sin – and we'll say more about why that is in a few minutes. But it was not a capital crime. Exodus 22 makes that clear.

Adultery was a capital crime. And unfaithfulness during betrothal was considered adultery.

This is because betrothal in the ancient world was not like engagement today. Betrothal included the full commitment of marriage. It was sort of like taking the vows, but not yet consummating the marriage. Breaking a betrothal basically required a divorce. And unfaithfulness during betrothal was seen as the same thing as adultery. And that's what's in view here.¹

So that provides some clarity. But it still leaves us to ask why the Bible would apply the death penalty in cases of adultery.

And there's a few things we need to consider in answering that question.

¹ This again fits with Wenham's understanding of this text, because it's focused on unfaithfulness in recent months, not overall virginity. [Wenham, 332; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 241]

One is that some of the details in this text [Wenham, 333] along with concepts found elsewhere in the Law of Moses [e.g.: Numbers 35:31 with Exodus 21:29-30], make it clear that in practice, with the exception of premeditated murder, capital crimes could receive much lighter sentences than death. [Copan, 95-96] And that could be just and right. We see proof of this in the Gospel of Matthew. When Joseph thinks that Mary has been unfaithful to him during their betrothal, he doesn't seek the death penalty or anything like it, but Matthew says that "Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." Often, such sentences, in practice, were much less severe than the maximum sentence described here – and the Bible itself makes that allowance.

Along with that, in the life of the Church, the Apostle Paul takes laws concerning execution in Israel and re-applies them to acts of excommunication in the Church today. [1 Corinthians 5:13]

That said ... we may still want to know: Why does God describe such sins as deserving such harsh penalties in his law? Even if these penalties were rarely applied, why does God take sexual sin so seriously?

The answer, is that human sexuality is designed by God to be a powerful realm of complete self-giving and faithfulness, exclusive to marriage, that points to our relationship with God.

Let's take that claim one piece at a time.

Human Sexuality Is Designed by God

To start, human sexuality is designed by God.

God made humanity. And he made us male and female. And he called us to be fruitful and multiply.

God made human sexuality.

Which means that human sexuality is good. God made it good. And God declared it to be good. [Genesis 1:31]

Yes, human beings have twisted our sexuality in sinful ways, but that doesn't mean that sex itself is bad. God made sex. And so, it is good.

But also, because God made sex, it means that we should use it according to how he designed it to be used.

When God's Word – when the Bible – gives direction about human sexuality, it's not imposing some outside set of restrictions. Rather, the God who made human sexuality is telling us how it was meant to be used when he designed it.

And he tells us is that he designed human sexuality to be a powerful realm of complete self-giving and faithfulness, exclusive to marriage, that points to our relationship with him.

God Designed Sex to Be Powerful

First, God designed sex to be powerful.

Sexuality has a powerful impact on human beings. Used rightly it can be a powerful force for good. But used wrongly it can be a powerful force for destruction. And it's for that reason that it must be channeled properly.

And we recognize these sorts of dynamics in many other areas of life.

For example: Electricity is good. God made it. And we can make wonderful use of it. It's by using electricity properly that we have lights here this morning, and my voice is being amplified, and the organ works, and people are able to watch on the livestream. Electricity is good when it's properly channeled. We are pro-electricity here.

But being pro-electricity doesn't mean that we think electricity should be let loose, without restrictions, to go wherever its natural impulses take it. Because electricity is also incredibly powerful. It would be wrong to look at the power lines running to our building and say: "You know, if we were really pro-electricity, then we would release the electricity from the tight confines of those insulated wires, and we'd let it run free in the streets." That wouldn't release the goodness of electricity. Instead, by refusing to channel it properly, the very real power of electricity would turn from a force of great good to a force of great destruction.

And the Bible tells us that human sexuality is similar. The Bible puts firm and narrow restrictions on human sexual expression and union. But it doesn't do that because it thinks that human sexuality is bad. It does it because it knows that human sexuality is powerful. Human sexuality, improperly used, has led to heartbreak, to broken families, to destroyed relationships, personal trauma, rage, jealousy, murder, war, and more. And all of that is not because human sexuality is bad. It's because it is powerful, and so when it's misused, real damage is done.

God designed sex to be powerful.

God Designed Sex to Be a Complete and Personal Self-Giving

Second, God designed sex to be a complete and personal self-giving.

Our sexuality cannot be fragmented off or separated from the rest of us, but it's deeply intertwined with us as whole persons.

This is something the unbelieving world has tried to deny for millennia, both in the modern secular world and in the ancient pagan world. Both seek to divide and fracture individual people into separate components of who they are, and to downplay or deny our wholistic unity. They try to treat sex as a commodity – whether it's two people exchanging sexual fulfillment with each other

in a meaningless hookup, or whether sex is actually bought and sold as verses 17 and 18 of chapter 23 describe. In both cases the assumption is that you and someone else can separate your sexuality from the rest of yourselves, with no real ramifications for your hearts, your minds, your souls, or your relationships with other people.

But that approach denies our fundamental unity as human beings, and the basic nature of human sexuality.

As one preacher puts, when you pursue someone sexually outside of marriage, then what you're saying to them is: "I want to fully receive your body. But I don't want to fully receive your heart, or your mind, or your social realities, or your financial realities. I'd like to take this one part of you, and sever it from the rest of you, so that I can receive this part of you completely, but keep the rest of you at more of a distance." And at the same time, it's also to say, "I'll fully give you my body, but not my heart, not my mind, not my social life, not my finances – those things I'll separate and keep for myself, apart from you." [Keller, 223]²

Even when two people agree to such an arrangement, there is something fundamentally inhuman about that – something that cuts contrary to the nature of human sexuality itself.

And so, once again, the Bible doesn't have a negative view of human sexuality. Rather, it has a high view of human beings as wholistic persons, and it rejects a sexual ethic that would seek to divide people up into their component parts and dimensions. [Lewis, *Mere*, 97]

God designed sex to be a complete and personal self-giving.

God Designed Sex to Be a Promise of Faithfulness

Finally, God designed sex to be a promise of faithfulness.

What we do with our bodies communicates something.

We look people in the eye to acknowledge them. We smile to indicate we're glad to see them. We hold out our hand for a handshake, or we put out our arms for a hug, and all of that communicates something. And often those physical communications are more powerful than verbal ones. When another person cries, giving them a hug can sometimes communicate our care for them even more powerfully than our words can, in that moment.

Now, words are important. That's why the false accusations of a husband against his wife are dealt with so harshly in verses 18 and 19. Misusing words can do powerful damage.

But actions speak too. And sometimes they speak even louder. We see that especially when they contradict our words.

² This idea is implied in this citation from Keller, but I'm pretty sure I've heard him make this point in the form I have used here, but I could not find a proper citation for it.

If someone walks into a room and you say “Good to see you.” with your words, but physically you grimace while you say it, then your physical communication will speak much louder than your verbal communication. Or when someone tells you about something bad that happened to them and you say “I’m so sorry to hear that” but you have a big smile on your face ... then they’ll hear the smile louder than your words.

Our bodies communicate, and their communication is often weightier than the words we speak.

The same can be true in the realm of human sexuality.

You can say, with your words, to one another, that it doesn’t mean anything. But sex, as a physical act, was designed to communicate a promise of faithfulness. And it speaks those words louder than any agreement we verbalize beforehand or after.

As a character puts it in one story: “Don’t you know that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not.” [Vanilla Sky³]

Now, to be clear here: I’m not saying that if two people have been united sexually, then “in God’s eyes” they’re already married. That’s not what I’m saying.

What I am saying is that all sexual union and expression outside of marriage communicates a lie. Even as two adults completely consent to it, they’re consenting to lie: to lie to the other person’s body, and to their own body.

Because their bodies are communicating a promise of faithfulness, which their hearts and minds have no intention of keeping.

And God designed human sexuality to be a powerful realm of complete self-giving and faithfulness.

God Designed Sex to Be Exclusive to Marriage

Which is why, the Bible tells us, God designed sex to be exclusive to marriage.

Marriage, and the life-long commitment of marriage is the only relationship that can truly handle the power, the personal self-giving, and the promises of human sexuality, without resulting in damage and dishonesty.

That’s why God gives marriage to humanity as a gift, and why he insists that sexual union and expression be restricted to that relationship.

It’s also why adultery is such a painful and damaging sin. Because it breaks the promise between husband and wife in a powerful way. It is a deep and intimate betrayal.

³ I haven’t actually seen this movie. So I really can’t vouch for any other aspect of its content besides this quote.

And so the Bible takes the sin of adultery seriously.

But that's not the only reason it takes it so seriously.

Human Sexuality Is Designed to Point to Our Relationship with God

Adultery is also taken seriously because the Bible tells us that marriage – including the sexual union within marriage – was designed by God to point to our relationship with him.

The Bible tells us that every aspect of creation in some way speaks of God. [Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-20; Stimpson, 14-15]

And the Bible then goes on to specify that marriage, in its various components especially points to our relationship with God.

Repeatedly in the Bible, God's love for his people – for the Church – is described in terms of the love of a Bridegroom for his bride. We see this in the book of Ephesians. But it's also repeated throughout the Bible – especially in the Old Testament. God is a bridegroom, his people are his bride. God loves, and cares for, and draws close to his bride. And the prophets are not shy to use marital language to describe that union [e.g.: Ezekiel 16:8].

And God designed it that way. From the very beginning, God made marriage and designed it to be a metaphor for how he relates to his people.

The Penalties of This Text Should Point Us to the Gospel

But ... the Bible is also clear that it's not just the glories of marriage that should point us to our relationship with God.

It's also the brokenness of many marriages that should point us to our relationship with God.

Because what we also see in the Bible is that our sin against God, our idolatrous devotion to other things, our spiritual unfaithfulness, is overtly described in the Bible as an act of spiritual adultery [e.g.: Ezekiel 16:15].

Yes, laws about adultery in the Bible are about God's design for marriage and human sexuality, and they need to be applied to that area of life.

But God's laws about adultery, and the consequences of adultery, are also meant to point us to our spiritual adultery against him, our unfaithfulness to him ... and its consequences for all of us.

We have all sinned. We have all betrayed God. We have all committed spiritual adultery against him.

And our text reminds us that our spiritual adultery both deserves and results in spiritual death. That's the deeper truth behind these laws: Our spiritual adultery against God deserves eternal death.

That's a heavy truth. But it's in that truth that these texts, as heavy as they are, actually point us to the gospel.

Because in the gospel, when Jesus, our bridegroom, saw that we the bride, had been unfaithful – when he saw that we had betrayed him and committed spiritual adultery against him ... he looked on us ... and he looked at the death and destruction we had brought on ourselves ... and rather than let that just punishment fall on us ... he took it on himself.

Jesus was the betrayed groom. We were the unfaithful bride. But rather than letting us perish in our sin, on the cross, he took on himself the death that we deserved, so that we might be spared, we might be forgiven, and we might be able to join him, and be united with him once again for eternity. That's how great his love is for us.

Whatever our sin, whatever our unfaithfulness to him, whatever our idolatry, all of our spiritual adultery, including sins like physical adultery – all of these can be forgiven. Because Jesus took on himself the sentence we deserved.

Our text today is severe. But it points us ultimately to the severe judgment that we all deserved, but Jesus received on our behalf.

And in that, the gospel shines through this text.

Conclusion

And so, brothers and sisters, because he has done this for us, let us seek to honor God in all things, including with our bodies, by living out our sexuality, as he has designed it.

But even more than that, when we fall short, when we see our own sin, whether in the realm of sexuality or any other realm of life, let us marvel at the gospel truth, that when we were unfaithful, Christ, our bridegroom, took the penalty we deserved onto himself, so that we would be spared, and so that we could be with him forever.

That should capture our heart. And it should strengthen our love, for this Savior, who would do such things for us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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This sermon draws in some parts from a sermon I preached here on October 20, 2022.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.