

SEX, LOVE, AND CHARACTER

A TALK TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Permit me to begin by telling you a little bit about myself. I'm a psychologist, a college professor, a family counselor, a husband (married to my wife Judith for 37 years), a father, and a grandfather. I'd like to talk to you today about sex, love, and character.

What is good character? It's having the right stuff on the inside—strengths such as honesty, respect, responsibility, caring, and self-control.

Character is built, not born. We create our character by the choices we make. Good choices create good character; bad choices create bad character.

Why is character important? An anonymous sage once wrote:

**Be careful of your thoughts,
for your thoughts become your words.
Be careful of your words,
for your words become your deeds.
Be careful of your deeds,
for your deeds become your habits.
Be careful of your habits,
for your habits become your character.
Be careful of your character,
for your character becomes your destiny.**

Look around. Character is the key to self-respect, to the respect of others, to positive relationships, to a sense of fulfillment, to achievement, to a happy marriage, to success in every area of life.

As a psychologist, I'm often asked to speak to young people about sex and character. I speak on this subject because I care about your happiness and welfare. I also believe you're not being told the truth about sex. Without the truth, you can't make the right decisions. And the decisions you make about sex are some of the most important decisions you'll ever make. They will affect your life profoundly, now and in the future.

All of you here today belong to one of four groups:

1. *You have never been sexually intimate with another person, and you do not intend to do so until you get married.*
2. *You have never been sexually intimate, but you're not sure what you think about sexual intimacy before marriage.*
3. *You have been sexually intimate, and you don't see anything wrong with it.*
4. *You have been sexually intimate, but you now consider it a mistake—or you're not sure what you want to do in the future.*

Whichever of these four groups you belong to, I'd like to offer you a way of thinking about sex—a way I believe will help you make wise sexual decisions, decisions that will help you build a good character and lead a good and happy life. You may not agree with everything I have to say, but I ask you to listen thoughtfully.

Don't Think, "It's Too Late For Me"

I'd like to say a special word at the start to anyone who may be in these last two groups—persons who may have already had a sexual relationship. You may think, *"It's too late for me to change, even if I wanted to."* But in fact, you have the power to make different choices at any point in your life. You can put the past behind you; you can make a fresh start. A great many young people have done exactly that. If you have religious faith, you can ask God's forgiveness for past mistakes and for help in following a different path in the future.

Let me give you an example of someone who is making a fresh start. She is 22-years old, a former student of mine, and a first-year elementary school teacher. She is now working on her Master's degree in Education, and last spring she took my graduate course on character education. For her course project, she did a paper titled, "Teaching My Younger Sister About Sex and Love." In her paper she wrote:

I wanted to inform my 14-year-old sister Kathy about something that I unfortunately just began to take seriously: abstinence. Sure, I have always known what the word meant, but I had never considered it an option for me, until recently. I felt it was my responsibility to pass the philosophy of abstinence on to my sister because I know she won't get it in the "going to do it anyway" program that is used at her high school. Also, she is a virgin (her friend is, too), so I wanted to show her how important it is to hold onto that purity.

She says she began their discussions when she accidentally overheard her sister Kathy and her friend Michelle talking about a person they referred to as a "slut." She says:

I asked them why they considered her a "slut." Michelle responded, "She has slept with eight guys already, and she is easy." I asked them to think about why this girl is so promiscuous. Kathy said, "She's trying to keep a boyfriend."

We first tackled the issue of sex as "showing love" or "keeping a boyfriend." I used the example of the girl they had been talking about to show how boyfriends come and go whether girls have intercourse with them or not. We also talked about girls' feelings when they are rejected after giving part of themselves to another person.

I then told them about my having had premarital sex, and how I wished these relationships had never occurred—and that the only true way to find out if a guy loves you is to make him wait until marriage.

We talked about the self-respect and courage involved in leading chaste lives until marriage. These two young girls developed a new awareness of how truly loving relationships and commitments develop and are sustained. Their awareness was evident in their response to my disclosing that I recently told my boyfriend that I wanted to abstain from sex from now on and he said he couldn't do that. I asked Kathy and Michelle if they thought the relationship was worth continuing. They both said, "No, he does not love you if he won't wait for you." I was proud of their answer.

Besides being more confident in their virginity, Kathy and Michelle have now set the personal goal of saving sex for marriage.

So never think, "It's too late for me." If you haven't saved sex for marriage, start saving it. *Although you can't regain your physical virginity, you can regain chastity at any time.* Chastity is a moral decision from this moment forward to save all sexual intimacy for your marriage partner.

In sharing my thoughts about sex, I'd like to address 10 questions young people often have about this subject.

1. ISN'T SEX A NATURAL WAY TO EXPRESS YOUR LOVE?

A few years ago I spoke in Canada at a conference for parents. In one of the breakout groups, a mother disclosed a situation she was facing with her 16-year-old daughter Karen. For the past year, Karen had been dating a boy David, who was nearly three years older. Karen had recently come to her mother and said, "David and I feel we're ready to have sex."

The mother was stunned. She replied, "But, Karen, sex is meant for love." Karen said, "But, Mom, we do love each other, and this is how we want to express it." The mother said she was then at a loss for words.

What would we say if this were our own child, student, or friend? We could ask, "*What does it really mean to love someone?*"

Love means wanting what is best for the other person, seeking the greatest good for that person. How do you know when somebody really loves you? When they want what is truly best for your welfare, your happiness—not just now, but forever. Measured against that standard, is having sex with someone you aren't married to truly an act of love?

The way to answer that question is to ask, what are the consequences that can come from sex between unmarried persons? Pregnancy is one. Sexually transmitted disease is another. Emotional and spiritual hurt is a third. If you really love somebody, if you truly want what is best for that person, will you gamble with his or her health, life, and happiness?

Consider these lines from the pamphlet "Love Waits":

Love is patient, love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love never demands something that will harm you or the person you love.

Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices. . . . choices that could change your lives, your goals, and your plans forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

2. BUT WHAT IF YOU USE CONTRACEPTION—DOESN'T THAT MAKE SEX RESPONSIBLE?

There are two ways to answer this question. From the perspective of some religions—Catholicism, for example—contraception goes against God's plan for sex, because God designs sex for two purposes: to be love-giving and life-giving. Sex is for deepening love between a husband and wife and for the procreation of children. Contraception kills the life-giving power of sex. By contrast, Natural Family Planning—abstaining from sexual relations for the few days a month when a woman is fertile—uses the natural fertility cycle to postpone a pregnancy.

The Myth of "Safe Sex"

There's a second way to address the question of "protection." And that's to ask, does contraception really make unmarried sex "safe," as is so commonly claimed in the media? What is the truth?

The truth is that no matter what type of contraception you use, the girl can still get pregnant. It happens—and then there is a developing life to deal with. Among adult users, condoms have an average annual failure rate of 15% in preventing pregnancy, according to studies published in *Family Planning Perspectives*. Among teens, who typically don't use condoms with 100% consistency and correctness, the failure rate can go as high as 30%.

Abortion: Not a "Quick Fix"

Many teens who get pregnant turn to abortion to try to solve that problem. Our country has the highest teenage abortion rate in the developed world, according to a United Nations study. About 300,000 abortions are performed on teens each year.

Abortion poses a number of medical risks for the girl (risks that the abortionist typically will not tell you about):

1. mild to severe infection
2. mild to severe bleeding
3. puncturing of the uterus or other internal organs
4. infertility as a result of scarring from the abortion
5. a greater chance of breast cancer later in life
6. a greater chance of a subsequent miscarriage
7. a greater chance of having a deformed child.

These are all *possible* consequences of abortion for the woman. For the baby in the womb, abortion means certain death. That death is horribly violent. Abortion is the most common medical surgery in the country today, but you will never see a TV special showing you the different kinds of abortions. It's kept in the dark. You can, however, read any medical encyclopedia and find the different abortion procedures described there.

There are six methods of abortion. Permit me to describe just one. The most common method is suction abortion. A suction abortion is performed when the baby in the womb is 7 to 12 weeks old. At only 3 weeks of age, even before a woman knows she is pregnant, the baby already has eyes and a heart beat. At 6 weeks, the preborn baby has measurable brain waves.

In a suction abortion, a hollow tube with a knife-like edge is inserted into the woman's womb. A powerful vacuum machine is attached to the tube and sucks the baby out of the mother's womb. The knife-like edge of the tube slices the baby's body into small pieces, which are collected in a jar. Other methods of abortion, performed later in pregnancy when the baby is more developed, are even more gruesome.

The Emotional Aftermath of Abortion

What are the emotional aftereffects of abortion? Nancy Jo Mann is the founder of a group known as WEBA—Women Exploited By Abortion. She had an abortion when she was 5 months pregnant. She says, "I'm sure there are women out there who are never fazed by their abortion. But I would say that 98% of them are fazed, whether it's for a small period of time or for the rest of their lives."

She says that abortion's emotional aftereffects include grief, remorse, suicidal impulses, loss of self-esteem, anger, and rage. She says:

There is a desire to remember the death date. A preoccupation with the date when the baby would have been born. My daughter was due in early March.

There is an interest in babies but a thwarted maternal instinct. We have many women in our group who cannot hold children. There is a hatred for anyone connected with abortion. There is a lack of desire to enter into a relationship, a loss of interest in sex, and an inability to forgive oneself. Nightmares, tremors, and feelings of having been exploited. And child abuse. We see a lot of child abuse on the part of women who have had an abortion.

Here is the testimony of a young mother, now in her early 30s, regarding the abortion she had when she was in college. She reflected on her experience in a column for the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* newspaper:

It was spring of 1985, my sophomore year in college. I came back from winter break sick as a dog. I had trouble keeping food down. The doctor in the campus infirmary took a urine test and told me in a non-judgmental way that I was pregnant. "What would you like to do?" he asked.

"I want to get rid of it," I said, without even blinking an eye.

He quietly wrote down the phone number and address of the local Planned Parenthood and assured me he would be available if I needed him. The counselor at Planned Parenthood asked me if I was sure I wanted an abortion, and I said yes. That was it. No information on pregnancy and birth, no list of possible choices, no discussion of motherhood.

The day was set. My boyfriend couldn't be bothered to make himself available. It rained on the day of the "procedure." It was surprisingly simple and relatively painless. Afterwards I felt immediately 100% better. The nausea ceased. There was strong cramping, but I could handle that.

If someone had asked me right then how I felt about what I had just done, I would have said, "Wow, this is great! I have my health back, I have my life back!"

Go ahead, ask me now.

I am, at this moment, crying.

How callous I was. Just a kid, really. Self-centered and shallow. There were, and are now, so many other alternatives.

I am humbled by my two amazing living children. Most of all, I am humbled by my friend, Amy. She felt so strongly for her miscarried unborn child that she gave the child a name and a funeral. I didn't give mine a second thought—until I grew up.

Men, too, can suffer from the emotional aftershocks of abortion. Bottom line: Abortion is not a quick fix. I hope, for your own sake, that if you ever face a crisis pregnancy, you won't turn to abortion. If you're a guy who gets a girl pregnant, I hope you'll be man enough not to pressure her to have an abortion. There are many crisis pregnancy centers such as **Birthright** (800-550-4900) and **The Nurturing Network** (800-TNN-4MOM) that will give you free and compassionate help—help to carry the baby to term and either keep the baby, if that's your decision, or place it in the home of loving adoptive parents.

If you have had an abortion, or been involved in an abortion in any way, you can seek help and healing from support groups such as **Project Rachel** (800-5WE-CARE). If you have faith, you can ask God for forgiveness and for the grace to forgive yourself.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

What kind of "protection" do condoms offer against sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS? Dr. Susan Weller at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, in an analysis of 11 different studies, found that condoms on the average failed 31% of the time to prevent transmission of AIDS virus (*Social Science and Medicine*, June 1993).

In the November, 1997 edition of the Italian journal *Medicine and Morals*, the French priest-physician Jacques Suaudeau reported that "the risk of contracting an HIV infection while using a condom is at least 10 to 15%," based on his review of 88 studies, most of them from American sources.

A 2001 National Institutes of Health report, summarizing hundreds of studies, concluded that condoms reduce sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS by 87%, *but only if used 100% of the time*.

So condoms reduce the risk of AIDS but by no means eliminate the risk.

What about other STDs? The big three—the most common STDs—are human papilloma virus (HPV), herpes, and chlamydia. Medical studies show that condoms provide *even less protection ("zero" to "some") against these three diseases*.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). This is the cause of virtually all cervical cancer. It can infect anywhere in the male or female genital region and may be spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex. Condoms, which cover only a small part of the genital area, therefore do not prevent its transmission.

Herpes. This causes genital sores and cannot be cured. Once you get herpes, you've got it for life. Like HPV, herpes can be transmitted by skin-to-skin contact in the entire genital area and is not prevented by the use of a condom.

Chlamydia. Undetected, chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease and scarring of the fallopian tubes. It may be transmitted by secretions during sex that moisten the genitals outside the area covered by the condom.

A special word about chlamydia. One of five newly married American couples cannot conceive a baby. There are multiple causes of infertility, but chlamydia is the fastest growing cause. Medical studies show that condoms provide little protection against the sexual transmission of the chlamydia bacteria. So if you are having premarital sex, you may be gambling away your ability to have a baby when you get married. Is that something you want to gamble with?

Infertility is a tremendous stress on a marriage. If it was caused by STD, the stress is even greater. A 33-year-old wife recently wrote a letter to Dear Abby:

Abby, sometime during my wild college days, I picked up an infection that damaged the inside of my fallopian tubes and left me infertile. I am now married to a wonderful man who very much wants children, and the guilt I feel is overwhelming. We will look into adoption, but this whole ordeal has been terribly difficult.

3. WHAT ARE THE MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SPIRITUAL DANGERS OF PREMARITAL SEX?

Pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, and the inability to have a baby are all physical dangers of premarital sex which have serious emotional consequences as well. But what if you don't get pregnant, don't have an abortion, don't catch any STDs, and don't lose your fertility? Even if you escape these physical dangers, are there still mental, emotional, and spiritual dangers of temporary sexual relationships?

There are. The psychological and spiritual repercussions of premarital sex are many and varied. They include:

1. regret and recrimination
2. guilt
3. feelings of being used
4. self-contempt for being a user
5. fear of commitment because of having been burned
6. rage over betrayal, sometimes leading to violence
7. depression, sometimes leading to suicide (sexually active 12- to 16-year old girls are six times more likely to attempt suicide than girls who are virgins)
8. ruined relationships (because sex often comes to dominate a relationship)
9. stunted personal growth (because premature sex can hinder your identity development)
10. the separation from God that serious sin, until repented, always causes.

You don't see these consequences of sex outside marriage depicted on TV or in the movies. You don't read about them in *Seventeen* or *Sassy*. But they are very real.

Here is a teenage girl speaking of her experience:

I am 16 and have already lost my virginity. I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about.

Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in an argument. I don't think this guy is in love with me, and I know deep down that I am not in love with him either. This makes me feel cheap.

I realize now that this is a very big step in a girl's life. After you've done it, things are never the same. It changes everything. My advice is, don't be in such a rush. It's a headache and a worry. Sex is not for entertainment. It should be a commitment. Be smart and save yourself for someone you wouldn't mind spending the rest of your life with.

—Sorry I Didn't and Wish I Could Take It Back

A college guy talks about his guilt:

I finally got a girl into bed when I was 17. Then she started saying she loved me and getting clingy. After four weeks of having sex as often as I wanted, I was tired of her and dumped her. That made me feel pretty low, because I could see that she was hurting.

In short, there is no condom for your heart, mind, character, or soul. Condoms don't make sex physically safe (you can still get sick or pregnant), emotionally safe (you can still get hurt), or ethically loving (can you claim to love someone if you're gambling with their health and happiness?).

It's also important to think about the *intrinsic* meaning of sex. What makes sex special? Why is sex not a recreational sport? Why is it not like bowling or tennis?

Dietrich von Hildebrand, one of the great philosophers of the 20th century, writes about what makes sex different. Among the many activities of the human body, he says, sex occupies a unique position. Other bodily experiences, such as a good dinner or a good night's sleep, belong to the superficial zone of human experience. Sex, however, is essentially deep. Our entire person, body and soul, is involved. That is why sex has unique psychological and spiritual effects. The abuse of sex defiles a person in a way that gluttony, for example, can never do.

In sex, we give our whole self, intimately and personally. "The sexual act," von Hildebrand says, "is the most vital and intense experience of which the body is capable." We become what we do with our bodies, and there is no deeper act than sex.

Put another way, *sex is a unique self-gift*. If I engage in this deepest of possible intimacies with no intention of a lasting union with my partner, I have taken something profound and precious and thrown it away. In a very real sense, I have squandered my self.

4. CAN PREMARITAL SEX HURT YOUR MARRIAGE?

If I were to ask, "How many of you would like to be happily married someday?", most of you would probably raise your hands. If I were to ask, "How many would like to have a fulfilling sexual relationship within your marriage?", the same number of hands would go up.

So it makes sense to ask: What kind of sexual decisions at this time of your life will maximize your chances of a happy and sexually fulfilling marriage later on? Premarital sex can detract from, and even seriously damage, your sexual happiness in marriage. It can do so in several ways.

One is comparisons. If you have had sex with someone besides your husband or wife, there will be the tendency, sometimes beyond your control, to compare your spouse with previous sexual partners. One husband says, "When I make love with my wife, I think, 'This girl could kiss better,' or 'This girl could do that better.' I can't get rid of the comparisons."

Sometimes this problem takes the form of flashbacks—involuntary mental images of one's previous sexual experiences with other partners. Both women and men report these distressing intrusions into their marriage relationship. One young husband comments:

I've been married to one of the most wonderful women in the world for eight years, but I have never been "alone" in the bedroom with her. I would do anything to forget the sexual experiences I had before I met my wife. When we start having intercourse, the pictures of the past and other women go through my head, and it's killing any intimacy. I've gotten to the point where I no longer want to have sex.

Premarital sex can also lead to boredom with sex after marriage. In his book *Becoming a Friend and Lover*, psychologist Dick Purnell says the more you fool around with sex before marriage, the less exciting it is after the wedding.

"Before marriage," Purnell explains, "your body reacts excitedly to the *forbidden* aspect of sex. When you marry and take the 'forbidden fruits' idea out of sex and heavy petting, you take out much of the excitement. You've conditioned your body to respond to the wrong kind of excitement in sex."

There may also be a lack of trust that comes from knowing that your husband or wife had previous sexual partners, or that you and your spouse were sexually intimate with each other before marriage. Says one wife: "When I think of how Mike and I were sexually involved when I was his secretary, it makes me wonder what he would do now if he met somebody he was very much attracted to." Studies reported over the past decade in *the Journal of Marriage and*

the Family find that persons who are sexually active before marriage are in fact more likely to be unfaithful to their spouse after marriage.

So think of the kind of marriage you want, and the kind of sexual relationship you'd most like to have with your husband or wife. What will make that relationship most free, secure, and fulfilling? Molly Kelly, a chastity educator who speaks to thousands of students each year, says to think of how you'd like your wedding night to be: "There is no greater gift that a man and a woman can give each other on their wedding night than the gift of their virginity. And it's a gift you can give only once."

5. WHAT IF YOU'RE ENGAGED?

What if you're planning to get married—isn't sex okay then? Consider the story of Jack, an acquaintance of mine. Jack and his girlfriend Linda lived together when they were in their mid-20's. They believed they had a "committed relationship."

Even though they were using contraception, Linda became pregnant. Neither believed in abortion, so they had the baby, a little girl named Becky.

A year later they broke up. Linda moved several states away. She found a new boyfriend, and told Jack she didn't want him visiting Becky. Jack says, "I grieve for my daughter. She's three now, and I really long to see her. This is my child, and I can't have a relationship with her."

Neither can Becky experience the love of her father. These are very big consequences, ones that Jack never imagined when he and Linda were living together. But that relationship brought forth a new human life—one for whom there was not, as there should have been, a marriage and a family in which she could be loved and raised.

When you're married, truly married, sexual union is part of a bigger union. You join your bodies because you've joined your lives. In body language, sex says to the other person, "*I give myself to you completely.*" Within the marriage commitment, that's really true. By contrast, sex before marriage is lying with your body. It's like saying, "*I give myself to you completely, but not really.*" The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.

Another reality is that engagements often break up. About half of the people who get married have been engaged at least once before. In some cases, sex increases the chances of a break-up. Says one young woman, "Sex quickly became the center of our relationship. At the same time, new things entered — anger, impatience, jealousy, and selfishness. We just couldn't talk anymore." Dr. Robert Blood, in his book *Marriage*, reports a major study in which more engagements were broken by couples who had intercourse than by those who did not. "The more frequent the intercourse, the larger the proportion of rings returned."

In other cases, just the opposite may occur: Sexual involvement can fool you into marrying the wrong person. John and Kathy Colligan, authors of *The Healing Power of Love* and experienced Pre-Cana counselors, report their experience with this phenomenon:

We see many engaged couples who are living together. We find out by talking with them that they have little in common. They don't know each other very well. They haven't talked about their values and goals. But the sexual attraction and involvement are very strong.

When we suggest that they not live or sleep together, that they try to become friends and get to know each other to find out if they're really compatible, they typically resist. They don't see how they can stop having sex now that they are involved. As their counselors, we can see that this is a marriage likely to fail. And time after time, often in just a few years, it does.

Seven different studies, cited in David Myers's book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, all point to the same conclusion: Couples who lived together before their marriage are significantly *more* likely to divorce than couples who did not live together. For example, a U.S. survey of 13,000 adults found that those who lived together before marriage were one-third more likely to separate or divorce within 10 years. A Canadian study of more than 5,000 women found that those who lived together with their boyfriends were 54% more likely to divorce within 15 years of being married. A Swedish study of 4,300 women found that those who lived together were 80% more likely to eventually divorce.

The facts contradict the popular idea that living together would serve as a kind of "trial marriage" that would help a couple test their compatibility. If you really want to get to know somebody and find out whether you want to spend your life with that person, sex can make that harder, not easier, to do.

6. HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

Discussions of sex often talk a lot about intercourse but not much about how far you should go if you don't go all the way. A high school counselor offers this wise advice: "If you don't want to drive over a cliff, don't pull up to the edge and race the engine." George Eager, in his book *Sex, Love, and Dating*, says you're going too far when:

- either a guy's or a girl's hands start roaming
- either of you starts to remove clothing
- you are doing something you would not want to be doing around someone you really respect
- you are arousing genital feelings.

One psychologist offers this very specific guideline for guys: "If what you are doing is causing an erection, stop."

Saving sex for marriage, as chastity educator Mary Beth Bonacci points out, means saving *all* of it for marriage. All forms of sexual intimacy are "the language of marriage."

After a talk I gave recently, a young woman in her 20s came up and said, "I'm going with this guy and we're getting serious, but I still don't know if he's the one. The other night we were kissing, and it started to get heavy. I pulled back and said, 'Whoa—I want to save this for my husband.'" She realized that physical affection of this kind is meant to be part of the gift of love that you give to one person in the unique relationship of marriage.

7. WHAT IS GOD'S POINT OF VIEW ABOUT SEX?

It's not the business of the public school to tell you that you should or shouldn't believe in God. But if you happen to hold a belief in God, you might wish to ask certain questions that logically follow when you're thinking about sex. One is, where did my sexuality come from? Obviously, it came from God. That's why sex is good. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Sex is the beautiful gift of a good God."

The next question is, how does God intend for me to use the gift of my sexuality? And how can I find that out?

If you check out what your faith tradition teaches on this matter, you will learn that God did not intend sex to be part of the relationships of unmarried teenagers. Many young people, even those who practice a faith, are unfamiliar with religious teachings about sexuality. You may be surprised to learn the striking similarity of major world religions on this issue. Here are three examples:

Rabbi Isaac Frank: "Rabbinic teaching for at least 2500 years has consistently opposed premarital sex. Judaism removes sexual intercourse from any context of selfishness or primitive lust, and enshrines it as a sanctified element in the most intimate and meaningful relationship between two human beings: the sacred marriage bond.

Father Richard McCormick, Catholic priest: "The promise of two people to belong always to each other makes it possible for lovemaking to mean total giving and total receiving. It is the totality of married life that makes sexual intercourse meaningful. This is why the Church refers to sexual intercourse as 'the marital act.'"

Muzammil H. Siddiqui, Islamic teacher: "Islam views sexual love as a gift from God. It is a sign of God's love and mercy. Islam limits sexual activity to a man and a woman within the bond of marriage.

The Sermon on the Mount includes strong words about sex. There Jesus said that chastity of the body is not enough; we must also practice chastity of thought and desire.

You have heard it said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away! It is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. (Matthew 5: 27-30)

You might wonder, why does God take such a tough line on sex? The theological answer: Because He loves us. God isn't trying to spoil our fun, rain on our parade. Like a loving parent, He knows what's best for us. He knows that sex within the right relationship—marriage—will make us happy, and that outside that relationship, it won't.

8. WHAT ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

This is a controversial and complex subject. First, it helps to have some facts. You may have heard it said that 10% of people are gay. In fact, according to several recent studies, only about 1-2% of men and about 1% of women say they are exclusively homosexual in their behavior. (See, for example, the 1993 report of the Alan Guttmacher Institute and the 1994 University of Chicago study, *Sex in America*.)

You may have also heard that there is a "gay gene" that makes a person gay. But in fact, there is no scientific agreement about what leads a person to be attracted to the same sex. A 1991 study of identical twins (who have identical genes) was reported in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*. The study found that if one identical twin was homosexual, the second twin was just as likely to be *heterosexual* as homosexual. The researchers concluded: "Genetic factors are an insufficient explanation for the development of sexual orientation."

In our pluralistic society, people have different views on homosexuality. Discussions of this sensitive subject should include the following points:

1. A promiscuous life style is not healthy—regardless of who your partner is. The health risks of a homosexual life style can be considerable, especially for males. The average age of death for sexually active gay men, for example, is early 40s.
2. The factors influencing homosexuality continue to be debated. Researchers have cited genetic disposition, family upbringing, personal sexual experiences, or a combination of these.
3. A homosexual *orientation* is not the same thing as homosexual *activity*. Some persons who have a homosexual orientation decide—for health, moral, or religious reasons—to refrain from all genital sexual activity. "Your sexual behavior," says Joe, a previously sexually active gay man (now dating a woman) said, "is always a choice." Gay people can decide to lead an abstinent lifestyle, just as many single heterosexuals do.
4. People differ in their conscience judgments about homosexual activity. Some regard it as morally acceptable; others do not. Those who object typically believe that sexual intimacy is reserved by God for a husband and wife united in marriage. By this standard, any sex outside

of heterosexual marriage—regardless of whether the sex is premarital, extramarital, homosexual, or bisexual—is wrong. If this is the conviction of a person's conscience, it is not fair to accuse him of being "prejudiced" for so believing. A prejudice is a judgment that someone is inferior *as a person* because they are a member of a certain race, gender, or other group; by contrast, judgments about homosexual sex, bisexual sex, or premarital heterosexual sex are judgments about the healthfulness or rightness of certain sexual *behaviors*, not judgments about the worth of persons.

5. All persons are obliged to respect the basic human rights and dignity of all other individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. For that reason, name-calling, degrading graffiti, harassment, violence, and any other malicious conduct directed against homosexual persons are always morally wrong. Tolerance does not require us to approve of another person's sexual behavior, but it does require us to respect the dignity and rights of all people.

9. IS MASTURBATION WRONG?

This is a subject not often discussed.

Answering that requires us to ask another question, "What is sex for?" One answer is that sex is intended to be *relational*, an expression of love between two persons. From this viewpoint, masturbation is wrong because it reduces sex to solitary pleasure-seeking, sex with yourself.

Also, by its very nature sexual intercourse is meant to be not only *love-giving* but also *life-giving*. Masturbation thwarts that second purpose of sex as well.

There are also good psychological reasons to avoid masturbation. Masturbation can easily become a habit that is hard to stop. If it does, your feelings of self-control and self-esteem will take a dive. It's also easy to use masturbation as an escape from emotions like anxiety or depression. If you fall into that trap, you're likely to end up feeling worse, because the problem that caused the bad feelings is still there. Especially for adolescent males, masturbation is also usually accompanied by pornography—which quickly becomes another addiction in itself. Pornography, in addition to demeaning women and perverting sex, has in some cases nearly wrecked a marriage. So you'll be doing yourself a big favor if you avoid masturbation.

10. HOW CAN I BE SUCCESSFUL IN LEADING A CHASTE LIFE?

I've shared with you many benefits of saving sex for marriage. The medical writer Kristine Napier provides an excellent summary of those benefits in her book *The Power of Abstinence* (Avon Books):

1. *Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.*
2. *Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person*

you are).

3. *Waiting will increase your self-respect.*
4. *Waiting will gain the respect of others.*
5. *Waiting teaches you to respect others; you'll never pressure anyone.*
6. *Waiting takes the pressure off you.*
7. *Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).*
8. *Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons with other premarital partners and based on trust). By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.*

University of Dallas professor Janet Smith names still another advantage: By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as faithfulness, self-control, modesty, good judgment, courage, and genuine respect for self and others—you're developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner and attract the kind of person you'd like to marry.

Here is the testimony of a young woman who is reaping these rewards. In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Sarah Hinlicky, an editorial assistant at *First Things* magazine, writes:

I am 22 years old and still a virgin. Not for lack of opportunity, my vanity hastens to add.

My mother taught me that self-respect requires self-control. My father taught me to demand the same from men. I'm enough of a country bumpkin to suspect that contraceptives might not be enough to prevent an unwanted pregnancy or disease, and I think that abortion is killing a baby. I buy into all that Christian doctrine, which means that the stuffy old commandments are still binding on my conscience. And I'm even naive enough to believe in permanent, exclusive, divinely ordained love between a man and a woman.

The dominant feminist ideology, Ms. Hinlicky writes, has misled her generation. This ideology had held that "a woman who declines to express herself in sexual activity has fallen prey to a male-dominated society." This line of thinking, Ms. Hinlicky says, is "a set-up for disaster." The idea that women must be sexually active in order to be "free" has "opened the door to predatory men. . . . Against this system of exploitation stands the more compelling alternative of virginity. It is a refusal to exploit or be exploited."

There is no second-guessing a virgin's motives: her strength comes from a source beyond her transitory whims. It is sexuality dedicated to hope, to the future, to marital love, to children, and to God.

Her virginity is, at the same time, a statement of her mature independence from men. It allows a woman to become a whole person in her own right, without needing a man either to revolt against or to complete what she lacks. It is very simple, really: no matter how wonderful, charming, handsome, intelligent, thoughtful, rich, or persuasive he is, he simply cannot have her. A virgin is perfectly unpossessable.

Knowing the benefits of waiting is the first step in leading a chaste life. What else will help you achieve that goal?

It's important to make a *promise* to wait—a pledge that you write down, sign, and put in a special place, like a dresser drawer, where you'll be often reminded of it. If you have religious faith, that pledge can include a promise to God. Here are the words of the *True Love Waits* pledge that millions of young people in more than 90 countries of the world have signed:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment, from this moment forward, to God, myself, those I date, my future spouse and children, to always live a chaste life, as a single person or within a covenant marriage relationship.

In addition to a promise, you need a *plan*—practical steps that will help you stick to your promise. Here are some things that I recommend you make part of your plan:

1. Practice modesty in your speech, dress, and actions.
2. Date only people who share your values.
3. Avoid sexual temptation such as time together alone.
4. Avoid sexual stimuli such as most "R"-rated movies.
5. Limit your physical affection to light hugs and kisses.
6. If you believe in God, take advantage of God's forgiveness and grace.
7. If you believe in God, develop the habit of daily prayer—at least 5 minutes at the start of every day—asking God's help in remaining pure and faithful to Him. Mother Teresa said, "Purity is the fruit of prayer."

Finally, let me close with the words of a 23-year-old wife :

Anyone who is struggling with chastity now should have the faith that if you do love this person and you do wait, sex is going to be better than you ever dreamed. I think you will regret it if you give in beforehand. If you wait, the first contact will be in the context where sex is as good as God made it to be.

Thank you for listening. God bless and keep you.