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Presentation Transcript
Mental Health and the Bible – God and Sex
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When I first entertained the idea of learning to do couples' counseling, I asked my mentor if there was a way to determine if a couple was past the point of no return. Some people came in so angry, it seemed to me there would be no hope. The people I talked to were quite often distrustful. They were embittered, or they were discouraged, and I just didn't think there was any hope for them, in some cases. When I asked my mentor that question, I was surprised when she told me that there was one question she always asked couples in their first session. And that question was, "Have you ever, in your marriage, had good sex?" She then explained that the research had demonstrated that, if a couple has ever had good sex – even for just a short time – it's likely that the relationship can be healed, provided the couple is willing to do some hard work together. And that was amazing to me! And it started the wheels turning for me.

I immediately thought of the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." We know from other scriptures that God's rules about sex also limit sex to marriage. Premarital sex is against God's law as well. That said, it's interesting that after talking to hundreds of teens and adults – including those who are faithful church-going people – very few consider premarital sex a sin anymore – or even harmful. Most think premarital sex is even good for them in that they learn how to do sex before they get married. It can often be seen by these folks as something that can be done for fun, without any kind of commitment.

Why do people think this way about sex today? Is the prevailing approach helpful or harmful? What does it mean that a relationship gone south can be healed if the couple has ever had good sex? These are some of the questions we're going to explore today.

The biology of sex – let's start there – not even the biology, but the *anatomy*. There is a large bundle of nerves that go from our genitalia right into our limbic system, which is the emotional center of the brain. And that can tell us something rudimentary about sex. It can easily be seen

that sex is a highly emotional event. And, if sex is performed in a loving way, it can be about the emotion *love*.

Now let's talk about *biology*. There are several chemical processes that occur during sex. One is the release of *dopamine*. Sex isn't the only thing that releases dopamine, but we know high levels of it *are* released during sex, and that's part of the pleasure/reward system in the brain. If we experience pleasure from an event, dopamine receptors develop around it. They cry out for more dopamine, causing us to want to engage in sex again – or in any behavior. I was listening to a presentation once, where this psychologist was talking about how he had smoked cigars years ago, and when he got some prestigious award, he was presented at the bar with a cigar, which he smoked. And he said, "All the urges came back," just like he'd just smoked a cigar the day before. And his explanation for that was, that the dopamine receptors, when he quit smoking cigars, went dormant, but when he smoked one again, they came right back to life – kind of like a drug does. In fact, dopamine has been called heroin for the brain. Dopamine tends to change how we remember things – better than it was sometimes.

Now, the next one is called *oxytocin*. And that causes us to forget what is painful. And it's primarily, though not totally, created in women's bodies. After a woman has a baby and starts breast feeding, lots of oxytocin is produced. And this helps her forget the pain of birth and bond to her child. It has been verified that it's a skin-to-skin contact with her infant that starts the flow of oxytocin. The same thing happens when a woman is intimate with a man. The oxytocin is what causes her to bond with him emotionally.

The next hormone I want to talk about is called *vasopressin*. This one is produced primarily in men. And it has the same effect on men that oxytocin has on women.

So what do all these hormones do to people when they have sex? Well, it causes bonding. Sex is like relational glue. Dopamine with a person makes us want to have sex with them again, and oxytocin is what causes women to bond with the man, and vasopressin causes a man to bond to his partner. So the research affirms what we all know anyway – sex causes bonding.

So let's talk about sex in marriage now. I learned some time back that 95% of all marital issues are, at least in part, due to poor communication. Why is that? Well, it's because it's really hard to understand someone of the opposite sex – especially what they mean. Why is that? Well, it's because we assume we know what they mean, because we know what we would mean if we had said what they just said. But that's usually *not* what they mean, because males and females think differently about things. So they speak to each other, and constantly misunderstand each other to one degree or another. And this tends to make getting along really hard. So God, in His wisdom, created some glue, called sex, to help them be connected. "Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," Adam said.

Notice what the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:28:

Ephesians 5:28-31 – *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, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* We use terms like *attached at the hip* today to talk about close relationships. But, in the Bible, it says, “one flesh.”

Sex is one of the most important factors in gluing two dissimilar beings together in a tight bond. In Song of Solomon, we can read in chapter 2, verse 16:

Song of Solomon 2:16 – *My beloved is mine, and I am his. He grazes among the lilies.* If you're familiar with the work of Georgia O'Keefe, that might help you understand the reference to lilies.

Also in the Song of Solomon, chapter 5, verse 8, it says:

Song of Solomon 5:8 – *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, you tell him I am drunk with love.*

So what's that about? Well, that's about being intoxicated with the dopamine, oxytocin and vasopressin that's released when there is sex. People become addicted to each other. So the sexual connection ameliorates the tensions of living with someone who's hard to understand. Sex promotes a strong emotional connection, and that can, sometimes, override the problems of living day to day.

Now let's talk about the implications for unfaithfulness in marriage. After what we just covered about bonding, it becomes obvious that extramarital sex is a trust-wrecker. People are expecting to have a sexual ongoing exclusive relationship with the person they marry. Interestingly enough, even though people in our society think it's okay to have *premarital sex*, everyone seems to know that sex outside of marriage is a huge no-no. Most people think that it kills a marriage. And God even allows that someone who's been cheated on can divorce. There can also be health reasons and always trust reasons for this. Still, the research shows that, if a couple has ever had good sex – and disease is not a factor – it's possible – given genuine repentance and hard work – to heal the relationship. That's very encouraging to me, as I work with people. And I've found, as I've asked that question, and then kind of thought back about the people I've worked with, that there's always people that have had good sex and it doesn't last, but I think that's because they weren't willing to do the work.

So what about implications for premarital sex – something everybody seems to think is all right? Well, I have had a young woman who has been intimate with all seven of her past boyfriends. They would drop her and she would beg them not to. Her emotional connection to them was so strong, she had a really hard time letting go. Also, all these guys seemed incapable of

commitment. And if half the stuff she told me about each one of them was true, I tend to think that they probably were not compatible with her – a bad choice from the get-go. Now, she's bright. She's a relational person. But the sex she's had with each of them caused her to become bonded to them, and that has caused her to lose her objectivity. She hung around way too long because she was bonded to them emotionally and sexually. From what she told me about each one of these guys, none of them, really, were good choices for her, but she couldn't see it because of the dopamine and the oxytocin. I believe premarital sex, and drive for more of it, causes people to make some really bad choices, and results in lots of broken hearts.

Also, sex, like a piece of tape, the more you use it, the less sticky it becomes – the less affect it has to glue. I talked to a man once, who was happily married and had been for many years. He told me that when he was young, he had lots of sex with lots of different girls. Once he married his current wife, he was faithful to her. However, he said quite often the faces and the bodies of some of those girls from the past, would come to his mind while having sex with his wife. And he said it made him feel like he was cheating on her – like he was unfaithful. I asked him if he had ever told his wife about this, and he said no he hadn't. But it made him feel terrible. He said he tended to withdraw from his wife sometimes, because of his own guilt. So, in effect, he really was the only one that was hurt, primarily, by his early promiscuity.

I have also run into people who were incapable of a committed relationship because they had had sex so much that it just wasn't special like it used to be – not as much dopamine and the other hormones were secreted – so not possible to be drunk on love anymore – to be addicted.

So, if you think about the verses we read earlier from the Song of Solomon, it's clear that the two lovers there were exclusive. Now I know that each human is unique, and there's always a wide range of responses to any given event, but it seems to me, after talking to so many people, that there's always a price to be paid when we break God's rules about sex. I mean, one of the greatest premises in the word of God is that God's laws are there to protect us, and to help us be happy people.

Let's talk about something a little bit off of this tack. Let's talk about pornography. It's a very strange thing that's happening in our society – sexual excitement without someone with whom to have sex with. There's dopamine and the addiction that comes with it, but no bonding because there's no skin-to-skin relationship – no oxytocin or vasopressin that comes with human touch. You can't make a commitment to a video, or fall in love with a video. So people are left with the addiction, but no natural relational satisfaction. And this leaves people addicted, but unsatisfied – unfulfilled. It's a lot like social media. There's no face-to-face, so people can't really connect on a biological level. People tend to present themselves on social media as perfect, which is *always* false, so there's no *real* relationship there, based on truth and reality, that exists.

We talked about biology earlier. We are all *relational* beings at a cellular level. When we shake hands with somebody, and smile at them, our heart rate drops, our blood pressure goes down a

bit, a bit of dopamine is produced. It's a good feeling. None of that happens on Instagram or snapchat. All these efforts happen through eye-to-eye, and face-to-face, and hand-to-hand physical contact. That's part of what makes a relationship a relationship among humans. And that's absent in these electronic forms of relationship. So that's true of pornography, or Instagram or snapchat or whatever form – even the telephone. So all these efforts at relationship, without the possibility of human connection, leaves us frustrated – either a lot or a little bit. Sometimes, the level of frustration is biological, and we're not in touch with it, so we don't feel it, but it's still there. What happens when people, who are only used to electronic media, get face-to-face or body-to-body – in the case of sex – often, not much that's good.

I also want to talk today a little bit about mental health and sex. You might ask why this topic would be on our *Mental Health and the Bible* series. Well, the young woman I mentioned earlier came for relief from depression and anxiety. This person had a very damaged sense of self, and her anxiety about acceptance drove her to use sex, sort of, as her relational currency to attract men. And the result of relational disasters caused her to be more anxious about herself than before. So sex can play a role in mental health issues, sometimes, in extremely unusual ways.

A woman came to me some time back, and she told me that she was depressed, and that she felt empty – that nothing satisfied her. She said she was like on a quest, but she didn't know what for. Well, that was really an interesting statement. She told me that she had been unfaithful to her husband so many times that she'd lost count, and that she had *never* had, in her entire life, experienced sexual satisfaction from any sexual relationship. So, as the therapy began, I asked her about her earliest memory, and she said she could remember showing a friend her father's porn stash in the garage. I asked her how old she was, and she said she was three. When a person is three, there is no place in the brain yet for that kind of experience. And it causes anxiety. She reported that her whole childhood was filled with sexualized experimentation with other children. And she became promiscuous as a young teen. Why does that happen? We hear about people who have been molested and all that becoming promiscuous. Well, the anxiety caused by the exposure too early drives a person toward a pathological effort to explain that experience. And it, generally, gets acted out. And she was still doing this as an adult. Yet her presenting complaint was anxiety. And she was right on the money with that. The anxiety, that was caused by her being exposed too early to sexual things, created anxiety in her.

I've told, also, many times the example of the man who was caught in his attic, by his wife, dressed in women's formal apparel. It had become a sexual thing for him. It was what we call a fetish today. People can become sexually focused on, and turned on by all kinds of things. His wife told him that she was going to leave him if he didn't get help, so he did. And as the therapy progressed, he recalled the time when he and his beloved little sister were playing dress up in the attic. And she had on a little formal gown and fancy gloves, and he had on a black bow tie. After some time, they got tired of their play and, like children do, they impulsively ran across the street to gather walnuts, still in their dress up clothes. So he was dropping walnuts into the lap of her gown as she held it open. And when they had enough, she stepped out on the curb without

looking as was struck and killed by a truck. Their parents had everything of their daughter's out of the house within a few days – no photos, nothing. The brother was not allowed to go to the funeral. And his parents never spoke of her again. His grief sought expression years later in a pathological memorialization of his beloved sister. And that was in a sexual way. So, this example, and many others, point to the power of sex in human experience – something so powerful, it needs to be treated carefully.

So how can we sum this up? Well, God has already done this for us. In Deuteronomy 5:33, He says:

Deuteronomy 5:23 – *You shall walk in all the ways that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you possess.*

So don't be gullible. Don't be naïve. Don't be foolish. Follow God's rules and be better off for it, including when it comes to sex.

Also, don't forget to check out our Website. We have lots of other mental health and relational information on it. You can also find our more recent presentations on the Apple podcast site.