

Broken Sexuality

Let's start today, with the story of Monica. Monica says that when she was in college she had sex like she was eating at a sketchy diner. Most of the time the sex was not great, but it also not a big deal. She had some bad experiences that took some time to get over, but she always did and continued on—no big deal. Sex was fun, but she never allowed herself to get attached.

Much of our society would consider someone like Monica to be a liberated, sex-positive woman with a healthy sex life. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's disappointing, but it's progress for women to reject the typical female stigma about sex.

But to other parts of society—including the Church, someone like Monica is promiscuous and reckless. We talk about people like her in Bible study and say things like, *"Isn't it sad? Her sin will catch up to her. Let's pray that she finds Jesus."*

Now, of course, her story is sad and we should pray that she finds Jesus. But neither of these responses to Monica is sufficient, because there's more to her story than meets the eye. You see, Monica's story comes from the counselor and psychologist, Dan Allender, who she came to for counseling. She didn't go to him to talk about sexual problems, but because she always seemed to sabotage her relationships. She described it almost like she had some kind of a curse on her.

But as they talked, she shared that when she was 12-years old, her older brother had taken a video of her showering. She was able to cover herself, but not before the damage had been done. From that time her brother used the video as blackmail to get her to grant his friends sexual pleasures that she called “*some groping and slobbery make-out session with boys who didn’t have a clue how to kiss.*” When he asked her to describe how she felt about it, she said it was “gross and weird, but no big deal. Even my mom told me to chalk it up to boys being boys.” While she was resistant to call it “abuse,” her life followed one of the patterns of people who have been sexually abused.

Biblically speaking, healthy sex is done within a loving, whole-life union of a man and woman in a covenant of marriage. Sex is not just a way to get pleasure from someone else’s body, but you see treat them as a whole person made in the image of God—an integrated whole of mind, body and soul. When sex is separated from the whole person, we become *dis-integrated* and we feel *used*, rather than *valued*. Of course, this can happen both inside and outside of marriage.

Today, we’re talking about sexual abuse, but not *just* about sexual abuse. I want to talk about what I would call “broken sexuality.” For some this looks like sexual addiction or compulsion or what’s called *hypersexuality*. For others, sexual brokenness could be a lack of any desire for sex that causes much pain in their marriage. For others it’s the inability to experience any intimacy in relationships, whether sexual or not.

This brokenness can be caused by many things—physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual. But often sexual experiences from our past—especially abuse—shapes us in ways that we often don't realize. And these experiences don't have to be violent. They could be as simple as an older kid introducing a younger kid to pornography; or an encounter with another kid at school that resulted in a confusing and unexpected arousal all the way to repeated sexual abuse by a trusted adult.

If we were to define, *sexual abuse* we would say it's any unwanted sexual activity often entails an imbalance of power where one person feels they can't reasonably say no to the more powerful person's advances. It could be between an adult and a child, a teacher and a student, or even a boss with a direct-report. These imbalances can be manipulated to coerce someone into doing something they wouldn't otherwise do.

You see, sometimes even consent can be hard to define. For instance, we live in a society that encourages women and even girls to trade sex appeal for things they want—popularity, advancement and even money. The problem is that even if it seems consensual at the time, and even when the person without the power gets what they wanted, they will feel cheapened and used. See Harvey Weinstein.

And sexual abuse leaves a mark. Brain studies show that when we experience sexual abuse, our bodies have a natural physiological response. Sexual abuse changes our brain in ways that naturally predispose us to avoiding more harm.

For instance, both a *lack of sexual desire and hypersexuality* are ways our bodies try to protect themselves from harm. I think it's easy to see how it works when it comes to a *lack* of desire—you don't put yourself in positions that remind you of the abuse. But how does *hypersexuality* help people cope? Well, there are a couple of ways.

Think of pornography addiction, for instance. Often, people who use pornography feel a sense of shame and dis-integration, which is painful. But sexual pleasure releases the feel-good chemical in your brain called dopamine that makes you feel better for a time. But when it wears off, you feel terrible again and you continue the cycle. When someone suffers chronic pain they will often find anything they can to ease the pain, whether it's pornography, sex, alcohol or drugs.

But the other way *hypersexuality* works is that when someone is abused early in life, they learn the lie that their only value is their sexual availability. So, sex becomes the way they feel valued and wanted by another person. The problem with both of these responses is that they're both temporary.

Now, here's why we're talking about this. Christians will often look at people who are living promiscuous, immoral lives with contempt and drive them away from church. Pastor John Burke tells the story of a woman who was counseling with a friend whose life was spiraling out of control, but when she invited her to church, her friend replied, "*Why would I go to church? I already feel bad enough about myself!*"

Unfortunately, sometimes that reputation is earned. And the reason it's earned is because we misunderstand the nature of sin. And our misunderstanding makes all the difference in the world for how we handle sin. Let me show you what I mean by looking at a passage from the Gospel of John, chapter 8. Turn there with me please

I don't know if you know this, but there is a lot of sex in the Bible. Some of it's healthy and good. The first command God gave to Adam and Eve was to go have sex. The Song of Solomon is a highly sexual, poetic play-by-play of a couple on their wedding night.

But there's a lot of broken sexuality, too. The Bible describes drunken sex, rape, gang rape, incest and adultery followed by murder among other things. And yet it doesn't offer a lot of commentary on broken sexuality other than to warn against sexual sin.

But the Gospels do tell us stories that show us how Jesus responded to people—primarily women with sordid sexual histories. One of these stories in John, chapter 8.

Now, there's some question about how to handle this passage. Your Bible probably says something like, "*John 7:53-8:11 is not found in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts.*" In fact, many of the commentaries I consulted don't even comment on this passage. The first time we see it in manuscripts of the Gospel of John is in the 5th Century. So, the consensus is that this story was not originally part of the Gospel of John.

So, the question is, should we use this story? My answer is obviously, “yes,” but with caution. While most Biblical scholars believe it wasn’t a part of the original Gospel of John, most also believe that the story is authentic—in other words, they believe that it did actually happen and was passed around in oral form for many years before someone later, inserted it into the gospel.

Now, if this passage contradicted the picture of Jesus elsewhere in the gospels, it would have been left out long ago. But we’ll look at it today because it is completely consistent with how Jesus handled others in the same situation in the gospels—the Samaritan woman at the well and the prostitute who anointed his feet, for instance.

Let’s read: **¹Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.**

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you

who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

It was only after reading this passage recently did it dawn on me that even though we might not be able to call this incident abuse, and whatever her motivation or previous sexual practices, this is an incident that had the potential to scar her. The whole situation seems pretty sketchy.

First of all, it says she was caught “in the very act of adultery.” Now, I don’t know how the religious leaders *happened* to catch her in the very act of adultery. She could have been set up. Or possibly her husband came home from work and caught with her lover and he immediately brought her to the Scribes and Pharisees.

Even if it wasn’t a setup, the Pharisees had the presence of mind to think, “This is a great opportunity to trap Jesus.” The other sketchy facts is that it takes two to commit adultery and yet they didn’t seem to be concerned about the *man*. But notice that the woman was being *used* as a pawn for someone else’s end, which is devastating.

But as usual, Jesus' response was unexpected. And the reason he responded the way he did because he was willing to look deeper than the act of adultery itself. And his response is different than how we often respond because he understood what we often don't understand about sin.

First, he knew that people can be simultaneously victims and perpetrators of sin.

Now, we need to be clear that the woman *was* committing adultery. She was, to some degree a willing participant. When Jesus says, "go and leave your life of sin," he acknowledges that the woman was caught in the cycle of sin.

So, I'm not trying to excuse sin or deny that people are responsible for their actions. Sometimes people who are abused go on to be abusers. But even if there is a connection, that still doesn't excuse their sin. Sometimes people who experience sexual trauma go on to live in sexually destructive ways and their actions are still destructive regardless of their motivation.

But even though she was responsible for her sin, Jesus had compassion for her because there was more going on beneath the surface. There was a spiritual battle going on. In Ephesians, chapter 6, the Apostle Paul writes, **"¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."** And

oftentimes, this battle comes in the form of lies we believe. Satan takes our legitimate needs and desires and twists them into lies.

We believe lies like, “You’re not lovable,” “The only value you have is being the source of someone else’s sexual gratification,” “You won’t hurt so much if you’re the one in control,” “It’s just sex,” or even “I don’t really need anyone.” These are destructive lies.

You see, sin isn’t just an individual action intentionally rebelling against God, but someone caught in the cycle of sin. That doesn’t excuse sin, but it does change how we think about the solution. Whether you are a victim or a perpetrator; whether there’s abuse involved or not, the solution is the same—sin has to come into the light. To be graciously, but honestly named, owned, and confessed. That truth brings freedom.

The second reason Jesus responded the way he did is that *he knew condemnation was not the shortest path to repentance*. In Romans, chapter 2 Paul was writing to believers about our tendency to judge others for their sin in order to excuse our own. He writes, **“When you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same thing, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”**

Paul was just writing what Jesus demonstrated. Jesus knew the religious leaders didn't care about the woman. They were only intent on taking him down, and she was a pawn in their game. So, he brought *their* sin into the light saying, **“Let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone.”** And one by one, they dropped their stones and left.

The religious leaders were only interested in *punishment and condemnation*, but Jesus wanted *healing and restoration*. I've always found it much easier to dismiss people than to walk with them. It's easier to *shame* people for trying to meet their needs in illegitimate and sinful ways than it is to make it possible for them to have their needs met in ways that are life-giving. There are times when people need to be confronted when they are acting in destructive or self-destructive ways. But, the best long-term approach to sin is to walk with people and help them meet their needs in life-giving ways.

Our *first* move always has to be grace that invites people into relationship, not condemnation, because the goal isn't just to get people to behave, but to come into a relationship with the God who created them and wants what's best for them and to restore their relations with people—to help them believe the truth about themselves. This is especially true when it comes to victims of sexual abuse.

Trust comes hard for victims of sexual abuse. Many of them were lured in by people they trusted. Most abusers aren't physically violent, but their abuse is often disguised as care and tenderness. So, many people who have been abused are initially

ambivalent to kindness because they've been conditioned to expect that anyone who seems kind, wants something from them. But persistent kindness without demands is the way to break through that ambivalence.

But when Jesus responded to her with grace and kindness, he also named her sin and challenged her to leave the cycle behind. Our society tends to go two ways with victims of sin. There's one side that doesn't seem to care or take people's past into consideration at all and as a result, has no compassion for sinners. Rules are rules and if you break them, you're guilty and you deserve punishment.

The other side recognizes that many people are victims of personal or systemic sin, but that victimhood becomes their identity. That identity allows them to excuse bad behavior. In fact, some even use victimhood as a way to get the upper-hand in society. If I was a victim, then I can't help it.

But, neither of these approaches is helpful. And I know this has become a cliché, but the answer is *grace* and *truth*. It's leading with kindness but acknowledging the root of the sin, naming it, and confessing it. Walking in that tension where we honor people's story but don't allow them to believe the lies they tell themselves. As we close today, I want to talk to three groups of people here today.

First, for those of you caught in sexual sin that's not abusive and not the result of sexual abuse in the past. I know it's easy for you to rationalize what you're doing. We all

have our reasons why what God says doesn't apply to us—whether it's pornography, an affair, sex outside of marriage. You have to understand that God created the boundaries for the good of your body and especially, the good of your soul. What you do with your body isn't disconnected from your soul. And it just might be that what you are doing sexually is hindering the growth of your soul or participating in a cycle of sin that will have lasting effects on you and others.

If you're caught in an addiction of some sort, that addiction has to be brought into the light to be healed. It's the only way. So, don't let shame prevent you from finding someone you trust to help you walk through it. //

If you have been the *victim of sexual abuse*, I want to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry because I know that it's unfair that even though someone else was the abuser, it's the victim that receives the curse. And now you fight a constant battle with guilt, shame and self-protection.

I also know it's common for those who have been abused to believe it's your fault or that you somehow invited the abuse. I want to tell you that it's not your fault. You didn't invite it and you didn't deserve it and I want you to be free. The good news is that Jesus opened that door.

Listen to what it says in Romans 8:1-2 says, **“¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law**

of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Now, if Jesus sets those who *commit* sin free from the law of sin and death, how much more does he want to set *you* free from the curse of someone else’s sin. The good news is that the death and resurrection of Jesus made it possible to be free from the curse of sin and the shame that comes with it and give you hope for the future even if you still carry it with you in this life.

That doesn’t mean it will be quick or easy. It doesn’t happen instantly and there is no step by step and you’re done. It’s a long and painful process. But the only path to healing is to admit that you’ve been a victim of a terrible sin and grieve your way through it. Name it, believe that it’s not your fault, and tell your story to someone you trust. Find a good Christian counselor. I have the names of three who deal with sexual trauma. When you tell your story and receive kindness, that’s when you can begin to heal. //

And for the church...I hope you see just how necessary it is for us to remember the attitude of Jesus toward people and especially toward people who are sexually broken. Rather than condemning people, we have to be willing to walk with them and show them kindness. Receive their story as a gift and handle it carefully. Combat the lies by speaking life and truth to them.

These issues are incredibly deep and can be incredibly hard. And today, we’ve only scratched the surface. But I hope what we’ve accomplished today is to put this on the

radar, so maybe someone will reach out and find healing. Scripture calls us to “bear one another’s burdens,” and I want to be a church that does that well.